

## **Process Tracing and International Political Economy**

by

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Chapter prepared for Jon Pevehouse and Leonard Seabrooke, Editors, *Oxford Handbook of International Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). I thank Martha Snodgrass and, especially, Wolfgang Minatti for excellent research assistance. For comments on earlier versions, I thank Jon Pevehouse, Len Seabrooke, James Wood, and the IR Theory Working Group at the European University Institute.

**Abstract:** As a methodological choice, process tracing and qualitative international political economy (IPE) would seem a natural fit. These scholars employ case-study research designs and theorize in terms of processes and mechanisms - a combination that typically leads to process tracing as a key within-case method. Yet, in qualitative IPE, one sees little process tracing; or better said, it is often there, but only partly operationalized or used implicitly.

Surveying the contemporary qualitative IPE literature, this chapter advances two arguments. First, these scholars utilize a narrative case-study style that hides their methods, including process tracing. The result is an empirics-method disconnect, where readers are unsure how data for the narrative was gathered and causal inferences or interpretive understandings gleaned from it.

Second, qualitative IPE scholars can and should do their process tracing better. However, in making this methodological move they should resist the temptation simply to pull process tracing 'off the shelf' and use it. Rather, they should use their interest in the method to address three cutting-edge issues for process tracers: transparency and formalization; within process-tracing methods; and developing a robust interpretive variant.

## **I. Introduction**

Over the past 15 years, process tracing had advanced significantly as a method (George and Bennett 2005; Bennett and Checkel 2015; Beach and Pedersen 2019). We have gone from a situation where many liked process tracing - ‘process tracing is good!’ - to one where we have clear standards and best practices for the method. Researchers can now examine a particular application of the method and conclude ‘this is an instance of good process tracing’ (Waldner 2011; 7).

Qualitative IPE scholars have not kept up with this methodological evolution. Work in this tradition typically presents its findings via narrative case studies, often to very good effect. Kirshner’s (2007) study of financial sectors as a buffer against war and Ban’s (2016) examination of how global neo-liberal economic ideas diffuse and ‘go local’ are exemplars of this IPE genre. Yet, as process tracing qua method has advanced and our more general expectations and standards for qualitative methods have risen, one could argue a methods gap/lacunae/neglect has arisen in qualitative IPE.

Reflecting on this gap, I advance two arguments. First, the majority of qualitative IPE scholars utilize a narrative case-study style that hides their methods, process tracing as well. The result is an empirics-method disconnect, where readers are unsure how data for the narrative was gathered and causal inferences or interpretive understandings gleaned from it. Second, these scholars can and should do their process tracing better. However, in making this methodological move they should resist the temptation simply to pull process tracing ‘off the shelf.’ Rather, they should use their interest in the method to address three cutting-edge issues for process tracers.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I begin with a survey of the contemporary (2010-2020) IPE literature, assessing its use of qualitative methods and, especially of process tracing. My main finding is this work has been good at taking on board the case-study

method, but less attentive to the natural follow-on: the within case methods needed to carry out the case study. This is surprising as the methods literature on such within-case methods (process tracing, interviews, document analysis, discourse, ethnography) is by now quite substantial.

If my first section is backward looking, the next looks to the future. As qualitative IPE scholars begin to utilize methods such as process tracing, I argue they should not be passive consumers of the technique. Instead, they should use the turn to process tracing to advance it in three ways. For one, they should push process tracing to be more transparent, but not by applying Bayesian logic. In addition, these scholars are well-placed to help process tracers address a neglected issue: the additional methods process tracing requires to gather data on its causal mechanisms. I will call this the challenge of developing within-process-tracing methods. Finally, those qualitative IPE scholars who work interpretatively should help develop the currently missing interpretative variant of process tracing.

I offer one caveat before beginning. Qualitative IPE is not alone in its neglect of process tracing or the operational use of qualitative methods more generally. This methods-empirics disconnect is also evident in constructivist international-relations (IR) theory (Checkel 2018), while historical institutionalists and students of comparative historical analysis confront serious methodological challenges in measuring one of their central concepts: critical junctures (Symposium 2017). Thus, while my arguments and critiques here address qualitative IPE, they likely generalize to other political science subfields where qualitative methods play an important role.

