ST 32: Le process-tracing comme méthode d'analyse des politiques publiques

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Comparative process-tracing: Usages of Europe during the EU accession process

Abstract

Process-tracing has become increasingly recognized as an innovative method to address causality by exposing the causal mechanisms linking initial conditions to a specific outcome. This paper explores comparative process-tracing as a means to extend its use beyond mere narrative explanations of single cases and enable findings that make a distinct theoretical contribution. Two pathways offer themselves: a within-case comparison assessing different competing mechanisms can contribute to theory-building, while cross-case comparative process-tracing is a means to test and refine theorized mechanisms across a variety of empirical settings. The application as well as the benefits and drawbacks of all three uses of process-tracing are shown through an empirical illustration discussing civil society mobilisation in the EU accession process. Unlike process-tracing in single cases, the paper concludes, its comparative use generates external validity and allows scholars to address equifinality and define the scope conditions under which they expect their theorized mechanisms to hold.

Résumé : Le *process-tracing* comme méthode comparative : usages de l'Europe pendant le processus d'adhésion

Le *process-tracing* est une méthode novatrice de discuter la causalité en exposant les mécanismes causaux qui lient certaines conditions initiales à un résultat spécifique. Cette communication explore le *process-tracing* comparatif en tant que moyen d'étendre son usage au-delà d'explications narratives de cas isolés, afin d'obtenir des résultats qui font une contribution théorique distincte. Deux possibilités s'offrent aux chercheurs : une comparaison à l'intérieur du même cas peut contribuer à la formulation de théories, tandis qu'une comparaison de plusieurs cas différents est un moyen d'évaluer et de reformuler les mécanismes théorisés à travers une variété de contextes empiriques. L'application ainsi que les avantages et inconvénients de ces trois usages du *process-tracing* sont illustrés à travers une discussion de la mobilisation de la société civile dans le processus d'adhésion à l'UE. La communication conclue que, à l'inverse du *process-tracing* dans des cas isolés, son utilisation comparative génère une certaine validité externe et permet d'exposer l'équifinalité ainsi que de définir le domaine d'application des mécanismes théorisés.

Process-tracing is becoming an increasingly prominent method in the qualitative social sciences. Through its focus on causal mechanisms and the functioning of causality, it offers an alternative to more traditional approaches based on the search for correlation or constant conjunction. Initially applied in a somewhat disparate manner, process-tracing has become gradually formalised over the past two decades. It was the landmark volume by George and Bennett (George and Bennett 2005: chapter 10) that drove the wider recognition of process-tracing as a distinct approach to within-case analysis. More recently, the different functions of process-tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2013) and its application to a variety of research areas (Bennett and Checkel 2015a) have been the object of extended discussion. Thanks to the growing involvement of the scholarly community and the progressive emergence of shared standards, process-tracing has evolved from a form of sophisticated story-telling to a credible and recognized way of tackling the complex causality that characterizes social phenomena.

However, the within-case focus of process-tracing has limited its application essentially to single-case studies. The general advice goes that given the substantial resources required for close process-tracing, additional cases should be added only in exceptional circumstances. One such instance would be the testing of a theory that underwent significant revision following an initial process-tracing study, though even here, many authors recommend that the revised theory be tested on new evidence from within the same case rather than expanding a study to comprise other cases (Bennett 2013; Checkel and Bennett 2015). This paper challenges the conventional wisdom of limiting process-tracing to single-case designs. It suggests instead a comparative application of process-tracing, which brings the method closer to more classical comparative designs, while nonetheless conserving its originality and explanatory power. The paper argues that while comparative process-tracing does require additional efforts, its likely gains, not least in terms of harnessing the method and avoiding lengthy, descriptive story-telling, make it a worthwhile pursuit.

I set out by charting the progressive formalisation of process-tracing over recent years, with a particular emphasis on the importance of causal mechanisms as a way to differentiate process-tracing from mere story-telling. Building on the limited discussion of process-tracing in comparative settings, I explore two possible forms of comparative process-tracing: within-case, via a parallel or competitive testing of different causal mechanisms, and cross-case, whereby causal mechanisms are tested and refined across a variety of empirical settings. Each form of process-tracing discussed is followed up by a concrete illustration of its use, benefits and drawbacks through an empirical application to the issue of civil society mobilisation in the context of EU accession. Despite its difficulties, the paper concludes, a cross-case application of process-tracing holds a number of promises in terms of generating external validity, better delineating scope conditions and addressing equifinality.

