CHAPTER 24

Structured, Focused Comparison

Vytautas Jankauskas, Steffen Eckhard, and Jörn Ege

Structured, focused comparison (SFC) allows a structured comparison of several cases (e.g., six international organizations), whereby the researcher conducts in-depth analysis within each case based on a standardized set of variables and general questions. The design not only increases the external validity of findings but also allows for cross-case comparison and a fine-grained theoretical analysis. Typical applications are research questions focused on processes or mechanisms and those that allow for the interplay of several interdependent conditions (causal complexity).

What?

The method of structured, focused comparison was first introduced in the early works of George (1979), George and McKeown (1985), and George and Bennett (2005). It aims at a systematic case comparison, which is built on an in-depth analysis *within* each case, while simultaneously allowing for the cumulation of findings *across* cases. The method can thus be positioned between small-N qualitative and large-N quantitative research. On the one hand, it rests on a process-based logic; on the other, it also relates to quantitative research from which it "borrows the device of asking a set of standardized, general questions of each case" (George 1979). This makes the method *structured*, since the same set of general questions—reflecting the research objective—guides data collection and is scrutinized in each case under investigation. The method is *focused*, as the researcher only deals with those variables of each case that are expected to be theoretically relevant.

The following example illustrates the logic of SFC. In their study, Knill and colleagues (2019) defined and conceptualized administrative styles in IOs and explained their variation based on comparative case studies of four IOs. Selecting cases based on a most similar system design, they argued that the varying level of external challenges that IO secretariats face determines their administrative styles. For the empirical investigation, the authors used interview data and a survey of IO staff. Their analysis was thereby *structured* as the authors formulated general indicators that reflect both the dependent and independent variables and can be transferred to study further IOs. It was also *focused* as it only dealt with those theoretical features that were directly linked to administrative styles—IOs' internal and external challenges and functional or positional orientations of IO bureaucracies.

Historically, the SFC approach was motivated by the criticism of single-case studies, especially their noncumulative nature of empirical findings. The method was developed with the purpose of improving historical analysis of foreign policy events by accumulating findings from comparable case analysis into a broader theory. This should have discouraged "policy-makers from relying on a single historical analogy in dealing with a new case" (George and Bennett 2005: 67).

Analogously, we suggest that IO scholars bring their attention back to SFC to combine qualitative and quantitative research methods to facilitate larger collaborations between IO scholars who are ready to (1) agree on the same theoretical frame and variables, (2) commit to finding similar data sources, and (3) trace processes with attention to similar details. IOs can be treated as complex problem-processing systems (Reinalda and Verbeek 2004; Rittberger, Zangl, and Kruck 2012), so researchers who study them should be able to capture those interacting components that are relevant for specific research objectives. In this manner, SFC provides a systematic and rather simple way to increase studies' external and internal validity.

Why?

The methodological divide between quantitative and qualitative research designs is a well-known phenomenon in political science. Research of international organizations (IOs) also faces the challenge to balance between maintaining internal validity of findings and ensuring their generalization in other settings (see Eckhard and Ege 2016). Against this backdrop, the structured, focused comparison offers a promising alternative for scholars seeking to explore the methodological middle ground. By combining features from

both qualitative and quantitative methods, we argue that SFC can increase validity, reliability, transparency, and scope of IO analysis, while at the same time bridging the traditional quantitative-qualitative divide.

First, SFC offers a coherent framework, standardized data sources, and transparency over how conclusions are drawn systematically from the sources often lacking in single-case studies and small-N comparisons. Single-case research design is usually criticized due to its tendency "to go its way, reflecting [the] special interests of each investigator and often being unduly shaped by whatever historical data was readily available" (George and Bennett 2005: 70). SFC, by contrast, offers a coherent, selectively focused treatment of empirical cases that enables better follow-up research by colleagues working on other IOs or trying to understand over-time changes when studying organizations at later points in time. When it comes to controlled comparisons, the combination of a theoretical focus and a structural case examination allows for a systematic comparison across cases. If new cases of the same class of events emerge, they can be easily included into the existing SFC frameworks, which fosters the cumulation of findings over time.

