A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences.

Even though the familiar qualitative and quantitative divide continues to be the basis on which everyday speech juxtaposes different approaches to social science research, on which most graduate students are trained and on which scholarship is categorized for publication, the discomfort that many have long felt with this state of affairs is no longer merely being lamented but actively challenged. This discomfort has generated two basic responses that are driving new and important developments in social science methodology. Some have argued that no field can lay claim to being a true science if there is no shared epistemological foundation underpinning how questions are answered and assessed, and so have proposed for social science a unifying framework that aspires to accommodate both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Now approaching its twentieth birthday, Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba’s (aka KKV) Designing Social Inquiry (1994) is the canonical text of this camp. Not persuaded, others have argued instead that coherent epistemological pluralism is a defining feature—indeed, an asset rather than a liability—of social science, proposing the pursuit of a “mixed methods” agenda in which the respective strengths and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative approaches are formalized, with active exchange between them embraced as questions—and prevailing resource constraints—determine. (A dissident third camp dismisses any and all forms of methodological formalism as “hegemonic,” but I shall not address the merits of those claims here.)

A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences (hereafter TTC), by political scientists Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, explicitly locates itself in the second camp but seeks to up the ante, specifying the comparative advantage of quantitative and qualitative methods on the basis of mathematics and logic, the respective ways in which each approach defines and analyzes cases (within/between), and addresses matters ranging from causal inference to the delineation of scope conditions. In providing a reasoned refutation of the first camp’s all-encompassing approaches (such as that of KKV), TTC strives to articulate, in effect, a metaframework that identifies how qualitative and quantitative approaches, in all their distinctiveness, can coherently, fruitfully, and peacefully coexist. One might characterize TTC as an ambassador’s guide to methodological diplomacy, one that seeks at least an informed

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and respectful détente in the centuries-long methodenstreit; if it were to achieve its more ambitious goal, TTC would be the cornerstone of an enduring paradigmatic step change in the tone and terms of debate across the methodological divide in social science research. Under this approach, more and better data would find itself in active dialogue with theory, which itself would be iteratively upgraded in the process as teams of researchers with different skills and sensibilities sought to collaborate and jointly refine our collective knowledge. The social in social science would be retained, but so too would the science be improved as an abundance of hitherto “black box” explanations of vexing problems were incrementally shrunk, slowly replaced by ever more refined mechanisms-based accounts. All well and good.

However, this reader comes away from TTC feeling somehow both exhilarated and disappointed; I wanted to love this book and ended up merely liking it. I wanted to love it because there is surely a desperate need for researchers across the social sciences to have both a sophisticated awareness of the array of methodological tools available to them and a capacity to judiciously deploy them, singularly or in combination, as the questions they ask determine. I was exhilarated because the absence of even the pretense of philosophical literacy among the rising generation of self-styled “rigorous” researchers (e.g., those doing randomized controlled trials) is appalling, and TTC strives valiantly to reinvigorate some vital antecedent awareness of what makes different methodological approaches to social science research both possible and desirable. As a matter of principle, I loudly applaud anyone who is willing and able to speak knowledgably about approaches to research that differ from their own, and who encourages others to do likewise. Academic life in the social sciences would be vastly more civilized if such knowledge were more widespread.

The basis of my disappointment is perhaps a function of the fact that the quiet revolution in social science research is still very much unfolding, in which case it is probably premature to expect a relatively short volume to amount to more than work in progress. Even so, I sense that many (if not most) social scientists, temperamentally and substantively, will actively resist incorporation into TTC’s framework on TTC’s terms. The biggest gripes are likely to come from mainstream qualitative researchers who will surely bristle at the implication that if only they were more mathematically sophisticated, they too would recognize that their broader project actually overlaps with that of econometricians. (For their part, most econometricians in my experience see absolutely no need to explore any approaches outside their own immediate field.) Even though TTC is at pains to stress that “interpretive” qualitative research largely falls outside its purview, the empirical reality is surely that “qualitative” researchers doing the type of work TTC addresses—namely, those engaged in what is called “qualitative comparative analysis” (or QCA), as inspired by Charles Ragin—are still a small minority, vastly outnumbered by ethnographers in
anthropology, sociology, political science, geography, and social history. One simply cannot write a book declaring that it can, in effect, reconcile the respective strengths and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative research traditions (as most people understand those terms) and then overtly dismiss or covertly colonize the territory where most qualitative researchers actually reside.