Formalisation of process-tracing and causal mechanisms

Process-tracing is, first and foremost, a method that seeks to go beyond the traditional search for correlation or covariation between independent and dependent variables. Instead, it conceptualizes causality as a process with numerous intermediate steps and mechanisms linking the initial conditions to their eventual outcome. In George's and Bennett's words, process-tracing:

> "attempts to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable." (George and Bennett 2005: 206).

Rather than serving to establish a generalizable truth or a universal law, process-tracing may be used to specify an existing theory within certain empirical boundaries. With the focus lying upon actors and their reactions to stimuli, initial studies often tried to trace decision-making processes right down to the micro-level, with certain advocates of causal mechanisms adhering to methodological individualism (Hedström and Swedberg 1998: 11-12; Boudon 1998: 173). Increasingly however, process-tracing is also used for macro-level processes, with Bennett arguing that there is no need to break down processes right to the individual level, but suggesting instead that the explanatory leverage may be situated at the level of the social structure (Bennett 2013: 209). Moreover, he presents process-tracing as a combination of deduction and induction: whereas the case is deductively constructed, including the choice of theory and the temporal boundaries of the selected phenomenon, the inductive dimension "involves 'soaking and poking' within a case and developing new explanations of its outcome" (Bennett 2013: 211-212).

Early sceptics have questioned the erection of process-tracing as an alternative approach to causal explanation. King, Keohane and Verba claim that process-tracing does little more than to establish the causal effect between intermediate variables in an infinite regress towards ever shorter chains of causality, but without differing substantially from more traditional causal inferences (King *et al.* 1994: 86). Process-tracing, they argue, is thus at best an operational procedure allowing researchers to increase the number of empirically observable implications (ibid.: 227), but not a separate definition of causality (ibid.: 87). This view however greatly simplifies the understanding of causal mechanisms that lies at the heart of process-tracing, which goes far beyond establishing a causal chain between different intermediate variables that link a set of independent variables to their eventual outcome (Gerring 2007: 178; Falleti and Lynch 2009: 1149).

One of the early definitions of causal mechanisms describes them as "frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences" (Elster 1998: 45). Causal mechanisms are therefore general in nature, with their applicability not being confined to the particular case under study:

> Causal mechanisms seek to account for an observed relationship between a proposed cause and effect (…). Unlike covering laws, the premises of the arguments in which they appear do not entail the truth of the conclusion. These propositions cannot predict specific outcomes; instead, they account for general processes or probabilistic outcomes. (Zuckerman 2009: 75)

A similar view is developed by the 'mechanism-and-process approach' advocated by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001; Tarrow and Tilly 2007) that seeks to push scholars to go beyond variabilism. Instead of searching for specific constellations of independent variables that can trigger contentious processes, McAdam and his collaborators suggest studying recurrent causal mechanisms that may hold across a variety of situations (McAdam *et al.* 2001: 12-13). Beach and Brun Pedersen define a causal mechanism is a sequence of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions and offer a useful formalisation of this idea that will serve as guidance for our further discussions:

$$X \rightarrow [(n_1 \rightarrow)^*(n_2 \rightarrow)] \; Y$$

where X represents the initial situation, n an entity, and → an action. The conjunction of different parts yields the full mechanism in square brackets, which eventually leads to outcome Y (Beach and Pedersen 2013: 30).

Empirical application

The involvement of civil society in the EU accession process has gained gradual importance in the European Commission's approach to candidate states. Such broader inclusion of non-state actors able to articulate citizens' concerns and feed expertise into the reforms required prior to membership are thought to improve both the acceptance of EU integration within the population, and the quality and implementation of new laws adopted throughout the process. A classic, single-case, non-comparative process-tracing exercise would focus on demonstrating how the new opportunities related to the EU accession process have favoured civil society mobilisation in a specific country.

