

The Sweet Spot in Comparative Area Studies: Embracing Causal Complexity through the Identification of Both Systematic and Unsystematic Variables and Mechanisms

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The tremendous value of Comparative Area Studies (CAS) is difficult to overstate, as CAS scholars appear to accomplish the impossible: reaching broad-ranging conclusions from cross-case comparisons spanning two or more geographic regions, while still incorporating the sort of deep and detailed knowledge of people and places that is the hallmark of classic area studies. CAS researchers not only showcase the approach's great strengths; they also encourage more work along these lines, since CAS contributions comprise only around 15 percent of recent works in comparative politics (Ahram, Köllner, and Sil 2018, 17). With this encouragement comes some welcome advice, including a push for more precisely conceptualized variables so that they are portable across contexts, admonitions against the assumption that geographic proximity defines the full population of cases to which one's theory applies, and a reminder that idiosyncratic factors are no less important than systematic conditions when it comes to causal explanation.

This essay offers additional advice to enhance the CAS approach, starting from the premise that Comparative Area Studies' greatest strength is also its main challenge: striking a balance between fully context-sensitive case studies, and the development of generalizable causal theories. I argue that CAS scholars can better balance these idiographic and nomothetic goals through more careful consideration of the logic of causal inference guiding one's research. In particular, CAS scholarship would benefit not only from more explicit attention to whether explanatory variables found to travel across regions are necessary, sufficient, INUS, or SUIN, but also from a more conscious effort to determine whether or not the causal mechanisms linking explanatory variables to outcomes also travel across regions. In other words, does X_1 cause Y_1 in the same way in one region or area as it does in another?

Good qualitative hypothesis testing typically entails two things: establishing the causal importance of

variables that cases have in common through cross-case analysis and identifying the mechanisms that link those variables to the outcome of interest through within-case process tracing. For the first task, CAS scholars seek to test whether a causal theory that explains cases in one region or area also explains cases in regions or areas other than the one in which that theory was initially developed. Yet it is not always clear what it means for a theory to "travel" across areas. For instance, if X_1 , X_2 , and X_3 are found to cause Y_1 in cases in Southeast Asia, should CAS researchers reject the cross-regional generalizability of the causal theory if they find that X_1 and X_2 , but not X_3 , are causally significant for Y_1 in cases in Latin America? Part of the problem is that assessing a theory's generalizability is not as simple as determining whether X_1 , X_2 , or X_3 is present or absent across all cases with the outcome Y_1 . Here is where more careful attention to the nature of explanatory variables in relation to each other and to the outcome can help.

In particular, CAS scholars should first specify whether the explanatory variables under consideration are necessary, sufficient, INUS (an insufficient but necessary part of a larger cause that is itself sufficient but unnecessary), or SUIN (a sufficient but unnecessary part of a larger cause that is itself insufficient but necessary) (Mahoney, Koivu, and Kimball 2009). Doing so would allow the researcher to then consider whether his or her causal theory is cross-regionally generalizable—meaning applicable to cases in more than one world region—despite cases examined in the second region not having the exact same combination of explanatory variables as the cases examined in the first region. For instance, in the example above, failing to find X_3 in any of the Latin American cases would not render the causal theory inapplicable to Latin America if X_3 is only a sufficient, but not necessary, cause of Y_1 in the Southeast Asian cases. Likewise, consider the possibility of X_3 being an INUS variable, as in the following causal equation:

Figure 1. $(X_1 * X_2) + (X_3 * X_4) \rightarrow Y_1$ ¹

Again, finding X_1 , X_2 , and X_3 in the Southeast Asian cases, but only X_1 and X_2 in the Latin American cases, would still confirm that one's theory travels across regions since X_3 is part of a causal combination that is not necessary to produce the outcome Y_1 . Finally, consider what would happen if X_3 were a SUIN variable, as in each of the following possibilities:

Figure 2. $(X_1 + X_2) * (X_3 + X_4) \rightarrow Y_1$

Figure 3. $X_1 * (X_2 + X_3) \rightarrow Y_1$

Figure 4. $X_2 * (X_1 + X_3) \rightarrow Y_1$

Figure 5. $X_1 * X_2 * (X_3 + X_4) \rightarrow Y_1$

Once more, finding that X_1 , X_2 , and X_3 cause Y_1 in the Southeast Asian cases, while only X_1 and X_2 cause Y_1 in the Latin American cases, would not necessarily render one's causal theory ungeneralizable across regions, unless one of the Latin American cases were missing not only X_3 but also X_4 in the scenario represented in either Figure 2 or Figure 5.

Note that X_3 —whether sufficient, INUS, or SUIN—can still be considered a systematic variable, even if it does not appear in any of the Latin American cases, because X_3 is still part of a larger causal model that explains cases in both regions. It is important to keep in mind, however, that a complete causal explanation for any one case often also includes unsystematic variables, meaning factors that are truly unique to a single case, which CAS scholars are right to recognize as no less important for causal explanation than systematic variables, which contribute to causal explanation in at least two cases. Cross-case analyses help scholars separate systematic from unsystematic variables so we can identify the generalizable parts of the causal story *even if* the full causal explanation for any one case also includes idiosyncratic factors that cannot be generalized beyond a single case.