## **II. Process Tracing and IPE – An Overview**

How do qualitative IPE researchers use their methods? To answer this question, I focus on the period 2010-20, and survey the following literature and sources: the journals *Review of International Political Economy (RIPE)*, *New Political Economy (NPE)*,

*International Studies Quarterly (ISQ)*, and *International Organization (IO)*<sup>1</sup>; qualitative IPE books published by Cambridge University Press and Routledge<sup>2</sup>; and publications by leading qualitative IPE scholars (Mark Blyth, Kathleen McNamara, Craig Parsons, Leonard Seabrooke). In addition, we asked the last group of scholars about other IPE researchers using qualitative-methods/process-tracing; their recommendations produced six additional names: Rawi Abdelal, Cornel Ban, Jacqueline Best, Nicolas Jabko, Jonathan Kirshner, and James Ashley Morrison.<sup>3</sup>

I present the findings in three steps, beginning with some over-arching results. Next, I work through several examples, designed to capture the modal way in which qualitative IPE uses process tracing. Finally, I turn to a small body of IPE literature where the process-tracing is well executed. This work represents the proverbial ‘exception that proves the rule.’

#### **A. General Findings – Where is the Process Tracing?<sup>4</sup>**

My review of the literature indicates the methodological debate on process tracing has only partially reached qualitative IPE and there is room for improvement in how these researchers use the method; this is seen in six ways. First, it is worrying that many IPE scholars claim to use process tracing, but do not cite any methodological article or book. At a minimum, such a connection is needed so readers can better understand the type of process tracing being used: deductive, inductive, Bayesian, or interpretive.

In a similar fashion, scholars frequently refer to process tracing as a within-case method in their qualitative study, but it seems to be more a label rather than a method that comes with certain requirements, considerations and best practices. This is process tracing

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<sup>1</sup> Keyword search terms: ‘process tracing’ and ‘qualitative studies.’

<sup>2</sup> Keyword search term: ‘process tracing.’

<sup>3</sup> A few comments on the data are necessary. First, despite sampling limitations, I am confident of the conclusions drawn – both because the findings are so strong and because they are consistent with my own ‘outsider’ sense of qualitative IPE. Second, we searched for both ‘process tracing’ and ‘qualitative studies’ as it quickly became apparent that ‘process tracing’ alone would miss the many instances when the method was being used implicitly. Third, the time span chosen (2010-20) captures the most recent and methodologically advanced qualitative IPE. In addition, by 2015 - the mid-point of this period – process tracing as method had come into its own, as evidenced by the publication of two well-received ‘how to’ volumes: Beach and Pedersen 2013; and Bennett and Checkel 2015.

<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Wolfgang Minatti for the data collection and part of the analysis in this section.

more as metaphor than as methodological tool. It is puzzling that one stills sees this usage, as by 2015, the methods literature had elaborated the techniques and best practices for using the method in a rigorous manner (Beach and Pedersen 2013; Bennett and Checkel 2015).

Data from the two leading qualitative IPE/political-economy journals support these points. For *RIPE*, 12 out of the 26 articles explicitly employing process tracing between 2010 and 2020 do not cite any methodological text. That is, in nearly half the cases (46%), the reader is told a key method will be process tracing, but given zero information on how the method will be used to make causal inferences or reconstruct interpretive narratives. Four articles do have one citation to the process tracing literature, but it is to George and Bennett (2005). While this is for sure a foundational text – it put process tracing on the map for political scientists – it lacks the operational focus of later work (how do I use it? what can go wrong?).<sup>5</sup>

For *New Political Economy*, the numbers are similar. Of the 12 articles between 2010 and 2020 that explicitly use process tracing, fully half (6 out of 12) do not cite any methodological text.

Second and consistent with a lack of engagement with the methodological literature, process tracing, even when it is the explicit method of choice for IPE scholars, is poorly defined (Thiemann, Birk and Friedrich 2018) or weakly operationalized (Helgadóttir 2016; Röper 2020). Several inductive studies do not specify in their method section that they will employ inductive process tracing (Quaglia 2012; Steinlin and Trampusch 2012; Piroška and Podvršič 2020). Others seem to mistake process tracing for content/discourse analysis (Wood and Ausserladscheider 2020). Indeed, researchers often use ‘process tracing’ to mean nothing more than her/his case study has a temporal element.

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<sup>5</sup> In the remaining 10 articles, the reference for process tracing is simply to cite another scholar using the method in her study.

Third, the meta-theoretical and theoretical understanding of causal mechanisms is often underdeveloped in qualitative IPE. Without hypothesized mechanisms, the use of process tracing makes little sense, as its whole purpose is to measure their observable implications. One sees too many instances where the language of causal mechanisms is used, but the case study is in fact tracking the effect of independent variables in a historical narrative (Ciplet 2017; Kluge 2017).

Fourth, qualitative IPE case studies tend to be heavily empirical. That is, they relate a richly documented historical narrative that is neither theory-guided nor refers explicitly to the hypothesised factors, variables or mechanisms. It is not uncommon for these scholars to theorise a causal connection, then narrate a case study where they carefully explain how certain negotiations or policy bargains unfolded and then - only in the last paragraph (article) or concluding chapter (book) – transition back from the empirics to the theoretical claims. If there is no theory in the case study, then there is no need for methods like process tracing (Eagleton-Pierce 2012; Trumball 2014; Avigor-Eshel and Mandelkern 2020).

