
Truth Seeking AND Sense Making: Towards Configurational Designs of Qualitative Methods

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Introduction and Overview¹

Within the qualitative social sciences, we can detect a wide gulf between those who strive for revealing “**the truth**” about the social world on the one hand and those whose goal is to “**make sense**” of it on the other. The former apply methods which are implicitly or explicitly rooted in positivist or realist epistemologies and ontologies whereas the latter apply methods based on constructivist or interpretative epistemologies and ontologies. Some of the characteristic expressions of this gulf can be found in the work of Goertz and Mahoney who exclude interpretative approaches in their characterization of qualitative research.² This is mirrored by Yanow who insists on the distinctiveness of interpretative research.³

Nevertheless, a closer view reveals that on both sides, among ‘truth-seekers’ and among ‘sense-makers,’ we find quite distinct research goals, epistemological principles, and ontological presumptions, as well as a broad spectrum of methods of data collection/creation and methods of data analysis/interpretation. The **major claim** of the following contribution is that the internal diversity within both camps makes it possible to develop a plurality of coherent qualitative methods which allow to strive for truth-seeking and sense-making at the same time. These methods are configurational in the sense that they combine epistemological and ontological features of truth-seeking endeavors with those of sense-making projects. If appropriately conceptualized and designed, they do this without

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¹ This contribution emerged out of endeavors to provide overviews over qualitative methods in general (Blatter, Janning and Wagemann 2007, Blatter, Haverland, van Hulst 2016, Blatter, Langer and Wagemann 2017) and case study designs more specifically (Blatter and Blume 2008, Blatter and Haverland 2014). In line with major works (e.g. Brady and Collier 2004, Goertz and Mahoney 2012), in our first textbooks we described qualitative methods by comparing and contrasting them to quantitative ones. In our more recent publications, though, we characterize distinct qualitative methodologies primarily by comparing them to each other. The former approach facilitates mutual understanding between qualitative and quantitative scholars and stimulates multi-method research that combines qualitative and quantitative methods; the latter tries to do the same among truth seekers and sense makers within the community of qualitative social scientists.

² Goertz and Mahoney 2012.

³ Yanow 2003.

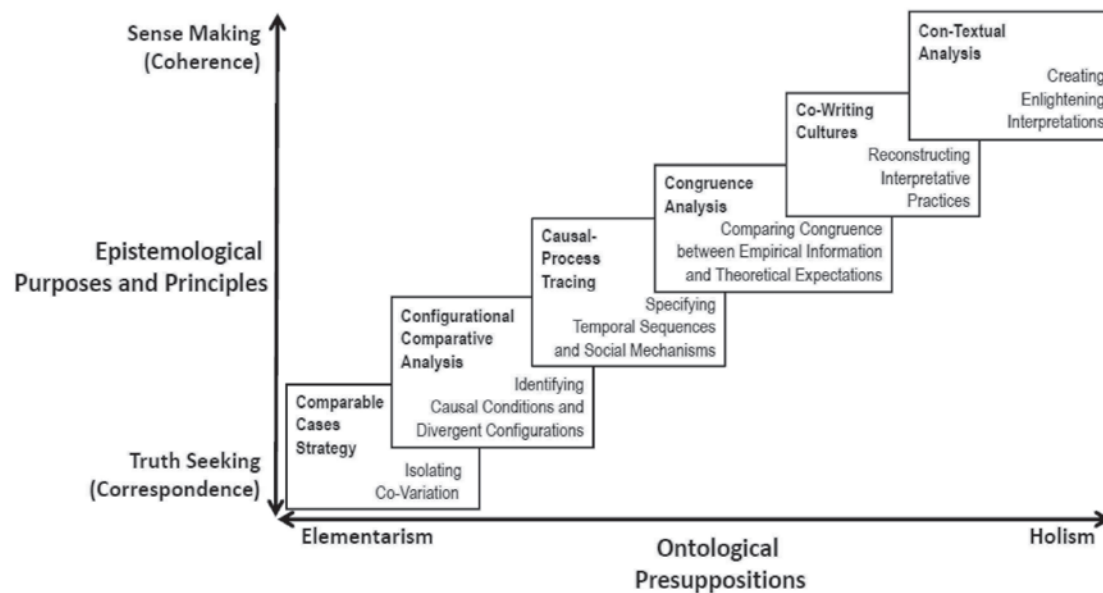
losing their internal coherence and are therefore helpful for building bridges across the aforementioned gulf.

In order to develop these configurative and coherent methods, I start by reflecting on epistemology and argue that a pragmatic epistemological stance consists of three components: a) a research goal specified by a research question; b) the corresponding kind of aspired knowledge/explanation; and c) the adequate way to secure the validity (and reliability) of the research process and its results. For each component, I identify principled differences between truth-seekers and sense-makers, but point to internal diversity on each side, as well. Next, I turn towards ontology and sketch the three components of a pragmatic ontological stance: a) presumptions about the basic entities of the social world; b) presumptions about the relationship among these entities; and c) understandings of causes and causation. Once again, I identify principled differences between the two camps and internal diversity in each camp. Based on these premises, I present two tables in which the scrutinized alternatives are aligned in such a way that six ideal-typical methods emerge. Each of these methods is characterized by an internally coherent set of epistemological purposes/principles and ontological presuppositions. A third table in which I lay out the corresponding methodological approaches to data collection/creation and to data analysis/interpretation can be found elsewhere.⁴ Due to the space limitations of this paper, it could not be incorporated.

Figure 1 provides a first overview, indicating not only the conceptual poles in the epistemological and ontological dimensions, but also the location of the six ideal-typical methods. Furthermore, figure 1 specifies and substantiates the major claim of the contribution formulated above. I argue that an ideal-typical method called **Comparable Cases Strategy** strives single-mindedly for revealing the truth (about the autonomous effect of a single cause). In contrast, the **Con-Textual Analysis** method aims entirely at making sense by creating enlightening understandings of the empirical world. The four methods in between, though, can be conceptualized in such a way that they combine truth seeking and sense making without being incoherent. Methodological approaches labelled **Configurational Comparative Analysis** and **Co-Writing Cultures** are still predominantly committed to either truth seeking (the former) or to sense making (the latter), but they incorporate already some epistemological and ontological features of the other side. **Causal-Process Tracing** and **Congruence Analysis** (two specified forms of within-case analysis which are often—alongside other forms of within-case analysis—lumped together under the term ‘Process Tracing’), represent methods that come close to balancing the epistemological principles

⁴ Blatter 2016.

Figure 1: Locating Ideal-Typical Qualitative Methods According to Their Coherent Positions in Respect to Epistemology and Ontology



Source: Blatter, Haverland and von Hulst 2016: xxi

and ontological presuppositions of truth-seekers and sense-makers.