Second, SFC also benefits large-N analyses, since the results from the SFC applications could be used for case selection and further theory-testing endeavors. The prime methodology used to analyze large-N data covers the whole range of (usually regression-based) statistical models. More recently, new methodological approaches such as quantitative Social Network Analysis (SNA) and quantitative text analysis have gained ground in IO research. However, quantitative studies still rely on a few larger datasets that have not necessarily been designed to understand intra-IO dynamics (such as the Correlates of War project) or have known inconsistencies (such as the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination data). Where there is systematic data on organizational structures and dynamics, it is often limited to one or two organizations. Furthermore, quantitative studies tend to merely test and—sometimes—modify well-known theoretical assumptions rather than bringing forward innovations in the theoretical debates of IO research. In light of this, SFC results could serve as a good starting point to establish plausible medium-N theories or to generate hypotheses that may be sustained with more large-N endeavors.

Finally, the SFC method seems to be particularly applicable to some of the latest trends in IO research. The first trend points toward increasing interdisciplinarity in the study of IOs. For instance, while the interest of international relations (IR) in IOs remains high (at least after IR scholars have acknowledged IOs as autonomous actors; see Reinalda and Verbeek 1998), IOs are being increasingly examined by other political science sub-

disciplines such as public administration, public policy, or comparative politics. In this regard, the use of general questions and focused theoretical frameworks (e.g., Ege, Bauer, and Wagner 2020) fosters the accumulation of knowledge across the increasingly diverse subfields of IO literature.

The same holds for the second trend, which relates to the increasing digitalization and availability of data that can be used in the study of IOs. Arguably, the problem IO researchers are increasingly faced with is less a lack of information than the availability of too many (fragmented) data sources. In this light, the use of SFC would bring more methodological clarity and transparency. One of the key benefits of the SFC method is that scholars can refer to existing findings and build upon them by applying the same set of general questions and theoretical elements to further studies. This implies that both the formulation of data as well as the specification of concepts have to be clearly defined, otherwise the structural and focused conditions of SFC are not met. Considering the critique by Church and McCaffrey (2013) on IO documentation and available information (i.e., that IO research lacks systematic and comprehensive IO data collections), meeting the requirements of SFC could help scholars increase the replicability of their data, thus fostering methodological clarity and transparency.

Overall, the use of SFC might bring the advantage of combining an in-depth case-oriented perspective with a comparative, more systematic approach. SFC is best applicable to so-called causes of effects types of research questions where scholars look for the causes for the occurrence of an observed phenomenon instead of the effect of one isolated factor (Mahoney and Goertz 2006). Naturally, SFC cannot be expected to solve the well-known problems related to the observation and analysis of complex IO realities. What it can do, however, is to outline a way in which a more systematic design of IO research can increase the generalizability of our conclusions and facilitate cooperation and knowledge accumulation in the future.

How?

This section highlights the main steps and presents some basic illustrations from our own research to show how the method could be applied to IO questions. In general, SFC case study data is defined and standardized by a set of general analytical categories, which are empirically linked through mechanistic processes. This allows a structured comparison of several cases, which is based on a careful case selection during which the researcher attempts to manipulate relevant explanatory variables (analogous to Mill's

method of agreement or difference). SFC is therefore different from the congruence analysis that looks at whether the expected values of dependent and independent variables are observed empirically (pattern matching; see George and Bennett 2005: 181).

More specifically, the following steps should be followed in designing a structured, focused comparison study (see George and McKeown 1985):

- First, scholars should clearly spell out the research problem and objectives under investigation. For instance, in his study, Eckhard (2016) investigates what determinants enhance or impede organizational performance in postconflict police reform.

- Second, researchers should specify the elements (variables, conditions, etc.) that will be used for the comparison. For instance, the main challenge in the study by Eckhard (2016) was to delimit explanatory factors linked to the organization from such factors linked to the country context in which missions acted. Internally, organization and management theory provided a conceptual framework consisting of six categories of strategic management for comparison. Externally, international relations theory served to specify outside conditions as alternative explanations for mission performance.

- Third, case selection must follow a careful consideration of the overall case universe and potential control variables (as well as alternative explanations). In this line, Eckhard (2016) conducted four case studies that were structurally selected based on internal and external factors. Internally, Germany, the EU, and the OSCE operated along different managerial strategies. Externally, Afghanistan and Kosovo served to compare police reform in a more or less challenging context. With the EU acting in both countries, a control case prevailed that allowed delimiting internal from external explanatory factors. Ideally, the number of selected cases is large enough to allow for variation in both the key explanatory variable (e.g., internal management) and the context conditions with potential causal relevance (e.g., country context).