In line with Europeanisation scholarship, the theorized mechanism would be that of differential empowerment (Cowles and Risse 2001): Based on a rationalist logic of consequences, this mechanism supposes that domestic actors become differentially empowered through an overlap of their preferences with the goals pursued by EU-level actors. To the extent that they are able to articulate their preferences as requirements resulting from membership negotiations, these actors will improve their relative position vis-à-vis other domestic actors and, if EU pressure is both sufficiently strong and credible, see them translated into domestic changes that correspond to their demands. X is the broader context of the EU accession process, and Y the eventual outcome at the domestic level.

Börzel and Risse explicitly articulate the different elements of the differential empowerment mechanism: only where there is a misfit between EU requirements and the situation on the ground (necessary condition or n_1) combined with the capacity of domestic actors to exploit such new opportunities (sufficient condition or n_2) can differential empowerment take place (Börzel and Risse 2003: 64). While it seems possible to find empirical evidence for such a mechanism at work, demonstrating its existence without exploring alternatives - such as mobilisation driven by domestic actors themselves independently of a pre-existing misfit – weakens the theoretical credibility of the argument. At the empirical level, the absence of a comparative dimension may still yield interesting insights into the dynamics of EU-driven civil society mobilisation, but risks overlooking other factors that influence the forms and impact of mobilisation and thus present a biased, one-sided picture.

One risk in the case of within-case process-tracing of a single theoretical explanation consists offering a 'just so' account (Schimmelfennig 2015: 105) or sliding into "lazy mechanism-based story-telling" (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010: 54). The gradual formalisation of process-tracing has contributed to establishing an increasingly shared understanding of the method's purpose and standards for its sound application. Process-tracing has therefore shifted from a label applied to a wide range of narrative explanations to a technique whose specific understanding of causality as going beyond inductive regularity allows scholars to make relevant contributions at the theoretical level. However, to be fully credible in sustaining that the demonstrated causal pathway is more than an idiosyncratic explanation of a particular case, process-tracing necessitates a comparative dimension, either within-case or cross-case. It is to the implications of each of these options that we will now turn.

Comparative within-case process-tracing

There is increasing consensus that process-tracing is not a theory-free enterprise. On the contrary, thanks to its focus on the internal workings of causality, it can greatly contribute to specifying broad theoretical approaches and assessing their explanatory power in specific circumstances. This, however, requires a clearly theory-guided approach from the outset. In Bennett's and Checkel's words, process-tracing requires scholars to "cast the net widely for alternative explanations" (Bennett and Checkel 2015b: 23), addressing – and ideally refuting – a number of rival hypotheses before establishing their preferred theory as plausible explanation of a case. While there is no assumption that an entire process, including multiple contextual factors that are specific to the case, can be found across several empirical instances, there is an understanding that causal mechanisms triggering certain outcomes may be generalizable at least to a limited set of cases, such as a geographic region of time frame. While the attention to detail advocated by process-tracing may run counter theoretical parsimony and a testing of grand theoretical claims, it can nonetheless contribute in a significant fashion to building mid-range, typological theories (Bennett 2013; Checkel 2015).

Using process-tracing in such a comparative, theory-building manner essentially requires the specification of a variety of possible causal mechanisms that may explain the observed phenomenon. The mechanisms are then operationalised by defining their empirically observable implications, which are subsequently assessed against the empirical data collected. In its theory-building form, process-tracing is an iterative process that oscillates between induction and deduction, refining and specifying initial theoretical assumptions through insights gleaned from empirical facts. Depending on the degree of theoretical specification and the prior empirical knowledge of the researcher, within-case comparisons of causal mechanisms can take the form of parallel or of competitive process-tracing.

Parallel process-tracing is useful where prior empirical knowledge is scarce and a variety of theoretical possibilities could thus account for the observed process. It seeks to distinguish between these different theoretically conceivable processes by conducting two (or more!) separate, subsequent analyses of two diverging mechanisms within the same case:

$$X \rightarrow [(n_1 \rightarrow)^*(n_2 \rightarrow)^*(n_3 \rightarrow)] \; Y$$
$$X \rightarrow [(n_1 \rightarrow)^*(n_4 \rightarrow)^*(n_5 \rightarrow)^*(n_6 \rightarrow)] \; Y$$