Figure 1 reveals that my typology of methods contains only **ideal-types** and not all logically possible combinations. Ideal-types are characterized by a conceptually coherent combination of specific epistemological purposes and principles on one side and specific ontological presumptions on the other. This means that I do not claim that these types exist in their ideal-typical form as methodological devices in textbooks or as distinct cultures among practitioners. At the end of this essay, I point to potential uses of a typology of ideal-types.

Before I start, I would like to signal to the reader that the attempt to bridge a very broad spectrum of qualitative methodologies and to develop ideal-types has two consequences in respect to **terminology**:

1. I use core expressions like “explanation” and “causation” as umbrella terms. This means that I treat “interpretation” and “understanding” as specific types of explanation and “constitution” or “construction” as a specific type of causation.⁵ Such a stance can be justified as follows: A common terminology facilitates mutual understanding and helps to build bridges between truth-seeker and sense-makers. Furthermore, terms and terminology frame the (scientific) discourse and set the limits of what is accepted and what is not. Thus, if interpretation is not accepted as a form of explanation, or if causality is limited to the empiricist/analytic understandings that dominate

the natural sciences, then these are fundamental forms of exclusion.

2. The terms that are used to label the ideal-typical methods are based on a broad reading of the literature and are picked in order to correspond as much as possible to existing terminology. Nevertheless, the ideal-typical approach implies that the main criteria for choosing labels has not been correspondence to existing terminology, but linguistic coherence and conceptual correspondence to the scrutinized features of the ideal-type.

Towards Pragmatic and Pluralist Epistemological Stances

In his widely cited textbook *Approaches to Social Enquiry*, Blaikie defines epistemology as “a view and justification for what can be regarded as knowledge—what can be known, and what criteria such knowledge must satisfy in order to be called knowledge rather than belief.”⁶ Such a definition tends to lead to principled disputes about what we can know in the social sciences given the facts that social scientists are parts of the social world they study, to the extent that some scholars claim that the social world cannot be studied as an externally or objective existing entity. A **pragmatic** approach, in contrast, starts with the assumption that we should accept all kinds of research goals which can be specified in distinct research questions. For each research question, we can identify an understanding of knowledge that is most appropriate for providing a useful answer to the question, and we can specify the criteria that guide the processes of gaining this kind of knowledge. As

⁵ In contrast to Wendt 1999, but in line with Elster 2007 and Kurki 2008.

⁶ Blaikie 1993, 7.

we will see, the most important advantages of such a pragmatic approach are that it helps to overcome dichotomous thinking and that it paves the way towards epistemological pluralism.

If we accept that an epistemological stance should be based on what we want to know (instead of what we can know given some specific ontological presupposition, for example), then a specific epistemological stance encompasses three components:

- a. the research goal expressed in a precise research question and translated into a corresponding research design,
- b. the type of knowledge/explanation that we aspire in order to answer the research question (e.g. if we want to know, how -and not whether or how much- X influences Y, then we strive for a mechanism-based explanation), and
- c. the principles and procedures that guide the process of acquiring this kind of knowledge and the corresponding criteria for evaluating the quality of concrete research projects.

In the following section, I do not only scrutinize the principled alternatives in respect to these three components, but I indicate how we can overcome the dualism that is invoked by focusing just on the principled alternatives.

*Research Goals: Truth-Seeking,
Sense-Making and their Combinations*

Social scientists, especially those who pretend to do “qualitative” research, find themselves located between the hard/natural sciences and the arts/humanities. Therefore, it is not surprising that some qualitative social scientists—in line with natural scientists—adhere to “**truth-seeking**” as their principled goal of research, whereas others strive—in line with those from the humanities—for “**sense-making**.” The prototypical research goal for truth-seekers is to develop and test parsimonious hypotheses and models that **correspond** to the main features of an external world. In contrast, the prototypical research goal of the sense makers is to develop and apply **coherent** paradigms and theories that provide orientation through meaningful interpretations of the world. In consequence, it seems that truth-seekers and sense-makers have clearly distinct and seemingly incommensurable research goals. Nevertheless, each of these principled research goals allows for a range of possible specifications as to what a research question is.⁷

Among the **prototypical research questions** that truth-seekers might try to answer are:

- a) Which effects does a specific and concrete cause (X) have?
- b) Which configurations of conditions make a specific kind of outcome (Y) possible?
- c) Which underlying mechanisms (M) make causes produce an effect?

Sense-makers ask questions that also take a wide range of prototypical forms, such as:

- A) Which fundamental structure (S) stabilizes and/or transforms a social/political system?
- B) Which interpretative signs and practices characterize a specific culture (C)?
- C) Which paradigms-based, but specified theory (T) provides a better explanation?

These prototypical research questions signal the existence of a plurality of specified research questions within each camp. In the following section, I want to show that the search for answers to **some of these questions demands research designs and methods that combine truth seeking and sense making**. For example, I argue that the most productive answer to question c) is based on an understanding of a causal mechanism as a configuration of three kinds of social mechanisms. Furthermore, it demands a kind of **Causal-Process Tracing** that aims to show not only that the identified mechanisms correspond to an external reality, but also that they make sense insofar as the social mechanisms are integrated in a coherent and comprehensive multi-level model of explanation. Likewise, to answer question C), we need a method that strongly combines sense-making and truth-seeking. As we will show later on, the corresponding method, **Congruence Analysis**, draws on the abstract approach to theory-formation that sense-makers adhere to, but the answer also depends on the systematic comparison of the expectations that we can deduct from those theories with the kinds of empirical observations that truth-seekers demand in order to accept an explanation.

At this point, these statements are not much more than claims, but I try to clarify and justify them in the following section. The first step on this path is to show that we find a similar plurality (instead of a dichotomy) when it comes to the principled kinds of knowledge that we are striving for and when we develop criteria for gauging the quality of the process through which we gain this kind of knowledge. Because most methods in the social sciences have been developed as tools of explanation, we limit our discussion to explanatory knowledge, although we generally share John Gerring’s view that “descriptions” and “comparisons” constitute forms of knowledge that are at least as important.⁸

*Explanations: Confirmed Thesis,
Convincing Paradigm, and Options In-between*

In the social sciences, there are multiple and quite different understandings of what a ‘good’ explanation is. In order to overcome simple dichotomies without erasing fundamental differences, we will develop a two-dimensional space for locating distinct understandings of explanations. The first dimension of this conceptual space refers to the **level of abstractness** and the second dimension to the **level of generality**. Since Collier and Mahon’s path-breaking work on concept building,⁹

⁸ Gerring 2012.

⁹ Collier and Mahon 1993.

