

# Qualitative & Multi-Method Research

Newsletter of the  
American Political Science Association  
Organized Section for Qualitative and  
Multi-Method Research

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### Letter from the Section President

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As the newly elected president of the Qualitative and Multi-Methods section of the American Political Science Association, it is my pleasure to introduce an especially charged issue of the newsletter. I write “pleasure” because although I had nothing to do with the theme or articles selected, I am glad to endorse healthy contention. An idea, like political life, often gains vitality through agonistic debate—through the creative frictions produced when staking out positions or defending commitments in public. It is my hope that subsequent issues will also produce imaginative openings for new kinds of discussion. To welcome ideas that shift the grounds on which our arguments previously found traction—this is our obligation as intellectuals. We are lucky to have a vocation enabling us to do what we love. Whether by generating an elegant game theoretic model, puzzling over a passage of philosophical import, doing fieldwork, mining the archives, solving a math problem, interpreting a film, conducting an experiment, writing questions for a survey, or devising new theories of political change and retrenchment, we have the good fortune of participating in worlds that are sustaining and affirming. Despite our tendencies toward justification, we would do well to acknowledge that our methodological choices are often based on what makes us happy and at ease in our environments. For some, joy comes from destabilizing conventional ways of thinking. For others, it is the activity of establishing new conventions or enriching old ones that invigorates.

We are a large section, encompassing a wide array of viewpoints and intellectual traditions. It is to be welcomed when we have serious scholarly disagreements. Our section’s strength rests in part on the ways in which members are willing to listen to one another and to entertain criticism seriously. The section’s commitments to embracing different approaches within the qualitative tradition, including recent trends combining quantitative and qualitative research in “multi-method” projects, allow us to generate a broad range of debates without becoming self-satisfied or conformist—or even overly empathic.

Relatedly, let me take this opportunity to draw your attention to the five short courses the section is sponsoring or co-sponsoring at the upcoming APSA meeting. This year we have outstanding offerings, not just in terms of the number of courses, but because of their novel content and breadth of

coverage. I want to thank the scholars who will be leading the short courses (too numerous to be listed here, but described in full on pages 52–53 below) for their efforts.

Thanks are also owed to the outgoing president, Gary Goertz, for his leadership over the past two years, to Robert

Adcock for his editorial expertise and his patience (with me, at least), and especially to Colin Elman whose organizational acumen, intelligence, and indefatigable decency make this section so worthwhile. The work of the many colleagues who have served on QMMR's committees this year is also truly appreciated.

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## Symposium. The Set-Theoretic Comparative Method: Critical Assessment and the Search for Alternatives

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### *Part 1. Concerns about the Set-Theoretic Method*

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#### *Problematic Tools: Introduction to Symposium on Set Theory in Social Science*

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“To welcome ideas that shift the grounds on which our arguments previously found traction—that is our obligation as intellectuals.” Wedeen (2014: 1)

Analysts who developed the set-theoretic comparative method (STCM) have formulated admirable goals for researchers who work in the qualitative and multi-method tradition. This method includes above all Charles Ragin's innovative approach of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), along with further systematization of the set-theoretic framework by other authors.<sup>1</sup> These colleagues are outstanding scholars and intellectual leaders in the field of methodology, and their advocacy of these goals is a major contribution.

However, the analytic tools employed by STCM have in many ways become an obstacle to achieving these admirable goals. For example, the system of fuzzy-set scoring appears to be problematic, poorly matched to a standard understanding of conceptual structure, and perhaps unnecessary in its present form. Computer simulations suggest that findings suffer from serious problems of stability and validity; and while the choice of simulations that match the method is a matter of some controversy, the cumulative weight of simulation results raises major concerns about STCM's algorithms—i.e., its basic, formalized analytic procedures.

Questions also arise about the cumbersome formulation of findings in what is often a remarkably large number of causal paths. Relatedly, some scholars question the STCM's rejection of the parsimonious findings, in the form of “net effects,” routinely reported in other methodological traditions. Regarding applications, readily available software has encouraged publication of dozens of articles that appear to abandon key foundations of the method and rely far too heavily on these

algorithms. Finally, STCM appears inattentive to the major, recent rethinking<sup>2</sup> of standards and procedures for causal inference<sup>3</sup> from observational data.

These problems raise the concern that the set-theoretic comparative method, as applied and practiced, has become disconnected from the underlying analytic goals that motivated Charles Ragin to create it.

This symposium explores these problems and seeks to identify promising directions for further work that pursues these same goals. In the symposium, this overall set of methods is referred to as STCM, and the designation QCA is used when the discussion is specifically focused on Ragin's contribution. For the convenience of readers, in anticipation that this essay might be read apart from the symposium, full citations to the other contributions are included in the bibliography.

Readers familiar with *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Brady and Collier 2004, 2010) will recognize the parallel with the present symposium. *Rethinking Social Inquiry* addressed an earlier, constructive initiative to redirect thinking about qualitative methods: King, Keohane, and Verba's (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry*—widely known as KKV. Their book had excellent overall goals, which centrally included a concern with systematizing qualitative research procedures that too often are unsystematic and unstandardized.<sup>4</sup> However, the book advocated specific tools for pursuing these goals that many scholars considered inappropriate, and in some respects counter-productive. *Rethinking Social Inquiry* sought to formulate methodological priorities and analytic tools more appropriate to qualitative research.

This symposium adopts the same perspective on the set-theoretic comparative method. The overall goals are excellent, and they centrally include a concern with systematizing qualitative research procedures that too often are unsystematic and

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<sup>2</sup> This rethinking is discussed in Tanner's (2014) contribution to this symposium and in Collier (2014).

<sup>3</sup> The term causal inference is employed by some STCM authors (e.g. Goertz and Mahoney 2012; Schneider and Wagemann 2012), yet for other authors “causal interpretation” and “causal recipe” are preferred. The present discussion respects these distinctions, and uses “causal inference” as an umbrella term that encompasses these alternatives.

<sup>4</sup> David Laitin (1995), well known as a (creatively) eclectic scholar who is deeply engaged in both the qualitative and quantitative traditions, praised KKV as an important step toward “disciplining” political science.

<sup>1</sup> Ragin 1987, 2000, 2008; and above all Goertz and Mahoney 2012, and Schneider and Wagemann 2012. QCA is understood here to include the crisp-set, multi-value, and fuzzy-set versions—i.e., csQCA, mvQCA, and fsQCA.