Empirical application

Building on the illustration in the previous section, the first mechanism we seek to evaluate is that of differential empowerment driven by conditionality determined at the EU level. $n_1\rightarrow$ would stand for the articulation of membership requirements by the European Commission. In a next step in the causal chain, $n_2\rightarrow$, domestic actors whose preferences are in line with the stated reform needs would explicitly refer to the existing EU conditionality to bolster their own claims. In an interaction with more sceptical or outright opposed domestic actors ($n_3\rightarrow$), the conjunction of misfit and domestic mobilisation in favour of the option stipulated by the EU would result in domestic adaptation in line with EU conditionality and with the preferences of a certain sector of domestic actors (which we here suppose to be representatives of civil society).

However, in addition to tracing empirical evidence for the shaping force of EU conditionality through compatible bottom-up civil society mobilisation, we now

take a closer look at the usages (Jacquot and Woll 2004; Graziano *et al.* 2011) domestic civil society actors make of the changed political opportunity structure they operate in. Here, we may articulate an alternative mechanism, namely that of a bottom-up uploading of preferences by domestic actors to the European level (Börzel 2002). Concretely, we would still expect the initial action to consist in the articulation of membership conditionality at the EU level ($n_1\rightarrow$). This time, however, the crucial element of agency is expected to lie with civil society actors, who actively engage in a debate on EU conditionality ($n_4\rightarrow$) and succeed in raising certain issues to the Commission's attention ($n_5\rightarrow$). Following this feedback loop, domestic (civil society) actors are able again to engage with their domestic opponents ($n_6\rightarrow$), now not merely in a piggy-backing of EU requirements, but on the basis of a platform and of concrete demands they have themselves participated in formulating.

Such parallel process-tracing holds two promises: methodologically, it is an important safeguard against underestimating equifinality. While we may have hypothesized a perfectly plausible pathway leading from X to Y, there may be other, equally plausible pathways we have failed to assess. Including such alternatives becomes all the more crucial when we fail to fully substantiate the initial hypothesized mechanism. Any missing link in the chain, or piece of evidence that suggests our initial hunch at least does not entirely explain the observed outcome, should lead us to question whether there might not be an alternative explanation for the phenomenon under study. At the empirical level, parallel process-tracing allows us to draw a fuller picture of the dynamics at play when it comes to domestic adaptation processes in the context of EU accession. While it is important to assess the impact of top-down EU pressures that have been recognized as highly relevant in this context (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Grabbe 2006), adding an additional mechanism allows us to explicitly address domestic agency and possible feedback effects that mediate the impact of EU demands (Eppie 2007) and to respond to the growing calls for an inclusion of the domestic dimension in discussions of accession Europeanisation (Elbasani 2013; Ripoll Servent and Busby 2013). The chosen example may thus show that processes of domestic adaptation are more complex than often acknowledged in the academic literature.

Whereas parallel process-tracing allows us to evaluate the empirical evidence for structurally different mechanisms, *competitive process tracing* is a means to assess two alternative hypotheses for each part of the causal mechanism. It thus requires two mechanisms of the same structure, assuming for instance the same entities, but different activities. The limitation to such structurally equivalent mechanisms requires prior empirical knowledge as to who are the relevant actors, with process-tracing serving to uncover how their behaviour can most appropriately be explained. The different parts of each theorized mechanism are therefore tested against each other within a single analysis:

$$X \rightarrow [(n_1 \rightarrow)*(n_2 \rightarrow)*(n_3 \rightarrow)]\ Y$$
$$X \rightarrow [(\sim n_1 \rightarrow)*(\sim n_2 \rightarrow)*(\sim n_3 \rightarrow)]\ Y$$

Empirical application

To make our chosen example fit with this form of process-tracing, we need to slightly alter the initial premises. Rather than focusing on domestic change following from the EU accession process (X), we will look at the form and degree of civil society inclusion (Y) resulting from this shift in the political opportunity structure. An improvement in the involvement of civil society actors in the membership negotiations, but also more broadly in policy-making processes, is one