⁷ Blatter, Langer and Wagemann 2017, 7-17.

we know that Sartori's "ladder of abstraction"¹⁰ was a misnomer: abstraction and generalization are not the same thing, and Sartori was primarily concerned with the problems of generalization. The opposite of "abstraction" is "concretization", whereas the opposite of "generalization" is "specification."

The dichotomy between abstract and concrete concepts shows up in the distinct procedures through which these two kinds of concepts are defined: **Abstract concepts** are defined through reflection on the relationships that one concept has to other abstract concepts. The attributes that we select for characterizing our abstract concept have to be justified with reference to a theoretical discourse. **Concrete concepts**, in contrast, are defined through the assignment of indicators that refer to observations. The categorical difference between abstract and concrete concepts shows up, once again, when we look at how the "negative pole" of the concept is getting defined. For an abstract concept, the **negative pole** must be defined through a substantial alternative concept (e.g. "monarchy" or "autocracy" for the concept of democracy³). For a concrete concept, though, it is enough to define the negative pole as simple negation or as the null point (non-democracies, zero degree of democracy).

When we reflect about the **level of generality** of a concept, we are not concerned with how the concept's defining characteristics have been derived. Instead, we reflect on the relationship between the set of characteristics or attributes that define a concept ("category" in Collier and Mahon's terminology) and the set of entities in the world to which the concept refers.¹² The former is called the "**intension**" of a concept, the latter the "**extension**." Collier and Mahon's most important insight is that only in classical systems of categorization does a higher intension (a concept that is more specified by a higher number of attributes) leads to a lower extension (a lower number of entities that correspond to the concept). If we use family resemblance or radial categories (systems of categorization in which some attributes are possible but not necessary attributes of a category), there is no logical trade-off between intension and extension. This means that the extension of a category that is located on a lower level of generality may exceed that of a category that is located on a higher level of generality.¹³ This is because, in these systems of categorization, going down the ladder of generality means to select a specific configuration out of a larger set of possible attributes which characterize a concept.

In line with such non-classical systems of categorization, we can define

a) a Paradigm (P) as the set of all theories that combine a specific core concept (CC) with one or a plurality of different peripheral concepts (PC): $P = CC * [PC1 + PC2 + PC3 + \dots]$ ¹⁴,

¹⁰ Sartori 1970.

¹¹ For the concept of "democracy" see Goertz 2006, 32.

¹² Collier and Mahon 1993, 846.

¹³ Collier and Mahon 1993, 850.

¹⁴ Schimmelfennig (2003) shows that a rationalist paradigm in International Relations consists of rational choice theory as a core concept plus divergent conceptualizations of the primary goals that states

whereby in line with Boolean algebra '*' means 'and' whereas '+' means 'or'; and

b) a Theory (T) as a specific combination of the core concept with one or a plurality of peripheral concepts: $T = CC * PC1 * PC2$.

The formulas reveal that a Paradigm has not only a larger intension (more attributes) but also almost certainly a larger extension (more empirical entities to which the concepts refers to) than a Theory. In consequence, we might **redefine** what "**intension**" means for non-classic systems of categorization and for non-classic approaches to concept and theory formation: In these contexts, "intension" would not refer to the number of attributes that characterize a concept, but to the intensity by which these attributes are linked to each other. If we accept this definition of intension, we end up also with what intuitively makes sense for the non-classic systems of categorization: a higher level of intensity leads to a lower level of extensity. The meaning of this insight, however, is markedly different to the currently dominant understanding which is still in line with the writings of Sartori.

So far, we have clarified the difference between abstraction and generalization. Furthermore, we have pointed to the categorical differences between abstract and concrete concepts, and introduced non-classic forms of categorization or concept formation. In earlier contributions, we transferred these insights from concept-formation to the task of theory-formulation. Whereas "attributes" represent the elements that we use for specifying "concepts," "concepts" are the elements that we use to specify "theories." Such a transfer paves the way to conceptualizing the relationship between paradigms and theories in the language of concept formation.¹⁵

In the following, we build on these insights and turn towards a systematic **mapping of the different types of explanation** for which the different strands of research strive to (see figure 2).

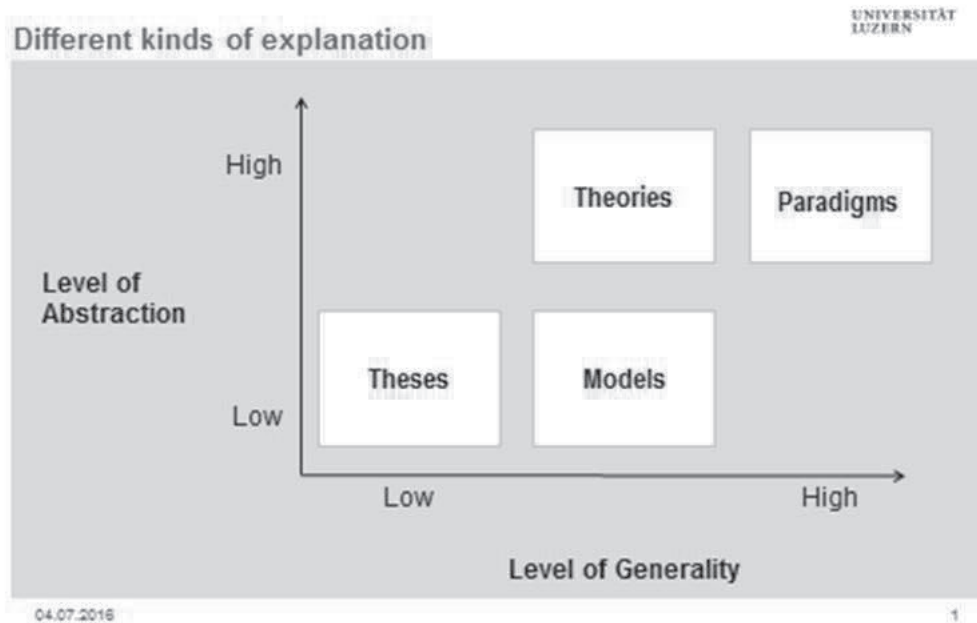
On the one hand, we might want to find out whether a concrete cause (low level of abstraction) has a specific effect (low level of generality). The corresponding hypothesis that provides a preliminary answer can be deduced from abstract theories, but it does not have to. Quite often, such a hypothesis is (seen as) nothing more than an unproven claim. In order to test the causal claim of said hypothesis, the independent and the dependent variable must be clearly specified and operationalized (concretized) by observable indicators. If we can control for all other potential causal factors by comparing similar cases in these respects, the observed co-variation among the independent and dependent variable provides enough empirical leverage for transferring the hypothesis into a truthful **thesis** about a causal relationship within a clearly delimited population of cases.