That said, it is possible that what appears at first to be an unsystematic variable in the initial analysis of cases in one region is later revealed to be a systematic variable once additional cases are analyzed in a different region. For instance, X_1 , X_2 , and X_3 might be found to cause Y_1 in every Southeast Asian case except one, which instead features X_1 , X_2 , and X_4 . At first, X_4 would appear to be

idiosyncratic to that single Southeast Asian case. Adding Latin American cases to the analysis, however, could reveal that most Y_1 cases in Latin America are also caused by X_1 , X_2 , and X_4 , meaning X_4 is a systematic variable after all. Such a scenario would suggest the causal model represented in Figure 5.

In sum, the first way for CAS scholars to test whether their causal theories travel across regions is through cross-case analysis. Crucially, testing for the generalizability of a causal theory is not the same thing as expecting every positive (Y_1) case within one's scope conditions to feature the exact same combination of explanatory variables as every other Y_1 case. Rather, what matters is whether each explanatory variable is necessary, sufficient, INUS, or SUIN since the role each variable plays in the full causal model tells the researcher how to interpret that variable's presence or absence in each case. Only fully necessary variables should be expected to appear in every Y_1 case.

The second way for CAS scholars to test whether a causal theory is generalizable beyond a single geographic region is through a cross-regional analysis of causal mechanisms. Qualitative researchers rarely rely on cross-case analyses alone to test their causal hypotheses. Instead, they combine cross-case methods with process tracing, a within-case method of causal inference that provides evidence of the specific processes through which explanatory variables actually cause the outcome in question. Arguably, causal mechanisms are at the core of theory development, which requires the researcher not only to identify a non-spurious correlation between explanatory variables (X_1 , etc.) and the dependent variable (Y_1) but also to explicate *how* and *why* those explanatory variables actually cause the dependent variable. Therefore, if scholars strive to develop truly generalizable causal theories, they should test not only whether the variables in their causal models travel across regions but also whether, holding variables constant, the same causal *mechanisms* connect those explanatory variables to outcomes in different cases. This advice applies to qualitative comparisons in general, but should prove especially valuable for CAS scholarship, which can evaluate the generalizability of causal theories by searching for recurring causal mechanisms across cases in different regions.

The distinction between variables and mechanisms is an important one. If a researcher finds that X_1 and X_2 are causally significant for Y_1 in all cases examined across both Southeast Asia and Latin America, it is still

¹ Following the norms of Boolean algebra, the + denotes the logical OR, and the * denotes the logical AND.

possible that the specific processes through which X_1 and X_2 cause Y_1 actually differ across the two regions. That is, X_1 and X_2 might cause Y_1 through one mechanism in Southeast Asia, and through an entirely different mechanism in Latin America. Such equifinality in causal mechanisms, again, holding variables constant, would call into question the cross-regional generalizability of the causal theory. Yet this is exactly where CAS scholars' deep area knowledge can bring balance to the analysis. By conducting fully context-sensitive case studies that "get the story right" as best as possible for each case through consideration of case-specific background details and vital idiosyncrasies, CAS scholars are well positioned to assess whether equifinality in causal mechanisms is

caused by something systematic within or across regions or by factors that are unique to individual cases.

Political scientists will increasingly view Comparative Area Studies not just as a welcome addition to the qualitative methods toolkit, but as outright indispensable for moving comparative politics and related subfields forward. The two main goals of CAS scholarship— theoretical breadth and case-specific depth—are not at odds and actually enhance each other in several ways. Getting the most out of CAS, however, will require greater consideration of the specific causal role each explanatory variable plays within a causal theory as well as closer attention to whether or not causal mechanisms, not just variables, travel across regions.

References

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What's the "Area" in Comparative Area Studies?

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Comparative Area Studies (CAS) promises to bring together the method of focused qualitative comparison and a sensitivity to area context in multiple world regions. Ariel Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil's *Comparative Area Studies* (2018), for example, provides a wonderful overview of how comparativists can learn from what might seem to be audacious cross-regional comparative projects. What could be more interesting than insisting that we read more European political history to make better sense of the case of the United States (Ahmed 2018) or identifying the "Arab" Spring in Israel and Mali (Ahram 2018)? I suspect that for many comparative social scientists, the very idea of learning about something familiar by comparing it with something very different is what attracted us to our field in the first place.

And yet the broader enterprise of CAS rests on what I consider to be a profoundly conservative orientation towards the world's regions. The starting point for this short essay is the observation that the literature on CAS almost universally conceptualizes "areas" or "world regions" in traditional Cold War terms (see e.g., Ahram, Köllner, and Sil 2018; Basedau and

Köllner 2007). Although areas such as "Latin America" and "the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe" do reflect geographical features and some world-historical processes, as categories they primarily reflect Western, and in particular American Cold War, *political* categories. An alternative model for CAS would be to reject these traditional conceptualizations of area and embrace more historically grounded or socially meaningful understandings of the world: former Spanish colonies, former Ottoman territories, Zomia, the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds, communist single-party states, and others. Some comparative area specialists have suggested how to do this; for example, Cheng Chen (2018) remarks that the post-communist world encompasses both the former Soviet Union and parts of Asia and Latin America. One future for CAS is to reconfigure "areas" and "regions" around these alternative ways of organizing cross-regional comparisons, thereby joining critics of "area studies" as commonly understood from across the humanities and social sciences.

The remainder of this essay develops this argument. In the next section I use the discussions in Ahram, Köllner, and Sil (2018) to identify what I consider to be