Fifth and a more general point on how qualitative IPE is using methods, discussions on transparency or ethics are largely missing. This is odd given the attention these issues have gotten in the general political science literature since 2014-15 (Moravcsik 2014; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). Specifically on transparency, Van Evera's four tests for sharpening the inferences drawn from process-tracing evidence (Van Evera 1997; 30-34) are virtually never utilized; the same holds true for using Bayesian analysis (Fairfield and Charman 2017) to improve the method's transparency.<sup>6</sup>

Sixth, in my sample, there is a special issue in *New Political Economy* devoted to process tracing (Palier and Trampusch 2016). Yet, its content confirms that the method is not a priority for qualitative IPE. For one, most of the contributors are not IPE scholars, but

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<sup>6</sup> In the surveyed literature, we found only one instance where the author emphasized transparency, in this case, including an appendix to outline the logic behind his analytic reasoning. Meissner 2019.

researchers who have participated in the more general debates over mechanisms and process tracing (Derek Beach, Tulia Falleti, James Mahoney, Renate Mayntz). More important, the collection concludes with an essay by a prominent political economist expressing significant hesitation and worry over any use of process tracing (Hay 2016). Overall, the special issue makes for an interesting methodological read, but it does not connect process tracing to IPE.

### **B. Qualitative IPE – Process Tracing (Not) In Action**

In this section, I turn from trends to specific examples, working through two cases that capture the modal ways in which qualitative IPE uses process tracing. The first is an instance where process tracing as invoked as a main method, but then vanishes or is implicit in the empirical sections. The second captures the use of a narrative case study where the theoretical set up – mechanisms, process - is primed for the use of process tracing, but it is not used. The overwhelming majority of the literature I surveyed falls into one or the other of these modal patterns.

In selecting two specific scholars, my intent is not ‘to ‘name and shame.’ Each has produced a very good piece of research, and their use/non-use of process tracing is very much in keeping with qualitative IPE community standards. This chapter argues those standards – in regards to the operationalization of methods – need to be raised, but the chosen scholars are doing no worse than the vast majority of their colleagues.

Published in 2012, Francisco González’s *Creative Destruction? Economic Crises and Democracy in Latin America* is an exemplar of my first modal type of qualitative IPE research. The book explores the relation between economic crises in the 1930s and 1980s and democratic development in Latin America. González situates his study within comparative historical analysis (Mahoney and Thelen 2015) and – like many in this tradition – structures his narrative around a number of case-study chapters.



Within the case studies, he uses process tracing for measuring the theorized causal mechanisms. To be more precise, this is the claim in the book's opening pages (González 2012, 5-7), where he defines process tracing as identifying the causal chain and causal mechanism between the independent variable(s) and the outcome of the dependent variable (González 2012, 5 – drawing upon George and Bennett 2005, 206). This is an excellent start, but the book has little more to say about the method. Ideally, the author would have used these opening pages also to operationalize the process tracing. That is, given the three mechanisms González theorizes, their observable implications in the data would be X, Y and Z. Unfortunately, this does not happen.

As a result, in the case studies that constitute Parts I and II of the book, the process tracing is implicit. The mechanisms are there in the cases, but it is not clear to the reader how process tracing is being used to measure their effects. Nor is there any effort to deal with the problem that bedevils mechanism-based theorizing: equifinality. This means that alternative causal mechanisms can very well lead to the same outcome. Testing for equifinality would have required even more explicit process tracing in the chapters. In sum, González's nicely argued book highlights a key feature of many qualitative IPE studies: Process tracing is invoked as a main method, but then vanishes / is implicit in the empirical sections.

Cornel Ban's 2016 book, *Ruling Ideas: How Global Neoliberalism Goes Local*, fits my second modal pattern. This is a richly documented account of the how economic ideas with global reach are translated into different national settings, where domestic translators make these ideas 'go local,' in Ban's apt phrase. Two of the case study chapters (6, 7) explicitly theorize and document the 'mechanisms' (socialization, diffusion) through which this spread and translation occurred. Overall, the book offers a carefully argued and detailed study of the various ways in which economic ideas diffused and were then translated locally.

Methodologically, the set-up is there for Ban to employ with-in case methods like process tracing. At the outset, he situates his study within the comparative historical analysis tradition (Ban 2016, 30-31), one of whose defining features is case studies theorized in terms of causal mechanisms that are measured with process tracing (Mahoney and Thelen 2015, 12-20). Indeed, the latter method would seem a perfect fit for Ban's chapters 6 and 7, where he is mapping the mechanisms through which ideas diffused to and were translated in Spain and Romania. Yet, there are no within-case methods in these chapters, and certainly no process tracing. This makes it difficult for the reader to evaluate how Ban is gathering evidence for the argument (Ban 2016, chapters 6, 7).