On the other hand, there are abstract **paradigms**, which aspire to make sense and provide orientation for many instances

aspire (power, welfare or security) as peripheral concepts (Blatter and Haverland 2014: 180-182).

¹⁵ Blatter and Haverland 2014, 158; Blatter 2016.

Figure 2: Different Kinds of Explanation



of social entities and for many facets of the social world (for paradigms, there are no boundaries of the population of cases to which they refer to). They are characterized by core concepts and a large set of peripheral concepts, whereby both the core concepts and the peripheral concepts remain on an abstract level, so that it needs a lot of interpretative work in order to connect empirical observations to these abstract concepts.

For an understanding of the difference between the other two types of explanations (theories, models), it is helpful to perceive them as less radical siblings of theses and paradigms. Like (hypo-)theses, **models** are located on a concrete level, but they are not as narrowly specified—they take a broader set of causal factors into account for explaining the outcome. This stands in contrast to when we want to test a hypothesis. In such cases, we try to control for most factors and to focus on one single independent variable and one dependent variable. A model can be a statistical model (Dependent Variable $Y = a \cdot \text{Independent Variable } X_1 + b \cdot \text{Indep. Variable } X_2 + c \cdot \text{Indep. Variable } X_3 + \text{error}$), a set-theoretical model (Outcome = Condition A * Con. B + Con. C * Con. D), a causal chain (Precondition A -> Precond. B -> Precond. C -> Outcome) or a multi-level model of a causal mechanism (Causal Mechanism = Situational Mechanism * Action-formation Mechanism * Transformational Mechanism). Crucially important—and the main difference to a theory—is the fact that models are integrated on an empirical level. A good model has a good “fit” to the empirical data. The various elements of the model do not have to be conceptually consistent in the sense of belonging to a single worldview.

Such a conceptual coherence is exactly what characterizes a theory in contrast to a model. As we have laid out before, a **theory** is a specified paradigm in the sense that it combines one or a few peripheral concepts and the core concept of the

paradigm and specifies the status of the selected peripheral concepts as necessary conditions for the theory (Theory = Core Concept * Peripheral Concept a * Peripheral Concept b). This means that a theory is located on a lower level of generality, but it remains abstract in the sense that its conceptual elements are derived first and foremost by discussing their relationship to other abstract concepts and not by referring to (existing) indicators. Crucially important for an adequate understanding of the kind of explanation that a theory provides is that the conceptual elements of a theory form a coherent whole through their belonging to a common worldview/paradigm. Elements are only included into an explanatory framework if they conceptually fit with the other elements of the theory and not if they enhance the fit to the empirical data.

Overall, the differentiation between levels of abstraction and levels of generality allows us to develop a pluralistic view on distinct kinds of explanations. The former aspect reflects the differences-in-kind between truth-seekers who strive for explanations on a low level of abstraction and sense-makers who prefer explanations of a higher level of abstraction. The latter aspect makes us aware that there are differences-in-degree on both sides: Truth-seekers develop and not only test hypotheses which focus (ideal-typically) on causal relationships between a single independent variable of interest and the dependent variable in a very limited population of cases, but also models which include causal relationships among a plurality of variables, conditions or mechanisms in a larger population of cases. Sense-makers, in turn, do not only develop and apply paradigmatic lenses that provide insights and orientation in general, but also theories that are more tailored for specific contexts.

Table 1: Different Focal Points and Different Strategies for Securing Validity

	Description	Explanation
Securing validity for the cases under study	b) Valid Concretization : Selecting <i>convergent OR alternative</i> indicators	c) Valid Conclusion : Linking abstract relationships to concrete observations through <i>inference OR interpretation</i>
Securing validity beyond the cases under study	a) Valid Specification : Justifying attributes by referring to <i>content OR context</i>	d) Valid Generalization : Presuming <i>causal OR constitutive</i> scope conditions

Quality Criteria: Different Ways to Secure Validity Between Neutrality and Positionality

Validity and reliability are the most basic quality criteria for research procedures. These two criteria point us to the most important questions for judging our process of knowledge creation: Do we study/explain what we claim to study/explain? Can we trust the results?

Usually, truth-seekers and sense-makers interpret and specify these criteria quite differently: In respect to validity¹⁶, the former argue that we have to make sure that we describe and explain what we want to describe/explain by relying on formal logic. Principles of formal logic are “objective” and independent from the standpoint of the applicant. In consequence, and in line with the goal to seek the truth, the first approach to validity aims at “**objectivity**” and prescribes “**neutrality**” for the researcher. Sense-makers, in contrast, argue that we have to secure adequate descriptions and explanations with the help of the associative and justificatory faculties that languages offer. These faculties depend on, and are shaped by, the specific language (theoretical lenses, concepts) that the researcher applies. In consequence, good research has to **justify the selected theories and concepts** by reflecting on their position in the scientific discourse and in the social/political practice and their relationship to other theories and concepts.

Nevertheless, we get a more nuanced picture of the meanings of validity, and of how validity is sought, if we break down the analytic process into four components that are necessary for producing an explanation. For a comprehensive, albeit differentiated understanding of validity, it makes sense to distinguish:

- whether we are concerned with the validity of **descriptions** OR with the validity of **explanations**, and
- whether we are concerned with the validity of concepts and conclusions for the **cases we studied** OR whether we are concerned with the validity of concepts and claims

¹⁶ Due to space restrictions, I cannot address the criterion of reliability in this contribution, but see Blatter 2016.

beyond the studied cases. This distinction is often labelled “internal” versus “external” validity, whereby external validity overlaps with reflection on the “generalization” of findings.

When we combine the two dimensions, we get four focal points that indicate where we try to secure validity (see Table 1). Furthermore, Table 1 highlights that for each focal point we can detect two distinct strategies for pursuing the corresponding task of validation. Within each cell, the first strategy is in line with truth-seeking, the second strategy with sense-making.

I briefly scrutinize the different strategies at the four focal points along the following sequence of a deductive research process: a) concept specification; b) concept concretization (operationalization); c) conclusions from the created data to the relationships among the concepts for the studied cases; d) reflections on the wider generalizations of these findings.

The validity of the **specification** of a concept depends on how (much) we justify the assignment of specific attributes by relating the selected concept to other concepts within the scientific discourse. Sometimes this procedure is presented as involving two steps: First, a “systematized concept” is derived from a “background concept:” the selection of a specific meaning from the universe of possible meanings is justified with the specific goals or purposes of the research project.¹⁷ Second, indicators are selected which “represent the universe of content entailed in the systematized concept.”¹⁸ Truth-seekers adhere to such a content-centered approach to concept formation since it allows them to treat concepts as clearly externally-delineated and internally homogeneous elements. Sense-makers, in contrast, emphasize the context-dependent meaning of concepts and the intersubjective construction of meaningful concepts. Accordingly, for them, the specification of a concept involves a reflection on the position and the role of a concept (its linguistic signifier) in the scientific discourse. The internal characteristics of the concept are not determined by selecting the best observable representative of a homoge-

¹⁷ Adcock and Collier 2001, 531.