Once upon a time, QCA-ers argued that they occupied a third space that was ontologically and epistemologically distinct; my own view is that they should return to this stance, staking out and filling in the middle ground between breadth (quantitative) and depth (qualitative), between “micro” and “macro” units of analysis, and focus on helping us understand process mechanisms. The prevailing division of labor means that social scientists can ably handle instances of a phenomena that number (say) fewer than 20 and more than 100, but are strangely unsure what to do with 40. The world’s problems surely do not array themselves in such a neat bimodal fashion, so the field is ripe for anyone who can help us interrogate this missing middle. “Middle range” theory, of course, was forged to help bridge the micro and macro, and yet most QCA examples (and most of the ones cited in TTC) are broad macro categories, such as work on “revolutions,” “economic development,” or “labor unions.” As such, demonstrating the utility of QCA for distinctly micro cases would be a huge advance. Some of this work is actually occurring, namely, in policy analysis, but TTC seems strangely unaware of it, and is the poorer for this neglect because it misses a huge potential constituency of readers and users. Giving only passing treatment to how causation via case studies is determined in the law is another such oversight. Far from engaging the tens of thousands of case study researchers conducting policy and legal analysis, TTC seems instead overly concerned with assuring its standing among the hundreds of academic researchers who deploy QCA.

Finally, I think there is an underappreciated tension in TTC between the endorsement of “process tracing” (i.e., the quest to understand the mechanisms and conjunctures that enabled certain paths, and not others, to be taken) and the very logic of set-theoretic relationships, which insist upon rather rigid categories and invariant connections between variables. Good historical research, for example, is all about distinguishing between events that are random, conjunctural, and (seemingly) inevitable, and the best of it seeks an active connection to a theory able to locate the particular in the general. How exactly QCA-style analyses improve upon this is still not clear to me; I do not doubt that it can be a complement, but TTC, if only by default, seems to imply that the serious researchers are those actively seeking to establish law-like causal relationships. The analytical height (“democracy,” “civil wars”) at which one has to fly to identify any such relationships, however, seems antithetical to the virtues of process tracing, which are all about engaging with messy details pertaining to time, contingency, and context. No amount of Boolean algebra resolves this tension.
Still, if KKV once ruled the methodological roost, they no longer do, and for that we can thank in no small measure the rising generation of thinkers and doers that TTC partially represents. *A Tale of Two Cultures* is an important landmark contribution to social science research, but it is the second rather than final word on the subject of how different methodological approaches can be usefully integrated.

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**Reference**


The world of development (and policy in general) is dominated by numbers. Every month, we digest data in spades, telling us how economies are faring, whether governments are improving, if a context is “good” for doing business, whether education systems are on track to facilitate growth, and more. Indicators purporting to reflect on these issues are produced and commented on, included in academic analyses, and embedded in country credit reports that look scientific and evidence based. However, Morton Jerven’s new book suggests that looks are deceiving, and the numbers we so readily rely on are more questionable than we would like to admit.

Jerven tells a lively and well-structured story of how statistics are generated in Africa that will cause any reader to question the basis of much of the “evidence” we use to inform our impressions of development on the continent. He goes into some detail about how core indicators are created (like gross domestic product [GDP] numbers) and ultimately shows that these core measures are produced by poorly capacitated statistical bureaus using weak and varying methods, with poor direct sources and many tenuous assumptions. All of his arguments and points ring true to me and show that the institutional foundation for generating and using data in Africa needs some important work.

While reading the stories, I was struck by how similar the situation with statistics agencies is to the many other governance mechanisms that seem to exist in Africa but do not really function properly. I have written about some of these (Andrews 2013) and examples include anticorruption commissions, procurement bureaus, budget office, and treasuries. Such entities exist on paper (as do statistical offices), and they produce outputs that