### **C. Qualitative IPE – The Exceptions**

In this last section, I consider a small body of IPE literature – a total of six publications in my sample - where the process-tracing is well executed; this demonstrates that methodological operationalization and transparency are possible for qualitative IPE. These scholars clearly define the method, carefully operationalize their mechanisms, make their tests explicit, and are transparent about evidence. In all six exemplars, the process tracing is of the deductive, theory testing type. I work through one study here, and refer the reader to the others.

Lisa Kastner's (2018) study of the relation between civil society activism and financial regulation in the wake of the 2008 crisis is a smartly designed and rigorous executed example of theory-testing process tracing. Specifically, she explains 'how diffuse interests were translated into post-crisis financial regulatory policy by systematically applying process-tracing to test the presence or absence of a hypothesized causal mechanism' (Kastner 2018, 34).

Kastner does this by referencing the process-tracing literature (Beach and Pedersen 2013; Bennett and Checkel 2015) and – more importantly – by operationalizing the method,

asking what are the observable implications of her theorized mechanisms. After each case study, she summarizes the evidence, showing the causal chain and whether each step is supported by the empirics. This is an exemplary and transparent use of process tracing.<sup>7</sup>

### **III. Process Tracing and IPE – The Future**

My argument in the previous section is that the qualitative IPE / process tracing relation is best characterized as one of benign neglect. These scholars are aware of the method, but too often fail to use it or apply it in an implicit, metaphorical and non-operationalized way. This a good news / bad news situation. The bad is this neglect is undermining the rigour, quality and transparency of their case studies. However, the good news and silver lining is that qualitative IPE – as a newcomer / latecomer to the method – can utilize its outsider perspective to rethink and address, in new ways, three cutting-edge issues for process tracing: transparency and formalization; within process-tracing methods; and developing a robust interpretive variant. This rethink will benefit qualitative IPE and all the many others – international relations theorists (Evangelista 2015), comparativists (Wood 2003; Waldner 2015), students of comparative historical analysis (Gibson 2019) – who also regularly use the method.

To begin, how did I establish the ‘cutting edge’ for process tracing? In short, I consider how we teach the method and what we publish about it. Regarding pedagogy, courses at key fora such as the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) methods schools, the Syracuse Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR) and APSA short courses consist of process tracing basics plus sessions on formalization; the latter includes applications of Bayesian logic, set theory (Barrenechea and Mahoney 2019), or causal graphs (Waldner 2015).<sup>8</sup> On research and publications, 55% of the journal articles,

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<sup>7</sup> The other good examples of deductive process tracing in qualitative IPE are: Trampusch (2014); Monheim (2014); Weinhardt (2017); Meissner (2019); and Weiss (2020).

<sup>8</sup> The data on course content comes from my own involvement in the APSA short courses, plus a review of on-line syllabi/course-descriptions for the other schools and institutes, for the years 2018-2020. See also Zaks (2021, 59).

newsletter contributions and book chapters on process tracing in the period January 2017 – August 2020 have been devoted in whole or in part to formalization.<sup>9</sup>

The cutting edge is thus defined by what the literature has prioritized – formalization – and what it has neglected. Formalization is one of the last steps in the use of process tracing, helping us with data analysis. By focusing so intently on it, scholars have neglected what comes before: how one does the data collection (within process-tracing methods) and, more fundamentally, meta-theory (the missing interpretive variant).

### **A. Transparency and Formalization**

The debate over transparency among process tracers is linked to the broader debate in the discipline over data access and research transparency, or DA-RT for short.<sup>10</sup> Despite a professed epistemological pluralism, these discussions have mostly been among positivists. Indeed, of the thirteen reports released by the ‘Qualitative Transparency Deliberations’ in January 2019, only two addressed transparency from an interpretive perspective.<sup>11</sup>

Consistent with a core positivist tenet that seeing is believing (Johnson 2006), much of the DA-RT/transparency debate and recommendations have come down to some version of ‘show me the goods.’ This might mean archiving one’s data in qualitative data repositories (Mannheimer, et al 2019); or using active citation (Moravcsik 2010); or attaching numbers to our causal hunches in process tracing to make the logic behind them more visible (Bennett 2015). These are all sensible proposals, but note that they are premised on a separation

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<sup>9</sup> For the period 1.17 – 8.20, I searched: (1) the journals *Political Analysis*, *Perspectives on Politics*, and *Sociological Methods & Research*; (2) publications listed in Google Scholar for Tasha Fairfield, Andrew Bennett, Derek Beach, and James Mahoney; and (3) the International Bibliography of Social Sciences database. Key words used were process tracing, Bayesian, set theory, formalization and qualitative methods. The search resulted in 20 articles, book chapters and newsletter contributions on process tracing. Of these, 11 – or 55% - dealt in whole or in part with formalization, understood as Bayesianism, set theory, or causal graphs.