¹⁸ Adcock and Collier 2001, 537.

neous concept but by reflecting on the (categorical and consequential) relationships of the concept to other abstract concepts.¹⁹

The validity of the **concretization** (often called operationalization) of a concept depends primarily on the selection of the correct indicators. The most important test that confirms this is whether the scores produced by an indicator are empirically associated with scores of other (direct) measures of the concept. This kind of validity is often called “criterion validity” and the procedure is labeled “**convergent** validation.”²⁰ Nevertheless, Gary Goertz has made us aware of the fact that the scores of indicators should converge only if we believe the indicators to be consequences of our concept (which would be termed a latent variable in quantitative research).²¹ If we perceive the relationship between indicator and concept not as causal (in a narrow sense, see below) but as functional or constitutive (as sense makers often do), different valid indicators of a concept need not converge because they may be understood as **alternative** options for making the concept possible.

The validity of the explanations that we derive for the cases we study depends primarily on whether the **conclusions** that we draw from observations/signs to unobservable relationships between our concepts are consistent from the viewpoint of formal logic or whether they are coherent in the sense that they are convincingly justified (explicitly, with means with the help of language). The former is denoted by the term **inference** (truth-seeking), the latter by the term **interpretation** (sense-making).

The validity of the **generalizing** conclusions that we draw from our results depends on the adequacy of some fundamental presumptions. Once again, we can detect different procedures for strengthening what is also called external validity. **Construct validation** refers to procedures which start with the **presumption** that **specific causal relationships exist**.²² For example, the Comparable Cases Strategy depends strongly on presumptions about other factors (beyond the factor of interest) that might influence the dependent variable. Already the validity of the conclusions for the cases under study crucially depends on the correct identification of alternative factors of influence. The only way to control for the influence of these factors is to take them as criteria for case selection (the selected cases must show no variation in respect to these factors). The same is true when it comes to draw generalizing conclusions beyond the studied cases. We can generalize the result of our cross-case analysis only for the population of cases that show similar values in respect to the control variables as our selected and analyzed cases, because only within this—often very small population of cases which share the same scope conditions—we can be sure that our factor of interest is responsible for a causal effect and not another factor.

In order to highlight the functional equivalency, and in

line with our valuation of linguistic coherence, we might call the principled alternative to construct validity “**construction validity**.” Like the former, the latter depends on a presumption of relationships between the scope conditions and our outcome of interest. Whereas the former presumes causal relationships in a narrow sense, the latter presupposes that the specific material or ideational **structures** which are being focused on **have a constitutive effect** on social actions and processes. For example, those who analyze discourses or narratives presume that these linguistic structures have a constitutive impact on the interests and interactions of social/political actors. In a Con-Textual Analysis, the analytic focus is not on testing this presumption but on the formation and transformation of these structures. In combination with the objectivist versus conventionalist understandings of knowledge, to which truth seekers and sense makers respectively adhere to, we can conclude: generalizations of truth-seekers depend on the truth of their causal presumptions in respect to control variables/scope conditions whereas generalizations of sense-makers, in contrast, depend on how well the constitutive presumptions are accepted in the scientific discourse.

Towards Pragmatic and Pluralist Ontological Stances

According to Blaikie, ontology refers to “the nature of social reality—claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other.”²³ Blaikie’s definition draws him immediately into the philosophical debate on whether the social reality that we study exists independent of the human mind. Quite similarly, Brady associates ontology primarily with the question of deterministic versus probabilistic causality.²⁴ A **pragmatic** stance, in contrast, starts by emphasizing that it is legitimate to ask all kinds of research questions, despite the fact that these questions imply very different assumptions about the nature of social reality. For each research question, we should use those assumptions about the nature of social reality that allow us to develop the most useful answer to the question. Such a pragmatic view of ontology not only helps us to build bridges between seemingly incommensurable ways of conceptualizing the nature of social reality, but also allows us to differentiate distinct understandings of causality among truth-seekers and among sense-makers.

As we did for epistemology, we distinguish **three aspects** that are necessary in order to specify a pragmatic ontological stance: a) presumptions about the basic entities of the social world; b) presumptions about the relationship among these entities; and c) understandings of causes and causation. For each aspect, I briefly indicate the principled alternatives, but the main goal is to point to the existing plurality within each principled approach and to highlight the fact that some understandings of causality allow for a combination of truth seeking and sense making.

¹⁹ Adcock 2005.

²⁰ Adcock and Collier 2001, 537-542.

²¹ Goertz 2006, 14-15; 62-65.

²² Adcock and Collier 2001, 542-543.

²³ Blaikie 1993, 6.

²⁴ Brady 2008, 225.

*Basic Entities of Social Reality:**Materialism, Idealism and Beyond Binary Concepts*

There are two principled alternatives when it comes to conceptualizing the basic entities of social reality: materialism and idealism. Materialists assume that the most fundamental fact about society is the nature and organization of material forces, therefore focusing on traits like the biological nature of humans, natural resources, geography, and forces of production and destruction. Idealists, in contrast, assign this role to the nature and structure of human and social consciousness, therefore concentrating on aspects like dominant forms of knowledge, ideas and values on the individual or collective level.²⁵

For sense-makers, it is important to locate an explanatory endeavor within the general discourse about these basic entities of social reality. This is because sense-makers' main goal is to provide orientation. Therefore, it is important to locate individual explanatory efforts within broader discourses. Doing so helps to avoid fully idiosyncratic explanations and to communicate research findings across different fields and (sub)disciplines. For truth-seekers, an explicit reflection on how the concepts they apply relate to the basic entities of social reality is not as important, since they concentrate on gauging the correspondence of explanatory models to a clearly delimited part of social reality. In consequence, truth-seekers are often agnostic with respect to the question of whether the concepts they apply in their explanatory endeavors arise from a materialist or an idealist nature of social reality. Arguably, this is the case with the concept of "actor preferences." It is a crucial explanatory factor for rationalist explanations, but it can reflect materialist and/or idealist motivations.

