**METHODOLOGIES EXPLAINED:**

**How to Conduct Systematic Political Research**

**AIMS:** This lecture is an introduction to research methods in political studies. It aims to address the following questions:

* What are the different methods of comparison in political research?
* What are large-n, small-n and single case studies?
* What are variable (dependent and independent) and how can they be used to study the international political economy?
* What is the difference between applying a theory and the discursive method?

**Section One: Methods of Comparison**

*Q: What is ‘methodology’?*

A: **Merriam-Webster Dictionary:**

1. A body of methods, rules, and postulates employed by a discipline: a particular procedure or set of procedures.
2. The analysis of the principles of inquiry in a particular field.

The goal of political studies literature is to **answer questions** regarding the relationships between a set of concepts. ‘Methodology’ therefore refers to the **strategy** that researchers use to answer questions about political phenomena.

As previously explained in the lecture on ‘Finding your academic voice,’ social sciences research aims to apply the scientific method as closely as possible to the study of human behaviour by examining the **relationships** between at least two concepts.

This course, for example, addresses the following questions:

* What is the study of the International Political Economy?
* How do politics and economics interrelate?
* How does international trade impact on development?
* What is the structure of the International Political Economy?

Each question can be answered in a variety of different ways—depending on the method that one employs.

***Exercise:*** *NEED two literature samples that feature different methodologies.*

A:.

The two studies are undoubtedly different in terms of both their scope and methods

Literature 1 (year)

* Topic
* Year
* Qualitative evidence

 Literature 2 (year)

* Topic
* timescale
* Quantitative evidence

* ***NB*: ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ refers to the type of data/evidence that a study employs, not necessarily the method.**

***Whether you use qualitative or quantitative data, your research must be systematic.***

There are three basic approaches, or methods, to answering a research question:

1. Large-*n*
2. Small-*n*
3. Single case study.

The symbol ‘*n*’ refers to either the number of countries or cases/observations under study.

**Large-*n***: compare political phenomena across a **large number** of countries and/or cases.

* > 50 cases.
* Generally applied to quantitative analysis of data on a large number of variables, which uses statistical methods to achieve ‘control’.

Example: “National Autonomy and Economic Development: Critical Perspectives on Multinational Corporations in Poor Countries.” Peter Evans, 1971.

(Peter B. Evans (1971). National Autonomy and Economic Development: Critical Perspectives on Multinational Corporations in Poor Countries*. International Organization*, 25, pp 675-692 doi:10.1017/S0020818300026382)

This paper explores the economic importance of multinational corporations in less developed countries (LDCs) throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America. Uses finance in- and out- flows in LDCs and corporate earnings data.

**Small-*n***: compare political phenomena across a selected number of countries and/or cases.

* 2-20 cases.
* Cases are **intentionally selected** according to the similarities to and differences from each other in order to establish ‘control’.
* Often called the ‘comparative method.’

Example: “The Structure of Dependence” Theotonio dos Santos, 1970.

(Theotonio dos Santos (1970). The Structure of Dependence. *The American Economic Review*, 60:2, pp 231-236)

This paper explores the dependence of the 19 countries of Latin American countries on trade partners in the global North. Uses data on Foreign Direct Investments and remittance.

**Single case study**: intensive study of a single country and/or case (i.e. *n*=1).

* Researchers often use qualitative data.
* **A single country can be divided into many cases/observations:**
* Time: historical period or years/months/days.
* Space: sub-national political units.
* Level of analysis: state, groups, individuals.

Example: “Economic Policy and Power Relations in South Africa’s Transition to Democracy.” Adam Habib and Vishnu Padayachee, 2000.

(Adam Habib & Vishnu Padayachee (2000). Economic Policy and Power Relations in South Africa's Transition to Democracy, *World Development*, Volume 28, Issue 2, February 2000, Pages 245-263, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(99)00130-8.)

This paper focuses solely on one nation state, South Africa.