> of the specific objectives pursued by the European Commission throughout the accession process (European Commission 2007; European Commission 2013). An initial hypothesized mechanism, in line with the top-down logic of differential empowerment, may consist in coercion: the European Commission pressures domestic governments to include civil society actors in formal policy-making settings ($n_1\rightarrow$), consultation procedures and similar structural from of involvement are created at the national level ($n_2\rightarrow$), and civil society representatives consent to make use of such access points to introduce their views on new legal and regulatory initiatives ($n_3\rightarrow$). Depending on the honesty with which both national governments and civil society actors engage in such formats, the outcome (Y) can range from shallow, *pro forma* inclusion to a more substantial transformation of traditionally closed policy-making structures.
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> Alternatively, civil society inclusion may result from a more gradual, progressive shift in the form of learning and lesson-drawing. Initial EU support for civil society inclusion may be more rhetorical and followed up by little direct pressure on governments to change the prevailing policy-making set-up ($\sim n_1\rightarrow$). In consequence, national governments shift the burden for improving civil society inclusion to civil society actors themselves, refusing to create formal structures to facilitate input from non-state actors ($\sim n_2\rightarrow$). In the face of weak support from both the EU and national government, civil society actors may decide to organise themselves outside institutional structures, for instance through coalition-building and other innovative forms of mobilisation ($\sim n_3\rightarrow$). The outcome again is likely to be a limited form of civil society involvement that may, however, over time evolve towards more productive exchanges between governments and civil society actors once both realize they stand to gain from such interactions.

Again, the comparative evaluation of both hypothesized mechanisms promises a more comprehensive insight into the research question. Competitive process-tracing has the particular advantage of zooming in on the relevant actors and how their respective actions contribute to producing a certain outcome. Moreover, the parallel structure of the mechanism allows for a more clear-cut assessment of which of the two hypothesized actions can be empirically observed, avoiding a narrative where all expected dynamics can be seen to varying extents.

On the whole, a within-case comparison of different theoretical alternatives greatly strengthens the internal validity of process-tracing studies. Parallel process-tracing of two or more competing causal mechanisms lends itself well to cases where the researcher has little prior knowledge of the situation, and therefore has to take into account a variety of different constellations of actors and interactions that produce the final outcome. Competitive process-tracing, on the other hand, is best suited when the actors involved are known, and it is their precise actions – including the norms or calculations guiding their behaviour – that need to be uncovered. The tracing of rival mechanisms is an effective means to discipline the narrative and to limit empirical presentation to those elements necessary to understand the causal link between the initial situation and the outcome. Moreover, by focusing attention on the causal mechanisms that bring about this outcome, rather than on a narration of the particular case under study, within-case comparisons can make a theory-building contribution by uncovering mechanisms that are likely to trigger similar outcomes in different empirical settings.

Still, the restriction to single-case designs limits our ability to assess how widely applicable a mechanism actually is, with the generalisability of a causal mechanism found in a single case remaining hypothetical. Without a cross-case dimension, there is indeed no way to know whether we are generalizing from the rule or the exception. More fundamentally, the focus on individual cases, with relatively little communication between different empirical studies, poses limits to the accumulation of knowledge within the overall field. It is here that a cross-case application of process-tracing may be a worthwhile remedy both to increase the external validity of process-tracing findings and to better define the scope conditions under which a given causal mechanism can be expected to operate.

Comparative cross-case process-tracing

At its outset, process-tracing is an inherently single-case method (Beach and Pedersen 2013). It is defined explicitly against the traditionally prevailing understanding of causality as 'constant conjunction', and instead focuses on exposing *how* a set of initial conditions result in a specific outcome. It is this emphasis on the functioning of causality over its regularity that explains the within-case approach of process-tracing. Indeed, the close scrutiny of the interactions of different explanatory factors and contextual conditions may yield insight into a causal process that is so complex it becomes unique to the studied case, and therefore inevitably precludes generalisations beyond the object of study. As a result, whereas process-tracing is able to generate exceptionally high internal validity, its lack of external validity is one of the major drawbacks of the method.