<sup>10</sup> For background on DA-RT and the debates it has spurred, see Symposium (2014); Symposium (2015); Symposium (2016); Hall (2016); and Monroe (2018).

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.qualtd.net/>. These deliberations and subsequent reports were organized by the American Political Science Association’s Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research; see Jacobs and Buthe (2021) for an overview of the process and findings. On the dominant positivist impulses shaping DA-RT, see also Isaac (2015).

between the researcher and what she studies – something again consistent with the positivist world view.

So, how might we operationalize transparency principles for a qualitative IPE researcher using process tracing, with – say – interviews as a key method for data collection? The answer for some students of process tracing is to employ a combination of active citation and Bayesian logic. However, such a choice would be incomplete as there is a prior, interpretive operationalization of transparency that one needs to consider.

Active citation works in the following manner. A footnote citing an interview is linked to a transparency index that contains interview transcripts or excerpts. A reader - by perusing the index - can better understand the evidence behind a causal claim the author advances in her text (Moravcsik 2014).

If we stop at this point, however, we are missing important information that allows us to understand the interview excerpt and what it is telling us. As ethnographers would argue – and interviews are a key method for them as well (Gusterson 1996; Gusterson 2008; Holmes 2009) – one needs to ask how that interview data has been shaped and changed by the researcher. How has her gender, skin colour, identity and the power relation inherent in the interview affected how the interviewee answered? In ethnographic/interpretive jargon, this is to reflect upon one’s positionality – and how it has influenced both participants in the interview (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009; see also Borneman 2014).

Returning to active citation’s transparency index, then, more than the raw data would be required. We also need to record – in a positionality index? – how a researcher thinks the interview answers/dialogue were a function of her gender, the way she asked a question, and the like. Transparency is now defined not by what we see, but by clarification of context and researcher-interviewee interaction. Reflecting on positionality also pushes a researcher to consider the ethical dimension of her work. For a transparency debate that has too often

failed to take ethics seriously (Parkinson and Wood 2015; Monroe 2018), this can only be welcomed.

My argument is not to do away with active citation and transparency indices; rather, we need an additional – more foundational – layer of transparency. For the latter, Lee Ann Fujii’s work on relational interviewing provides excellent advice - from a fellow political scientist no less - on how to establish one’s positionality in an interview context (Fujii 2017; see also Fujii 2010). If Moravcsik’s transparency index allows us to see the data, a positionality index helps one better understand the social process through which that data was constructed.

Her interview data now in hand, transparently collected, the IPE process tracer now needs to figure out what that data means – the data analysis. What causal inferences can she glean from it? This is where Bayesianism enters the picture, with the argument being it improves and make more visible the logic behind the causal inferences we make in process tracing (Bennett 2015; Fairfield and Charman 2017; Fairfield and Charman 2019). A number of leading scholars support it and Bayesian process tracing is being taught widely, as shown above.

Does the use of Bayesianism result in better, more rigorous and transparent applications of process tracing? Proponents cautiously answer in the affirmative (Fairfield and Charman 2017), while critics argue that the application of Bayesian logic is undercut by a number of logical and practical challenges (Zaks 2021). My own view accords more with the critics. Bayesian process tracing offers little improvement over the way the method has been carried out previously – for three reasons.

First, Bayesian logic cannot work with inductive forms of process tracing, as one has no (deductively derived) theoretical priors to which values can be assigned. This was a limitation recognized early in the debate (Bennett 2015, 276), but has since been forgotten.

Second, applying Bayesian logic and its accompanying mathematical formulas requires the assignment of estimated probabilities on the prior likelihood a theory is true as well as the likelihood of finding evidence (in two different ways). Bayesian analysis is impossible without these three estimated probabilities, which are derived in a subjective manner lacking any transparency.

Bayesian process tracers are aware of this problem (Bennett 2015, 280-81), but it is not clear how one fixes it. Maybe we need a transparency index (another one!), where a researcher explains what data she drew upon to fix a certain probability, assuring us that cognitive bias played no role, and that she did not cherry pick the data to get a probability that will make her favored theory work. I am being facetious here, but the lack of attention to how estimated probabilities are assigned simply pushes to a deeper level the transparency challenges that process tracing faces.