**Section Two:** **Quantitative vs. Qualitative Research**

Stress to the students that they will not be required to undertake quantitative research. You do not even need to have a lot of knowledge about statistics or econometrics involved. However you limit yourself and cut yourself off from a lot of crucial academic work if you cannot interpret simple quantitative research. It also adds value as large-*n* studies offer unique benefits to academic pursuits.

* Quantitative and qualitative approaches may conceptualise ideas/phenomena differently despite using the same words.
* E.g. the concept of “development” in a quantitative study must denote something that is – of course – measurable and quantifiable, so “development” in a country could then, for instance, be conceptualised as a function of:
	+ Increased international trade.
	+ Increased urbanisation.
	+ Data on infant mortality.
* There are thus decisions involved in quantitative work before a study even happens 🡪 the formulation of a questionnaire on development, e.g. is based on all sorts of conceptual assumptions on what development entails, and proxies or measurements for these concepts have to be found.
	+ These presumptions and decisions are not arbitrary, they are often grounded in previous studies and theory.
* A qualitative study could allow for a much broader conceptualisation of “development” and include aspects of it that are not directly quantifiable, but observable, such as:
	+ Perceptions of citizens.
	+ What development means to citizens.
* Rather than presuming what “development” means in order to formulate closed questions, for example, a qualitative study can ask respondents directly what development means for them.
	+ In that way, qualitative research can also be used to support further quantitative studies.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Quantitative** | **Qualitative** |
| Tests hypotheses | May start with initial hypothesis, but can also be completely grounded and build hypotheses up from the initial data gathered.  |
| Concepts are in the form of measurable variables | Concepts are often only measurable in that they are ideas that can be substantiated by observation or interviews |
| Measures are created before data collection and are standardized | Measures are created in an ad hoc manner and are often specific to the setting or the researcher. |
| Data are in the form of numbers from as good a measurement as possible. | Data are in the form of words and images from documents, observations, and transcripts. |
| Procedures are more standardized and are supposed to be more replicable, however conceptual assumptions then need to be made clear (based on different assumptions, one could interpret the same data differently).  | Research procedures are more specific to the setting or participants during fieldwork, thus replication is more complicated.  |
| Analysis uses statistics, tables, and charts and discusses how what they show relates to the hypothesis. | Analysis involves extracting themes from evidence and organizing data into themes and categories to present a coherent, consistent picture.  |

***Exercise:*** *Conceptualising “Democracy” for a Qualitative and a Quantitative Study*

**Qualitative vs. Quantitative Evidence**

When engaging with other authors’ arguments, there is also a tendency to give quantitative research more credit than qualitative research. Here are some commonly held assumptions [see slide].

Are these assumptions valid?

Can you, for example, think of some “bad statistics”?

Can you think about how qualitative research can in some cases actually be more valuable?

* Get behind the meaning of things
* More detailed, can identify important factors that quantitative surveys may have overlooked

Any research, whether quantitative or qualitative, has to be looked at critically.

When looking at quantitative research, ask yourself…

* What are the assumptions behind the approach to the issue?
	+ What sorts of questions are asked, and why?
* How are real-world phenomena turned into variables that can be quantified?
	+ That a variable is the best approximation possible or that the data is the best that could be obtained does not mean that the research is without problems!

For example: How do you measure poverty? How do you collect data in a war zone?

* How is the data interpreted? What claims are made based on the data?
	+ Numbers never just speak for themselves!
	+ For example, in summer, the consumption of ice cream and sunburns tend to happen at the same time. Even though you could probably plot a nice graph that shows that the higher the consumption of ice cream, the higher the incidence of sunburn, this does not mean that ice cream causes sunburn!

When looking at Qualitative Research, ask yourself…

* Who are the participants, and what are their potential ulterior motives?
* How does the researcher relate to the participants?
* How is the data interpreted? What claims are made based on the data?
	+ How transparent is the author about the process of interpretation?

Whether quantitative or qualitative, good research that produced good evidence…

* Is open about its assumptions, theoretical background and limitations.
* Is transparent about and rigorous in its methodology.
* Makes clear how data was interpreted in order to arrive at its conclusions.
* Does not make claims it cannot really substantiate.

