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Set-theoretic methods for the social sciences: a guide to qualitative comparative analysis

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BOOK REVIEWS


Since its launch in 1987 by Ragin as a methodology intended to bridge the gap between quantitative variable-based and qualitative case-based research approaches, social science researchers have increasingly turned to Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) for conducting comparative empirical social science research. Throughout the years, QCA has become an umbrella term for a set-theoretic configurational research approach encompassing a number of variants and techniques for systematically comparing cases (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). This textbook by Schneider and Wagemann is ‘dedicated to explaining QCA’ (p. 9), where the ‘focus will be more on the technical aspects’ (p. 11). They concentrate on the most popular variants: crisp sets (csQCA) and fuzzy sets (fsQCA). The book is aimed ‘to cater to both beginners and very advanced readers’ (p. 19).

The book is organized in 12 chapters subdivided into four main parts. Each chapter commences with an ‘easy reading guide’ which provides a succinct overview of the contents of the chapter. Two other ‘didactic devices’ (p. 19) that Schneider and Wagemann deploy are ‘at-a-glance boxes’ which summarize the key points per section or chapter, and the ‘glossary’ (pp. 322–335) which contains definitions and brief descriptions of the most important concepts in QCA. The first part of the book consists of four chapters that set the scene by explaining the very basics of QCA, inter alia: what is a set, how are they constructed, how are they combined, how are cases compared as configurations of sets, and what kind of causal statements can be derived? The second part of the book deals with those issues that are derived from the fact that the empirical reality does not ‘present itself in clear and neat patterns’ but that rather ‘social science research based on observational data is characterized by noisy data’ (p. 119): how does this noisiness present itself in QCA and how is it dealt with? Chapter 7 takes stock of the first two parts of the book by describing and showing ‘the current default way of performing QCA’ (p. 178).

The third part of the book will appeal to the more advanced QCA-users. Chapters 8 and 9 provide new and more advanced ways of doing QCA. In addition to the Truth Table Algorithm and the Standard Analysis procedure presented in Chapter 7, Schneider and Wagemann introduce the ‘Enhanced Standard Analysis’ and the ‘Theory-guided Enhanced Standard Analysis’ procedures. These procedures provide solutions for dealing with some pitfalls that remain (partly) unresolved by the defaults presented in Chapter 7. The authors have done an excellent job in explaining these new procedures, but it will require a solid understanding of the basics of QCA to fully grasp these procedures. Chapter 10 briefly introduces some other
existent QCA-variants such as multi-value QCA and temporal QCA. Considering the focus of the book, these are understandably presented in a concise manner, though a bit more empirical guidance could have helped the reader to value these QCA variants for applying them in their own empirical research. The penultimate Chapter 11 is an important one. As announced by Schneider and Wagemann in their introductory chapter, the book focuses for pedagogical reasons on the technical (and rather quantitative) aspects of QCA. Readers are advised, however, to keep in mind that QCA is the first and foremost qualitative research approach and that it should not be applied mechanically. This is elaborated in Chapter 11 that discusses, among other things: the standards for good practice, case selection, and the interpretation of research results. Chapter 12 concludes with a ‘looking back’ on the preceding chapters and ‘looking ahead’ on the future developments.

Schneider and Wagemann have written a needful textbook on QCA. The book provides a comprehensive state-of-the-art of the a–b–c of QCA. The book is well written and structured. It is understandable to beginners and interesting to more advanced users. The different didactic devices are useful, and the structure of the book certainly facilitates using it for educational and research purposes. Some remarks, nevertheless, are the following. First, understandable and argued for (p. 20) but bit of a pity nonetheless is the abundant reliance on empirical examples from political science literature. Readers are advised to look beyond this empirical bias and see the method’s analytical value for their own case-based social science research. Second, this case-based nature would have been worth stressing more. The authors, like many others in QCA literature, tend to explain the method’s features and qualities relative to conventional quantitative methods. However, QCA also has great potential and value relative to qualitative and even grounded-oriented students and researchers. All in all, the book is certainly value-for-money and, keeping in mind the above statements, I would recommend it to anyone, and especially to those interested in familiarizing themselves with QCA.

References

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For those of us engaged in ethnographic studies of one type or another, a sense of embodiedness, and with it a sensuous appreciation of the world we encounter, is not new. It is a precondition of and for ethnography, and it offers – repeatedly – a