Third, much of the application of Bayesianism to date has been to process-tracing greatest hits, especially Wood (2003) and Tannenwald (2007). Yet, none of Bayesians who replicate Wood or Tannenwald demonstrates where the Bayesian approach improves the process tracing. As Zaks argues, ‘Wood and Tannenwald are excellent data collectors, analyzers, and writers - skills that consistently prove to be the most central assets to good (and transparent) process tracing. Until Bayesian proponents can demonstrate where their method reveals new conclusions or more nuanced inferences, the costs of adoption will continue to outweigh the benefits’ (Zaks 2021, 71).

In the end, Peter Hall – in an early intervention in the DA-RT, transparency debates – got it right. The best theoretical-empirical qualitative research already does what proponents of enhanced transparency – including Bayesians - seek. For Hall, it is a commitment to ‘research integrity’ - policed by peer-review processes and scientific research programmes - that ensures a particular author takes methodological transparency seriously (Hall 2016).

Hall's argument is only strengthened when one considers the opportunity costs as well of learning the logic and mathematics of Bayesianism. For a qualitative IPE seeking to use process tracing in a transparent manner, Bayesian logic is an analytic bridge too far.

### **B. Within-Process-Tracing Methods**

Going forward, process tracers must devote more pedagogy and research to the techniques needed to do the method's 'front end' - the data collection - well. When teaching process tracing, I am struck that most students think it starts when we measure those observable implications of a causal mechanism. But the data for measuring those mechanisms comes from somewhere – typically, interviews, fieldwork and ethnography / political ethnography, archives, surveys, and discourse analysis.

Thanks to the revolution in qualitative methods since the early years of the new millennium, we have a wealth of practical, 'how to' literature devoted to these various within-process-tracing techniques. These include Mosley (2013) and Fujii (2017) on interviewing; Kapiszewski, MacLean and Read (2015) and Schatz (2009) on fieldwork and political ethnography; Trachtenberg (2006) on archival research; Fowler (2013) and Bryman and Bell (2019, chapters 5-7) on surveys; and Hansen (2006) and Hopf and Allan (2016) on discourse analysis.

Teaching these methods must become a part of our process-tracing pedagogy. Instead of devoting half the short course on process tracing at the APSA convention to Bayesian analysis,<sup>12</sup> we should instead be giving more attention to these within-process-tracing, data collection methods, which easily constitute the majority of one's time and effort in a process tracing study. Bayesian analysis requires high-quality data, gathered with diverse methods; without such data, the application of Bayesianism is simply not possible.

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<sup>12</sup> I have been one of the lecturers at the APSA short course most years since 2014.



Many scholars cite Elisabeth Wood's (2003) book on the Salvadoran civil war as a process-tracing exemplar (Lyll 2015, 189-191). It is a model because of the richness and quality of her data, gleaned from interviews, political ethnography and her ethnographic map-making workshops. Her process tracing works because she devotes an entire chapter and a part of her conclusions to operationalizing her within-process-tracing methods, discussing how she will use them to draw inferences on insurgent preferences, threats to the validity of those inferences, and the like (Wood 2003, chapter 2; pp.243-46). The data she has gathered is of a very high quality; it sets the stage and provides the raw material for her process tracing. Wood's use of the method is exemplary and transparent because of all this 'front-end' work.

For process tracing as method, we thus need to make time in our teaching and space in our research for these data-gathering methods. Process tracers need to get right the balance between front-end methods training and back-end data analysis. Zaks (2021, 72) nicely captures these tradeoffs and balancing act.

In the context of qualitative research, scholars have a lot more access to training in the analysis of data than they do in the research processes that get them the data in the first place. But the process of research and the processes we are researching are inextricable. Researchers would likely yield greater benefits from intensive training in ethnographic, interview, and sampling techniques; understanding the politics and biases associated with archival work; or even just additional and specialized language training needed to conduct research on a specific topic.

For a qualitative IPE turning to process tracing, this means less training on analysis (set theory, Bayesianism) and more on within-process-tracing methods.

A greater focus on the methods utilized within process tracing would have the additional – and much needed – benefit of bringing research ethics to the fore. This is a topic on which process tracers have been largely silent.<sup>13</sup> In process tracing's less scientific days, I would tell students that it gets you down in the trenches and really close to what you are

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<sup>13</sup> Neither of the two main process-tracing textbooks – Bennett and Checkel (2015), Beach and Pedersen (2019) - devote a chapter or even a section of a chapter to research ethics.

studying. This is true, and the ‘what’ is often policymakers, activists, civil-war insurgents, and the like – human subjects in ethics talk. Teaching those additional methods as a part of process tracing – and especially the interviews, field work and ethnography - would drive home the need to address and operationalize the research ethics of the method.