As a result, the increasing formalisation of process-tracing has gone hand-in-hand with some thinking about its use in mixed-methods designs (Beach and Pedersen 2013: chapter 8; Dunning 2015). Two general pathways offer themselves: initial findings of covariation can be confirmed and elucidated in more detail through an additional process-tracing study on a typical case. A mixed-methods design would serve here essentially as a case selection tool, facilitating the choice of a particularly relevant individual case for closer study. Inversely, the findings from process-tracing in a single-case can be tested through subsequent large-n statistical or small-n comparative methods. The rationale of such a 'nested' design (Lieberman 2005) would be to assess the generalisability of findings to other contexts, thus enhancing their external validity. However, such classical mixed-methods approaches risk eclipsing one of the strengths of process-tracing, which lie precisely in its ability to uncover not only a narrative that links initial conditions to their outcome, but to suggest causal mechanisms that may explain the observed process. These causal mechanisms, however, may vary across cases, reducing the utility of combining process-tracing with large-n studies. Given the problem of possible equifinality, even congruence-focused comparative approaches may be of limited value to select appropriate cases for process-tracing.

In light of the fundamental difference between causal inference based on covariation and that building on causal mechanisms, I suggest that comparative process-tracing – i.e. process-tracing across several cases – may yield more fruitful results than its combination with other methodological approaches. Such comparative process-tracing may follow a simple, sequential logic that is generally recognized in the more recent literature: findings from an initial process-tracing study serve to build or refine a theory, which is subsequently tested in a different case (Bennett and Checkel 2015b). Such a procedure would serve to check the generalisability of a causal mechanism, assessing to what extent it is necessary or sufficient for the population of cases to which it is thought to apply. A positive finding would enhance the external validity of the mechanism found, while a negative finding would call into question the extent to which the found causal mechanism is relevant beyond the specific case

in which its action was demonstrated. Establishing the existence of an alternative mechanism for a case that otherwise presents the same X and Y as the initial case would moreover serve to uncover equifinality and underscore the value of process-tracing as the only method that focuses on shedding light on the functioning of causality.

However, comparative cross-case process-tracing can also serve to specify the scope conditions under which a causal mechanism holds, thereby contributing to the formulation of typological theories (George and Bennett 2005: chapter 11; Checkel 2015). Cases can be selected according to two possible logics: first, a researcher may chose a deviant case that presents X, but not Y, in order to trace the functioning of the hypothesized mechanism up to the point where it breaks. This would be in keeping with the definition of scope conditions, as findings may hint that the mechanism could not fully unfold its causal power due to the absence of a particular context factor that was present in the initial case. Second, process-tracing could be conducted in an alternative case in which the initial conditions vary, but the outcome is the same as in the original case. Tracing backwards from the outcome can uncover an alternative mechanism that yields the same result. Depending on the degree to which the initial causal mechanism is modified, this would suggest either a refinement of the initial mechanism, or suggest a fully different mechanism that yields the outcome under a different set of initial conditions.

Empirical application

Let us suppose that our initial process-tracing study of Croatia showed domestic agency and the creative usage of the accession process to carry causal weight in explaining the form and degree of civil society inclusion in the accession process of an initial. In this case, EU support for civil society involvement was rhetorical rather than proactive, resulting in extra-institutional mobilisation of a large coalition of NGOs that voiced strong criticism of the government's performance. A study varying the outcome could look into the case of Montenegro, where civil society actors are formally included in government-level negotiation groups. Does this imply that in the Montenegrin case, EU pressure was stronger and the European Commission more determined to see calls for inclusion translated into structural solutions on the ground? Or were civil society actors simply more successful in shaping the EU's conditionality and pushing for formal inclusion from below?

Building on the Montenegrin findings, the case of Serbia would fall into the second logic of an alternative case: the initial conditions are the same as in Montenegro, including stronger EU pressure for civil society inclusion, but the outcome is closer to the Croatian case, showing limited formal involvement of civil society actors compensated by strong extra-institutional mobilisation. Given that EU actions can be taken to be the same, the variation must lie at the domestic level. Are civil society actors weaker in the case of Serbia? Or are state-level actors more dependent on non-state actors' expertise in Montenegro? Have Montenegrin civil society actors possibly learned from the failures of their Croatian colleagues, whereas Serbian counterparts are unaware of the Croatian experience?

