Book Review

Social science methodology: A unified framework

John Gerring

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Social Science Methodology is the new thoroughly rewritten version of the successful first edition (subtitled: ‘A Criterial Framework’). In the introductory chapter, Gerring introduces the reader to the issue of epistemological and methodological pluralism in the social sciences and presents his view of a unified framework, which consists of three distinct tasks associated with, respectively, hypothesis formulation, description and causation. Within each of these, Gerring revisits his ‘criterial’ approach of the previous edition where the treatment of each topic is associated with a set of criteria that define the best practice. The book is therefore organized according to these tasks, which correspond to three distinct sections labeled ‘general’, ‘description’ and ‘causation’.

In the general section, the book starts with the notions of discovery and appraisal, which guide the logic of inquiry and continues with a set of criteria for hypothesis formulation. The rest of the section is dedicated to the criteria surrounding social science analyses as a whole, namely, accuracy, sampling, cumulation and theoretical fit. In this respect, Gerring’s focus on replication and transparency as criteria for best practice in social science analysis is particularly welcome.

The next section focuses on what the author labels ‘description’, although most emphasis is placed on what other books label as ‘measurement’. The section begins with the issue of concept formation, an area in which Gerring has contributed much original work. In this case, the criteria are accompanied with a survey of strategies for conceptualization that could help the reader put the theory in practice. The following chapter in this section is dedicated to what Gerring calls ‘mere description’, a long-abandoned (in favor of causal analysis) aspect of social research where he guides the reader through the logic of constructing typologies. The section closes with a chapter that includes a useful discussion of strategies for measurement as well as an extensive example on measuring corruption.

The third part of the book is about causation and deals with three different aspects of causal inference. First, Gerring introduces how causal factors affect dependent variables through a causal mechanism, and how endogenous and exogenous elements might blur these effects. Then, he revisits the criteria for arguments presented in previous chapters, and sets out how causal arguments differ from these. Gerring maps out many possible causal diagrams, and thereby offers his less-experienced readers the tools necessary to structure their causal arguments. He then continues with a thorough discussion of causal strategies in randomized and non-randomized settings. The chapter clearly illustrates the logic of random assignment in experimental settings. However, its real-added value is found in the fact that Gerring does not limit himself to research designs that build upon spatial variation, but includes various observational research designs. This aspect offers the reader a comprehensive overview of different types of research design, clearly illustrated by a range of examples, and allows practitioners to choose the design most appropriate for their research. The author also discusses issues of internal and external validity of various research designs, but such assessments are not the main focus. The final two chapters of Part 3 do offer a wealth of causal strategies and approaches that are of great interest for both students and researchers alike. All in all, the third part of *Social Science Methodology* might be particularly appealing to undergraduate students who have little prior training in causal analysis, but more experienced scholars might find that a certain depth and degree of precision would have been desirable.

In the concluding section of the book, the author revisits some of the methodological and epistemological debates outlined in the introduction and offers some insightful advice on selecting an appropriate research design for social inquiry. This advice in the early and final chapters, which seems to be directed to graduate students, can prove very useful to those searching for an appropriate methodological framework for their PhD dissertation. The book can be particularly helpful to those not statistically minded students who are more comfortable with what is understood as qualitative research and are interested in adopting a rigorous approach to causation and/or measurement.

Unavoidably, some important issues regarding measurement and causality are treated only superficially, whereas popular approaches to social inquiry such as case studies are left out from the discussion. Sometimes, the book appears to lack a clear target audience. We understand that this is more of a problem of the need to strike a balance between detail and parsimony when one is writing a textbook unifying many aspects of the methodology in the social sciences. In any case, the interested readers can always consult more detailed treatments (including Gerring's own book on case-study research) of some of the topics after reading this 'Unified Framework'. At the same time, the breadth of the arguments, combined with the fact that the book does not

sound overtly technical (see the author's plea for the use of simple language to communicate social science in the book's appendix), make the book attractive as a textbook for advanced undergraduate instruction. *Social Science Methodology* is a book with a wealth of well-organized material aimed at both students and practitioners of social science.

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