We do not need a separate research programme on the ethics of process tracing, but we should teach more about how one operationalizes the challenging ethics of immersive within-process-tracing methods such as interpretive interviewing and ethnography.

Addressing ethics also forces a scholar to confront her positionality in the research process.

At a minimum and since transparency is currently much discussed among process tracers, we need to build modules into our process tracing curricula on the ethics/transparency relation and how we operationalize core ethical precepts (do no harm) in an era of open science. In making this pedagogical move, there is a rich and growing applied ethics literature upon which we could draw (Wood 2006; Parkinson and Wood 2015; Fujii 2017; Monroe 2018; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Delamont and Atkinson 2018; Kaplan, Kuhnt and Steinert 2020).

### **C. An Interpretive Process Tracing**

I start with three facts. Fact #1 is that process tracing has adopted a meta-theoretical stance where there is a place for both positivist and interpretative variants (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 10-16). Interpretive scholars in political science – fact #2 – have become increasingly interested in process – a move most clearly seen in the ‘practice turn’ (Neumann 2002; Adler and Pouliot 2011). Practices are ‘inarticulate, practical knowledge that makes what is to be done appear “self-evident” or commonsensical’ (Pouliot 2008, 258). Practices are built on a relational ontology that mediates between structure and agency (Adler and Pouliot 2015); meta-theoretically, they thus capture process and social mechanisms (Guzzini

2011). In terms of method, this means interpretive scholars need techniques that gather data on and measure process – something like process tracing.

Given these first two observations, fact #3 is a surprise: There is little interpretive process tracing. It is taught virtually nowhere, perhaps because our leading process-tracing texts have almost nothing to say about it (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Beach and Pedersen 2019).<sup>14</sup> Regarding empirical applications, there are but a handful of published works that utilize interpretive process tracing (Guzzini 2012; Norman 2015; Pouliot 2015; Norman 2016; Robinson 2017; Cecchini and Beach 2020).

This small literature is quite diverse and there is no agreement on what constitutes an interpretive form of the method. For some (Norman 2016), interpretive process tracing is similar to mainstream, positivist/scientific-realist efforts, but operates inductively. Others (Robinson 2017) favor a stronger grounding in an interpretive meta-theory, but it is not clear what the actual process tracing does.

Scholars working on practices have come the furthest in developing an interpretive form of process tracing – perhaps not surprising as social practices are all about process. Pouliot (2015) is explicit on this point: What he calls ‘practice tracing’ is interpretive process tracing. True to an interpretive ethos, he crafts a process tracing that operates inductively, but also takes considerable effort to show how it would work. Pouliot does this by engaging with Bennett and Checkel’s (2015, chapter 1) ten best practices for process tracing, and how they must be modified to work interpretively. His resulting practice tracing occupies a meta-theoretical middle ground, showing how practices create meaning (interpretism), but also thinking hard about how to measure the process through which those practices operate (scientific-realist).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On the teaching data, see Footnote 8.

<sup>15</sup> More generally, the most exciting and innovative theoretical-methodological work occupies precisely this epistemological middle ground. See Hopf (2002), Hopf (2007), Pouliot (2007), Hopf and Allan (2016).

Other scholars working on social practices build upon Pouliot, but argue for additional within-practice-tracing methods. Whereas Pouliot (2015) captures practices through ethnography and interviews, Cornut and Zamaroczy (2020) add an interpretive form of document analysis to this mix. All this work is promising and exciting, as it marks the beginning of a conceptually clear and empirically operationalized interpretive process tracing.

At the same time, practice tracers will need to address two challenges. First, it is not clear how either interviews or document analysis can measure social practices.<sup>16</sup> Recall that such practices are ‘inarticulate, practical knowledge’ - in layperson’s terms, stuff that is implicit and in the deep background. Ethnography, with its commitment to immersion, is best placed to access such background knowledge; however, it is not clear how asking questions or reading documents can do the same. With interviews, the researcher is interfering with and indeed likely changing the interviewee – through the questions she asks, her gender, etc (Fujii 2017). Accessing implicit background knowledge through all this distortion seems next to impossible.

Second, whatever additional methods they decide upon, practice tracers need to operationalize them in greater detail. Consider ethnography, which is the ‘gold standard’ method for practice tracers (Pouliot 2010). When done well, ethnography addresses – before going to the field – two issues that bedevil it: access and ethics. Thinking about the former requires operational plans for dealing with gatekeepers (Gusterson 2008), while getting the ethics right involves much more than ticking the boxes on documents submitted to your institution’s ethics review board (Delamont and Atkinson 2018). Practice tracers – to date – have been silent on both issues.

#### **D. Summary**

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<sup>16</sup> While recognizing they are a clear second best, Pouliot (2010, 66-72) offers a more optimistic take on the ability of interviews to access practices.