*Relationship Among Entities:**Elementarism, Holism and Beyond Binary Approaches*

There are two principled alternatives when it comes to conceptualizing the relationship among the basic entities of the social world: elementarism and holism. Elementaristic approaches to hypotheses- or model-building assume that the behavior/functioning of the parts of a system is determined by their internal properties and the entirety of the system is the result of the interactions among the autonomous individual parts. Holistic approaches to theory-building, by contrast, claim that the behavior of the particular elements is shaped primarily by the entire system (i.e. that entireties have an ontological status of their own and are more than the sum of their individual parts).²⁶ Truth-seekers have a strong affinity to an elementarist worldview since they conceptualize the relationship among the entities of a social/political system as causal (in a narrow sense), whereas sense makers assume it to be constitutive. It is important to note that this does not necessarily imply that the former only focuses on the consequences of individual agency and the latter on the constitutive functions of social structures. An elementarist approach can also strive for revealing the structural causes of individual or collective action. Similarly, a holist

approach can strive for the constitution of social structures through individual (inter-)actions.²⁷ In recent decades, Relationalism emerged as a less holistic alternative to elementarism, highlighting the ongoing and mutual re-constitution of parts and holes of a social system.²⁸

Causation: Different Ways to Define Causes and the Adequate Methods to Prove their Empirical Relevance

Truth-seekers usually adhere to an elementaristic understanding of causes as individual "**difference makers**." A difference-making understanding of causality stipulates that causes hold a general property of making some sort of difference to their effects. On the contrary, sense-makers are more inclined to follow those who stipulate that **causality is a relational concept** (and not a property that a factor generally inhibits), and that the dispositional influence of a cause on the effect manifests itself only under concrete circumstances.²⁹ In the following, I will show that when we leave the definitional level and look at the methods that are applied in order to prove the relevance of causes, we find a more diverse spectrum on both sides than such a dichotomous categorization implies.

When truth-seekers try to conceptualize causation and to identify the effects of causes, they embrace the "experimental template" as the gold standard. As Brady has shown,³⁰ this is the case because the **experimental template** combines a specific understanding with an efficient way to trace this kind of causation: An experiment is based on the "**counterfactual understanding**" of causation expressed by Hume as "if the first object had not been, the second had never existed,"³¹ and allows to control two important aspects: a) the "treatment/intervention" which is necessary in order clarify the direction of the causal relation, and b) alternative factors of influence which are necessary in order to isolate the causal effect of the factor of interest.

Brady identifies two further ways to understand and to trace causation that are less focused on the identification of the effects of one specific cause. The "**regularity approach**" is linked to Hume's other definition of "a cause to be an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first, are followed by the objects similar to the second."³² It focuses on the identification of the multiple causes of a specific effect. Finally, the "**mechanism approach**" to causation is concerned with temporal processes and social mechanisms that link cause and effect on a lower level of analysis.³³

The argument that these understandings of causation and their corresponding qualitative methods imply elementarist and relationalist ontologies can be formulated most clearly with the help of the terminology of necessity and sufficiency. When

²⁷ Wendt 1999, 22-29.

²⁸ Emirbayer 1997.

²⁹ Baumgartner 2015; Anjum and Mumford 2010; Mumford and Anjum 2011.

³⁰ Brady 2008.

³¹ Hume 1748 according to Brady 2008, 233.

³² Hume 1748 according to Brady 2008, 233.

³³ Brady 2008, 242-245.

²⁵ Wendt 1999, 23-24.

²⁶ Esfeld 2003.

the counterfactual approach is applied within the **Comparable Cases Strategy (CCS)**, where we draw causal inferences from an observed co-variation of independent and dependent variables in otherwise similar cases, we presume that the cause is a necessary AND sufficient condition for the effect. If we allow the cause to be sufficient but not necessary—if we find an effect without a cause—we cannot draw any logical conclusion. Similarly, if we allow the cause to be necessary but not sufficient—if we find the cause without the effect—we cannot draw any logical conclusion either.

The regularity approach broadens this understanding by accepting conditions that are necessary but not sufficient and conditions that are sufficient but not necessary. This implies that individual causes are most often INUS-conditions—in-sufficient but necessary parts of a compound condition that is itself unnecessary but sufficient for an effect.³⁴ INUS conditions imply that explanations do not contain single, “independent” factors that have “autonomous” causal power. Instead, causation involves a configuration of causal factors and that the causal power of individual factors is contingent on the existence or a specific expression of other causal factors. In consequence, the explanations that we strive for with a **Configurational Comparative Analysis (CCA)**, the method that is based on the ontological assumption of configurational causality, imply a relationalist ontology in contrast to the elementarist ontology that we presume when applying methods based on the experimental template. Nevertheless, CCA represents only a very limited step towards a holistic or relationalist ontology and its corresponding understanding of causality, since this method focuses on the empirical identification of the co-existence of a configuration of causal conditions and an outcome. It cannot provide empirical information on the mechanisms which allow the divergent components of a causal configuration to work together in such a way that they are able to produce the outcome. For that we need a different method that corresponds to an even stronger relationalist ontology.

That is exactly what we get, if we follow those methodologists who define and conceptualize the notion of “causal mechanisms” in line with major social theorists.³⁵ According to such an understanding, a causal mechanism consists of three complementary social mechanisms that connect causal factors on different levels of analysis: “situational mechanisms” which link structures to actors; “action-formation mechanisms” as the micro-foundations of mechanism-based explanations; and “transformational mechanisms” which link actions, including communicative acts, to social structures.³⁶ The corresponding ideal-typical method, **Causal-Process Tracing (CPT)**³⁷ is designed to help find the truth in the sense of developing an explanatory model that corresponds to the empirical reality, but it is also committed to provide meaningful explanations.

³⁴ Brady 2008: 227.

³⁵ e.g. Coleman 1990; Esser 1993; Elster 1998; Hedstroem and Swedberg 1998.

³⁶ Blatter and Haverland 2014, 95-97.

³⁷ As laid out in Blatter and Haverland 2014, 79-143.

This is the case not only because of the strongly relationalist understandings of causation that comes with the scrutinized conceptualization of causal mechanisms, but also because it guides the researcher towards applying one of the generic “action-formation mechanisms” that social theorists have developed.³⁸ This, in turn, affirms that explanations based on Causal-Process Tracing draw on basic social theory instead of creating a flurry of idiosyncratic explanations and mechanisms, as it is the case with other approaches to Process Tracing.³⁹ A final reason for assigning Causal-Process Tracing and its corresponding understanding of causation a centrist place in our template is the fact that the “bathtub” model of causation⁴⁰ that is often invoked to figuratively represent the scrutinized theoretical understanding of causal mechanism has strong affinities to figure 3, which we develop next and which helps us to scrutinize the (implicit) understandings of causation that sense makers adhere to.