- Fourth, the variance of variables or conditions should be described in detail—taking into consideration existing theory—and general analytical questions should be clearly formulated and reported. In

Eckhard (2016), the efforts of process tracing in each case were focused on by a common framework of six analytical categories of strategic management, which in turn allowed for cross-case comparison and the isolation of causally relevant variables. This way, SFC enabled the author to benefit from extensive interview data and rich qualitative insights about individual missions and causal mechanisms within each, while at the same time comparing mechanisms across cases to enhance the external validity of the explanation. In this example, it turned out that the EU's internal management procedures (formalized planning in headquarters, lack of discretion at mission level, high frequency staff rotation) undermined the performance of assisting police reform not only in Afghanistan but also in the comparatively "simple" case of Kosovo.

What Challenges?

One of the main challenges of SFC is to formulate questions that are relevant for the specific case but at the same time can be applicable to the overall universe of cases. The same goes for its findings: the strength of SFC is internal validity regarding mechanisms and processes, but with only few cases there may be exogenous factors that the researcher did not control for. Case selection therefore is crucial. However, selecting the right cases may at times be challenging because the distribution of values in the population may be unknown or can only be identified in postanalysis.

Another challenge is the integration of SFCs in the state of the art. Qualitative studies are at times difficult to integrate with the state of the art, especially regarding more quantitative papers, because they differ substantively in the operationalization of variables. Researchers should therefore be extra cautious to ensure the compatibility with the state of the art, for instance by discussing how other (more quantitative studies) operationalize a given phenomenon and how this relates to their own approach.

A last, more practical challenge is about the space provided by publication outlets. SFCs often require researchers to report on a lot of qualitative data. Whereas single-case studies might just fit within the scope of typical journal article, reporting a comparative qualitative study with less than 10,000 words is often difficult. This is why SFCs might be more appropriate for book-length publication formats, or more recent hybrids such as Cambridge Elements or Palgrave Pivot with 25,000 to 50,000 words. In fact, the recent emergence of these publication formats might also be a chance for more SFCs being implemented in the future.

To Go Further

George, Alexander L., and Andrew Bennett. 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

George, Alexander L., and Timothy J. McKeown. 1985. "Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision-Making." In *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, edited by Richard A. Smith and Robert F. Coulam, vol. 2, 21–58. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

References

Beach, Derek, and Rasmus B. Pedersen. 2013. *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Church, James, and Michael McCaffrey. 2013. "International organizations: Available information and documentation." In *Routledge Handbook of International Organization*, edited by Bob Reinalda. London: Routledge.

Cox, Robert W., and Harold K. Jacobson. 1973. *The Anatomy of Influence: Decision Making in International Organization*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Eckhard, Steffen. 2016. *International Assistance to Police Reform: Managing Peacebuilding*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Eckhard, Steffen, and Jörn Ege. 2016. "International bureaucracies and their influence on policy-making: A review of empirical evidence." *Journal of European Public Policy* 23 (7): 960–78.

Ege, Jörn, Michael W. Bauer, and Nora Wagner. 2020. "Improving Generalizability in Transnational Bureaucratic Influence Research: A (Modest) Proposal." *International Studies Review* 22 (3): 551–75.

George, Alexander L. 1979. "Case studies and theory development: The method of structured focused comparison." In *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory and Policy*, edited by Paul G. Lauren. New York: Free Press.

George, Alexander L., and Andrew Bennett. 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

George, Alexander L., and Timothy J. McKeown. 1985. "Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision-Making." In *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, edited by Richard A. Smith and Robert F. Coulam, vol. 2, 21–58. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Knill, Christoph, Louisa Bayerlein, Jan Enkler, and Stephan Grohs. 2019. "Bureaucratic influence and administrative styles in international organizations." *Review of International Organizations* 14 (1): 83–106.

Mahoney, James, and Gary Goertz. 2006. "A tale of two cultures: Contrasting quantitative and qualitative research." *Political Analysis* 14: 227–49.

Reinalda, B., and B. Verbeek, eds. 1998. *Autonomous Policy Making by International Organizations*. London: Routledge.

Reinalda, Bob, and Bertjan Verbeek, eds. 2004. *Decision Making Within International Organisations*. London: Routledge.

Rittberger, Volker, Bernhard Zangl, and Andreas Kruck. 2012. *International Organization*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.