This last question exposes a further benefit of process-tracing across several cases: becoming familiar with the intricacies of different empirical settings can allow a researcher to discover feedback effects and diffusion *between* cases. This contributes not only to a more complete empirical picture, but can also have theoretical implications, all the more in the study of usages. The basic premise of the concept of usages consists precisely in the need for

opportunities to be translated into impact domestically – where actors are aware of previous successful or failed attempts in similar contexts, they can adjust their own strategy, thereby enhancing their chances to see an outcome in line with their preferences.

Discussion

So what can be gained by a cross-case, comparative application of process-tracing? There are several obvious benefits over the traditional single-case design. First, the most evident advantage of applying process-tracing to a cross-case setting lies in the ability to generate some external validity of the findings. Whereas defining the number of cases under study inevitably implies a trade-off between internal and external validity, a cross-case application of process-tracing adds a crucial measure of external validity to this otherwise strongly inward-looking method. Second, and in a similar vein, cross-case process-tracing is better suited to defining the scope conditions under which a mechanism is expected to work. While some authors derive such predictions from single cases, it is difficult to assess which elements of a mechanism are generalizable, and which must be attributed to features specific to the selected case. Testing and possibly refining a mechanism in a slightly altered configuration of conditions can make a significant contribution towards the formulation of a typological theory, thereby greatly enhancing the relevance of a case study for the overall field of study. Moreover, designing a process-tracing study in a cross-case manner is already likely to favour the parsimonious formulation of causal mechanisms through the exclusion of idiosyncratic context factors, which makes it more likely to hold across a variety of empirical settings. Third, cross-case process-tracing in parallel cases – ones which present the same X and the same Y – can yield insights into equifinality by demonstrating that the same initial conditions bring about the same outcome, but through a different causal pathway. Addressing equifinality lies at the heart of process-tracing and is one of its core strengths over methods focused on covariation and inductive regularity. Showing equifinality across cases makes a strong point in favour of future efforts to uncover the functioning of causality rather than merely establishing the constant conjunction of two variables.

Despite its clear advantages, cross-case process-tracing also presents a number of drawbacks. Firstly, process-tracing as such is already a very resource-intensive enterprise (Schimmelfennig 2015); its comparative use multiplies the efforts required by the researcher. At the same time, a cross-case application disciplines the method in that it forces the researcher to critically evaluate which elements of a causal mechanism are truly necessary. The parsimonious formulation of mechanisms later facilitates both the collection and the evaluation of empirical evidence, since it is not necessarily indispensable to collect observations for the full process, as long as the crucial elements of the causal mechanism are covered. Secondly, given the already high internal validity of process-tracing, exposing the same causal mechanism at work in a second case may yield little added value compared to a single case study. Rather than seeking to forge external validity by finding an identical process in a different empirical setting, a cross-case comparative approach should therefore concentrate on defining scope conditions for the working of a causal mechanism and addressing equifinality. Cross-case process-tracing therefore appears best suited to most-similar designs, where a close study can uncover an alternative causal pathway or refine our understanding of how causality works in specific cases.

Conclusion

Starting from a discussion of the growing recognition of process-tracing as an innovative method to uncover the functioning of causality, this paper argues that cross-case process-

tracing representation a valuable extension of the single-case designs prevalent in process-tracing studies. Despite the increased efforts required by such a comparative application, the benefits in terms of generating external validity, addressing equifinality and better defining scope conditions for a certain causal mechanism in view of formulation typological theories are well worth the additional investment. Not only does a comparative application discipline the method and avoid lengthy, theory-free descriptions of cases, but it also brings process-tracing closer to traditional positivist methods, thereby strengthening its acceptance across the academic community while conserving its distinct understanding of causality. Using process-tracing in such a way will allow researchers not only to shed light on the specific case under study, but also to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge within their field by making a distinct theoretical contribution.

The comparative use of process-tracing is still at an early stage, and remains largely confined to within-case comparisons of rival causal mechanisms. Further cross-case applications are needed to assess the extent to which process-tracing of several cases enables a fuller, more theoretically informed specification of causal mechanisms and more credible definition of scope conditions under which a causal mechanism is expected to hold. Given the high investment required for process-tracing studies, such an initial effort could take the form of a collaborative project bringing together several single-case process-tracing studies of the same phenomenon in different empirical settings. Such a pilot study would allow for a realistic assessment of the trade-off between increased resources required and the added value obtained in terms of theoretical contribution and external validity.

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