Kurki has reminded us that we can draw on Aristotle for reflecting on the meaning of causation.⁴¹ For a productive use in the current context, we have to transfer **Aristotle’s famous four causes** into the context of the social sciences and translate them into the language of modern social science theory. Aristotle distinguishes four kinds of causes: material, formal, efficient and final causes. According to Kurki, material and formal causes are located on the structural level of analysis, whereas efficient and final causes are located on the lower level of individual or corporate agency.⁴² Material causes can be understood as the distribution of material resources and natural conditions that enable and delimit the potential range and direction of action; formal causes can be conceived as the normative-cognitive structures (discourses, frames) which define the possible (imaginable) range and direction of action. Within a social science context, final causes can be understood as purposes which mobilize and motivate action. Finally, efficient causes refer to agents that produce action through their pushing and pulling activities. Figure 3 shows how these four causes can be located within the conceptual space that refers to the ontological aspects that we scrutinized in the two foregoing subsections—a conceptual space that Wendt used for locating theories in the field of International Relations.⁴³

The location of these four kinds of causes is only the first step for delineating different understandings of causation that are in line with the goal of providing meaningful explanations of the social world. The second step is to show how a specific way to refer to these generic causes can be coherently aligned to a specific methodological approach.

The strongly holistic approach presumes that material or ideational **structures** (material and formal causes) strongly determine the formation and motivation of individual actors. In

³⁸ Whereby rational choice is just one option, see Hedstrom and Ylikoski 2010.

³⁹ Blatter, Haverland and van Hulst 2016b, viii.

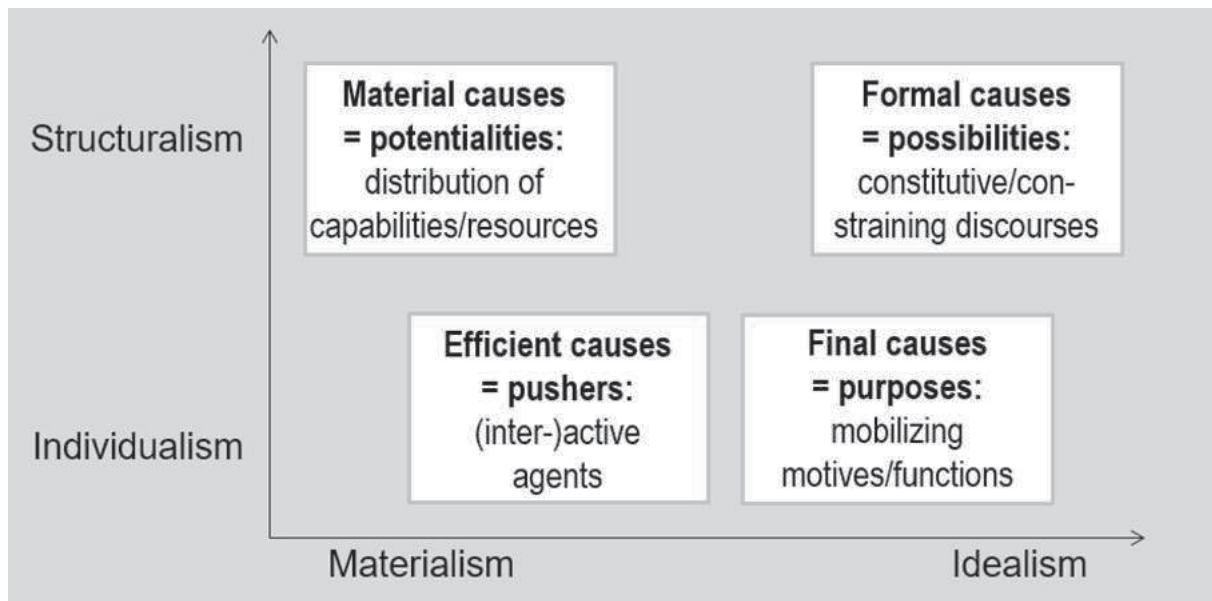
⁴⁰ Coleman 1990.

⁴¹ Kurki 2008.

⁴² Kurki 2008, 219-222.

⁴³ Wendt 1999, 29-32.

Figure 3: Different Kinds of Causes



consequence, approaches which can be labelled as **Con-Textual Analysis** focus on revealing the formation and transformation of these underlying structures. Most forms of Discourse Analysis conform to this ideal-type.⁴⁴

A first step in order to move from holism to relationalism is to broaden the range of causes that are taken into account on an equal footing. In this case, we strive for an explanation that not only includes all four causes, but also shows **how the four causes mutually constitute**, transform or stabilize each other. We reach such a complete picture when we combine a close interaction and communication between the subjects of the study and the social scientists' theoretical knowledge which leads to a "fusion of horizons." Therefore, we call the corresponding ideal-typical method "**Co-writing Culture**." Ethnographic studies are usually very close to this ideal-type.⁴⁵

A more radical turn away from holism combines internal coherence with external difference and plurality. Such an approach strives for explanations that are internally coherent inasmuch as they combine and specify different causes that correspond to a consistent materialist or idealist understanding of the nature of social reality (scientific paradigm). Insofar, the corresponding ideal-typical method, **Congruence Analysis (CON)**, is fully in line with sense-makers' striving for coherence. But, in contrast to other sense making understandings of causality, it does not presume that providing orientation demands a single integrated explanation. Instead, it assumes the productivity of a **plurality** of theories defined as internally coherent and externally distinctive explanatory **schemas**. A plurality of distinct theories makes it possible to develop multiple and divergent explanations of a phenomenon. Within such a Congruence Analysis, it is important to reflect

on the relationship between the different theories. In principle, they can complement or compete with each other. Furthermore, within a CON the divergent theories must be put to a systematic empirical test in order reveal the (divergent) levels of congruence between each causal schema and empirical observations, a feature that brings CON close to truth-seekers' striving for correspondence (between the explanation and the real world). Sense-makers can use the results of such a Congruence Analysis in order to reflect on the appropriate standing of the theories in the (scientific/social) discourse. Truth-seekers, in contrast, can use the results of a congruence analysis in order to reflect on the truthfulness of the divergent explanations within the specific field of the study to which they have been applied.

Congruence Analysis, like Causal-Process Tracing, is based on a relationalist understanding of causality inasmuch as both methods strive for explanations which include a multiplicity of causal factors on different levels of analysis (structure and agency). In a CON, though, each explanatory schema must be theoretically coherent, whereas CPT is open to the possibility of revealing the working of a combination of social mechanisms in which each single social mechanism is aligned to a distinct theory or paradigm. In other words, CPT is applied in order to create a comprehensive explanatory model that includes a plurality of causal factors, whereas CON develops a plurality of coherent theories in order to produce a comprehensive, in the sense of being multifaceted, understanding of an empirical phenomenon.

⁴⁴ Van Hulst, Blatter, Haverland 2016, xi-xii.

⁴⁵ See Van Hulst, Blatter, Haverland 2016, x-xi.