For process tracing as method, there is a rich pedagogical and research agenda to be pursued. It would rethink and broaden the manner in which process tracing operationalizes research transparency; deepen it (within-process-tracing methods; ethics); and expand it to interpretive forms. This agenda is meant to complement – and not replace – the focus on formalization and transparency. There is nothing wrong with the latter. Perhaps process tracing needs further formalization, but we should do this with an appreciation of the likely opportunity costs. We may get a more rigorous, transparent version of one type of process tracing: deductive, scientific-realist/positivist. But we will miss an opportunity to develop a richer, more ethically grounded, meta-theoretically plural method.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

The ‘qualitative’ in qualitative IPE is in need of renewal. Scholars working in this tradition have made very good use of the case study method, producing a number of excellent articles and volumes structured around case study narratives (Blyth 2002; Kirshner 2007; Blyth 2013; Helleiner 2014; Ban 2016; see also Odell 2001). However, while IPE scholars stayed with the case method, the qualitative methods literature moved on, arguing that one needed additional methods – within the case - to structure all that data collection (George and Bennett 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2015; Beach and Pedersen 2016).

This chapter considered one particular additional method – process tracing – that should be of special interest to qualitative IPE. Yet, as my review demonstrates, IPE has at best a tenuous relation to the method. Too often, process tracing is employed, but in an implicit way that makes its application invisible to the reader; in other cases, it is explicitly used, but in a metaphorical and non-operational manner. One could consider these criticisms as nothing more than methodological nitpicks, but they matter: weakening the validity of the causal and interpretive claims advanced by these scholars.

For sure, qualitative IPE is not alone in its non- or misuse of process tracing; one sees similar methodological misfires in other subfields (international relations) and literatures (comparative historical analysis). In addition, the expectations for how we use an array of qualitative methods have been rising fast in recent years. This latter fact alone makes it almost impossible for qualitative IPE to meet the methodological concerns of a sympathetic but critical analyst applying contemporary standards.

While this context is important, it does not change the chapter's bottom line: Qualitative IPE needs to finish the job. The case-study narratives it has mastered need to be followed and complemented by methods like process tracing. Above, I outlined a three-fold agenda for IPE to pursue as it applies process tracing. The reaction of some may be: 'Is Checkel serious?' 'Does he want to make us methodologists?' My reply: 'No, no, and no!'

I answer in this way for three reasons. First and conceptually, process tracing ain't rocket science. It is true that to use it well requires a clear understanding of causal mechanisms and the different, processual understanding of cause they carry. However, this is nothing like getting one's head around, say, the Boolean logic of qualitative comparative analysis. More important, for the aspiring process tracer, the literature now offers clear, operational discussions of such mechanisms (Hedstroem and Ylikoski 2010; Bennett 2013; Beach and Pedersen 2016, chapters 3-4).

Second, while my research agenda for process tracing may look daunting to a qualitative IPE scholar new to the technique, it is not. Its starting point is the shared understanding we now have of process tracing as method.<sup>17</sup> Yes, it needs corrections and adjustments, but these are fine tuning what we already have. In practical terms, for the IPE scholar wanting to use process tracing, the start-up costs are therefore not high. She should begin with one of the foundational texts (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Beach and Pedersen

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<sup>17</sup> To appreciate the extent of this understanding, see the broadly similar way the method is now being taught at the ECPR summer and winter methods schools, IQMR in Syracuse, and the APSA short courses.

2019) and then turn to the work of specific scholars for getting the operational details correct – be it on applied ethics, practice tracing, or Bayesian process tracing. In Section III, I purposely provided extensive citations - for the IPE scholar seeking this operational detail.

Third, qualitative IPE is already producing excellent work where the parts are there for the application of process tracing. Consider Sending and Neumann's (2011) study of the World Bank's social practices, where they trace the emergence of multiple practices within the Bank and how these define the boundary between it and member states; this is an application of practice tracing in all but name.

Process tracing is not manna from heaven. Done well, it can take considerable time, and it has an inferiority complex dating back to the days when leading methodology texts considered it little more than journalistic 'soaking and poking' (Gerring 2006, chapter 7). There are also parts of IPE where it likely has no role to play – Marxist approaches, world-system theory, or research based on experimental designs.<sup>18</sup> Yet for that substantial body of qualitative IPE surveyed in this chapter – with its interest in historical processes and dynamics, in causal mechanisms, in capturing the complex interplay between the global political economy and domestic politics – process tracing is a practical tool that will help it make better arguments, which, in turn, will be read by a broader set of scholars. The investment is worth it.

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<sup>18</sup> However, see Dunning (2015) for a brilliant argument that experimental designs actually require a prior stage of process tracing.

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