**Empirical Analysis**: research is quantitative if it measures concepts in terms of **numbers**.

* Some of the concepts in this course (from the syllabus; see slides).
* concepts are **abstract**.
* Empirical evidence, on the other hand, refers to data/evidence that can be **observed** in the real world (i.e. ‘operational’).
* An operationalised concept is referred to as a ‘**variable**.’
* This requires using a **proxy**for the concept.
* **Variables** are concepts that are defined in such a way that they can be observed and/or measured in some way.
* Variables can be evaluated in terms of their validity and reliability.
* We distinguish between dependent and independent variables.
* Variables can be **dependent or independent**.
* Dependent Variables
	+ Can be changed by other factors.
* Independent Variables
	+ Are not affected by changes in other factors

(Independent variable) causes a change in (dependent variable) and it isn’t possible that (dependent variable) could cause a change in (independent variable)

*Not sure whether this is a sound example – you could do a study to determine whether increased govt revenue make a country less risky for FDI*

FDI can cause a change in government revenue, but it isn’t possible that government revenue could cause a change in FDI.

***Exercise****: How do we measure key concepts in political studies?*

* *Trade.* Value of exports and imports.
* *Growth.* GDP, urbanisation.
* *Dependence.* FDI, bilateral/multilateral agreements.
* *Inequality* GINI coefficient or income distribution

**Statistical techniques:**

* Quantitative studies look for patterns between variables.
* **Correlation**: quantified measure of the relationship between two variables. Indicates the direction and magnitude of the relationship.
* ***Remember, correlation is not the same as causation.***
	+ Example: summer and ice cream.
	+ We cannot deduce any specific relationship on this basis – just because we observe hot days whenever people eat lots of ice cream does not imply that ice cream causes warm days.

**Terminology:**

* Many students avoid truly reading quantitative work because of the technical terms.
* Briefly going over the terms such as significance levels will help them make sense of the literature.
* Go over language that may differ from paper to paper – eg. Independent variable/predictor/regressor.

**Limitations:**

These should have come up in all the earlier discussion of the method and the way it is done etc. but it is worth going over some of the important ones again:

* Cannot establish cause – no matter how strong the correlation.
* Often sacrifice on the explanation of relationships and establishing why they might exist.
* Proxies – do they capture what we want them too? What does it mean if they do not?

**Exercise:** Analysing CASE STUDY – does XXX prevalence explain the onset of YYYY?

1. How have they created proxies for these variables? What is the measurement?
2. Do these proxies make sense? For XXXs as a ratio of YYY – ask students what you might end up capturing (what is the problem with this proxy?)
3. Is there correlation? In other words – what do we see happening to the likelihood of a variable when we look at different XXX/YYY values?
4. Ask how much we should read into the correlation. Ask the students here what might make us more or less likely to find one of the correlations important or suggestive of a causal relationship.

**Section Three: Applying Theory vs. Referring to Theory**

Although it is tempting to state that you are testing or applying a theory in your methodology section, it is important to understand the implications of testing rather than applying theory when you claim these methods.

**Applying a theory**:

* The theory imposes a logic that you must adopt in your approach.
	+ Example: Liberalism – specific logics that explain state action.
* It is crucial to remain consistent with your application of the logic.
	+ Ask students to consider liberalism. What would it *not* make sense to start speaking about? Point out here that this means that the unit of analysis appropriate for a theory is very important.
* Point out to students that this means that small things such as language become very important – referring to countries or people as actors will depend on your choice of theory [levels of analysis].
* Finally, because of the above, it is important to be careful when selecting a theory to apply to a case – **do not try to fit a theory to a case**.

**Referring to a theory as evidence**:

* Fewer constraints than when applying a theory systematically.
* You can hold up a theory for criticism or to support it based on an observation. But emphasize to students that one observation does not disprove/prove a theory.
* There is scope to compare the abilities of different theories to explain certain things.
* The language and approach of the student does not have to be constrained or guided by the logic of the theory.

This lesson plan is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution South Africa License. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/za/>

Or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California 94105, USA.