Table 2a: Purposes and Epistemological Principles of the Six Qualitative Methods

	Comparable Cases Strategy	Configurational Comparative Analysis	Causal-Process Tracing	Congruence Analysis	Co-Writing Culture	Con-Textual Analysis
	Truth-Seeking			↔	Sense-Making	
Research Question	Which effects does a specific cause (X) have?	Which configurations of conditions make a specific kind of outcome (Y) possible?	Which underlying mechanisms (M) make causes produce an effect?	Which specific theory (T) provides better/further explanations?	Which interpretative signs and processes characterize a specific culture (C)?	Which underlying structure (S) stabilizes and/or transforms a social system?
Research Design	=> X-centred research design	=> Y-centred research design	=> M-centred research design	=> T-centred research design	=> C-centred research design	=> S-centred research design
Aspired Explanation	Confirmed hypothesis for specified scope conditions	Configurational model with large empirical consistency/coverage OR theoretical coherence	Completely specified multi-level model of social mechanisms	Comparatively high congruence between a coherent theory and a crucial case	Consistent narrative of cultural practices co-produced by scholar and subject	Creative re-construction of social reality based on a comprehensive worldview
Validity	Means + preconditions for valid inferences: formal logic; reflections on the similarity of cases	Means + preconditions for valid concretizations and inferences: set theory; reflections on optimal calibration, consistency and coverage	Means + preconditions for valid specifications and concretizations: empirical density and depth; intensive reflections on relationships among causal factors	Means + preconditions for valid specifications and interpretations: reflections on relationships among theories + between concretes and abstracts; multiple theories	Means + preconditions for valid concretizations and interpretations: communicative fusion of horizons; immersion and empathy	Means + preconditions for valid generalizations: ingenious interpretation of important examples; reflections on paradigms
Reliability	Transparency: selection of variables and cases; scoring	Replicability: access to raw data; robustness tests	Traceability: detailed description of processes; access to original sources	Fairness: unbiased selection, specification, and application of theories	Authenticity: interpretations are shared/supported in the field of study	Reflexivity: research(er) is positioned in the research context

Characterizing Different Ideal-Typical Methods

Tables 2a (above) and 2b (next page) summarize the delineated characteristics of the six methods in their ideal-typical form.⁴⁶

Concluding Remarks on the Potential Uses of the Typology

On a practical level, the typology of methods helped us to write the introduction of our latest textbook on qualitative methods in Political Science.⁴⁷ There, we presented a set of prototypical research goals and questions (as done in the second section of this essay). The **core message for practitioners** is that each prototypical research question implies a specific configuration of epistemological principles and ontological presumptions with its corresponding methods of data creation and data analysis.

On a methodological level, though, the presumption that is implied in such an advice might be questioned. In research practice and in methodological contributions, we find applications and descriptions of the methods (with the same or similar labels) which do not correspond to our ideal-typical descriptions. For example, many scholars and methodologists pursue

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)—the most common label for the family of methods that correspond to our ideal-type CCA—or Process Tracing (PT) as purely truth-seeking endeavours. Moreover, interpretive scholars rarely put a plurality of theories to empirical scrutiny in the systematic way that is necessary for a good Congruence Analysis. Some scholars will challenge the presumption that the ideal-types presented here represent the best ways to search for valid and reliable answers to the formulated questions. Nevertheless, these ideal-types might challenge, in turn, the presumption that one must be either **seeking the truth or making sense**. My claim is that if adequately designed, **some methods allow for pursuing both** at the same time. Furthermore, the framework might be helpful to clarify which distinct strategies we have to apply in the various steps of a research project when we use these methods either as pure truth-seekers, as pure sense-makers, or as scholars who combine truth-seeking and sense-making.⁴⁸

On the most general level, the framework and typology presented here should stimulate a debate about the meaning of “multi-method research.” Currently, the dominant understanding equates multi-method research with a combination of

⁴⁶ Blatter 2016 contains not only a third table in which the corresponding methods of data collection/creation and data analysis/interpretation are summed up, but also a more comprehensive description of four out of the six ideal-typical methods.

⁴⁷ Blatter, Langer and Wagemann 2017 12-17.

⁴⁸ For first attempts to do so in respect to PT and CCA, see Blatter 2016; Blatter and Huber 2017. One important insight has been that Bayesian reasoning has to be applied differently.

Table 2b: Ontological Presumptions of Six Qualitative Methods

	Comparable Cases Strategy	Configurational Comparative Analysis	Causal-Process Tracing	Congruence Analysis	Co-Writing Culture	Con-Textual Analysis
	Elementarism			↔	Holism	
Basic Entities	All kinds of material and ideational factors understood as variables	All kinds of material or ideational factors understood as conditions	A complete set of causal factors on the macro- and on the micro-level of analysis	A theoretically coherent set of material or ideational factors on the macro- and micro-level of analysis	An empirically consistent set of meanings and practices	A coherent set of material and/or ideational factors understood as structures
Basic Relations	Specific co-variation of two elements on the same level of analysis	Diverse configurations of multiple elements on various levels of analysis	Complementary social mechanisms which link causal factors across divergent levels of analysis	Coherent combination of constitutive and causal relations across divergent levels of analysis	Co-constitutive relationship between interpretation and action on the micro-level of analysis	Constitutive consequences of macro-level factors on micro-level factors
Understandings...	Counterfactual (If no X, no Y)	Regular Coexistence	Causal Mechanism	Coherent Causal Schema	Consistent Reconstruction	Constitutive Power
Definitions... of Causation	A cause is a necessary AND sufficient condition of an effect	A cause is a necessary and/or sufficient element of a necessary and/or sufficient causal configuration of an effect	A cause is an element of a multi-level system of social mechanisms which are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for the outcome	A cause is an element of an abstract schema which includes coherently aligned causes, mechanisms + outcomes on multiple levels of analysis	A cause is an element in a co-produced narrative about meaningful practices	A cause is a social structure that fundamentally shapes (stabilizes or transforms) social systems
Implications for the autonomy or context-dependency of causes	Independency: autonomous causal effect; equal causal power in a specified population	Contingency: causal effect depends on context; causal heterogeneity	Complementarity: causal effect depends on the sequential/situated interaction of three social mechanism	Coherence: causation depends on a coherent combination of efficient causes AND final causes PLUS material OR formal causes	Consistency: causation depends on effective combination of material and formal causes for reaching final causes	Creativity: causation depends on the creation of final and efficient causes by material and/or formal causes

divergent methods (e.g. statistical analysis and Process Tracing, or within-case analysis and cross-case analysis) aiming at strengthening the internal and/or external validity of results, whereby these results represent the answer to the same research question. The presented typology, instead, highlights the fact that divergent **methods complement each other in a much more fundamental way** by allowing us to pursue different research goals and to answer quite distinct kinds of research questions.

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