Comparative Communication Research:
Why We Really Need Some More Fuzzy Thinking

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The comparative study of communication and media has made significant progress in the past 15 years or so, at least if we judge progress by the sheer quantity of comparative research now published. Methodologically speaking, comparative communication research has, however, developed largely in a quantitative direction over this time period. Qualitative methods of comparative communication research, of how best to design and conduct such research, have yet to receive sustained attention and lag behind some other fields and disciplines in the social sciences, both in terms of making comparisons over time and across space. In this feature article, I briefly make the argument that a greater engagement with qualitative methodological issues would help to make both quantitative and qualitative comparative communication research generally across its breadth and depth become more innovative, robust, and systematic.

Keywords: method, qualitative comparative analysis, fuzzy set

The field of comparative media research has developed over the past 50 years or so. It lagged considerably behind (and arguably still does—methodologically, at least) comparative work in sociology and political science, with Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch playing a pivotal role, almost dual-handedly, in keeping the idea and practice of comparative political communication research alive for many years (1975, 1992, 1995). Over the past 15 years or so, however, the amount of work in the field has been remarkable. Interest in comparative communication research has taken off with the publication of Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini's hugely influential book from 2004, *Comparing Media Systems*, which stimulated a great deal of research and which, as of August 2020, has more than 7,000 Google Scholar citations. We now also have an important handbook devoted to the comparative study of communication research (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012) and an excellent entry discussing comparative research in the *International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). Both are signs of increasing maturity and indicators of achieving "fieldness." Though the sheer volume of comparative work has been astonishingly impressive, the extent to which qualitative methodological advances have been achieved in comparative communication research, or, even, more modestly, the adoption of comparative methods used in other social sciences, has been at best rather limited, which means that comparative research has developed in a particular, decidedly quantitative way, with some roads consequently not taken. My contention, which from my perspective is not contentious whatsoever, is that the field remains underdeveloped in terms of qualitative comparative methods (for the sake of clarity, however, I want to emphasize that I am not arguing that qualitative methods are necessarily superior to quantitative ones, or, indeed ,vice versa). As Esser and Hanitzsch (2012) argue, perhaps a little generously, "a sophisticated discussion about theories, concepts,

designs, and methods in comparative communication research is only beginning to emerge" (p. 501). There is no compelling evidence of a greater emergence of such a conversation since 2012. The argument in this article is intended as a modest, but I hope thought-provoking, contribution to this slowly emerging property of the field that is now well overdue. It is time more generally for sustained qualitative methodological reflection on the state of comparative communication research, as this will help not only make research in the field more robust individually and systematic collectively but it may serve also to open up new ways of addressing empirical questions comparatively and more interdisciplinary lines of enquiry.

The Quantitative Turn in Comparative Communication Research

When reviewing the rapidly developing field of comparative communication research from a bird's-eye perspective, there are two outstanding features. The first is that some subfields of communication research are far more developed than others existing as almost stand-alone, autonomous fields in their own right. The fields of comparative political communication, health communication, audience, and journalism studies are densely populated, whereas comparative studies of media cultures or popular culture, for example, are more sparsely populated (Fletcher & Kleis Nielsen, 2017; Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramprasad, & de Beer, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006; Snyder, 2009). The danger in their drive to this almost autonomous, self-contained status is that they may not be as open to interdisciplinarity or methodological diversity as may otherwise have been the case. There are numerous institutional reasons why certain subfields have become more densely populated, but of considerable importance is how amenable different subfields are to the use of quantitative methods for comparative analysis.

The densely populated subfields have tended to adopt quantitative methods with enthusiasm borne both of conviction and pragmatism, as quantitative methods can help to create order in complex multinational projects. Though the development of such quantitative approaches is to be applauded and admired, there is a consequent danger that qualitative approaches are, often unintentionally, crowded out of these subfields. Quantitative approaches are not and should not be the only game in town. In contrast, subfields where there has been relatively little systematic comparative research remain methodologically undeveloped, comparatively speaking, because of a certain resistance to quantitative approaches. However, there are qualitative approaches to comparative analysis of media cultures that may help to develop comparative research in these areas. My contention here is that discussion of qualitative comparative methods for communication research will be of value in increasing the methodological diversity and robustness of the densely populated (but primarily quantitatively inclined) subfields, and will encourage those less densely populated qualitatively inclined subfields to engage in more systematic comparative research because of the availability of a more amenable, qualitative comparative method of analysis. No doubt suggestions of a methodological "third way" will draw criticism from both densely and sparsely populated subfields, although for very different reasons, but it is at least worth posing the question. To pose this question, though, requires a fundamental review of some of the central assumptions of comparative communication research.

What Are We Comparing? Macro-, Meso-, and Microunits

As Esser and Vliegenthart (2017) state, comparative communication research contrasts macrounits such as world regions, countries, subnational regions, social milieus, language areas, and cultural

thickenings (p. 2). One could add media systems and media cultures to the list of macrounits. Couldry and Hepp (2012) usefully point out the "national territorial" is often taken as the unquestioned starting point for comparative research. Though this may be appropriate in some cases, it needs to be argued for rather than assumed. They argue convincingly that when it comes to comparing cultures, the frame of the nation-state may be inappropriate. It may be too small in times of media globalization when cultures cross national boundaries (although, of course, cultures crossing national borders is by no means a recent phenomenon). It may also be too large if there are clearly distinct cultures within the nation-state. It may be both too small and too large simultaneously. Rap cultures, for example, can be transnational, transcultural, and translocal simultaneously (Bramwell & Butterworth, 2019). This suggests the importance of multilevel or multiscalar analysis (Keightley & Reading, 2014).

The key lesson to take from Couldry and Hepp (2012) is that the unit of analysis needs to be thought through on a case-by-case basis rather than taken for granted, which is often the case judging by the rarity of a discussion of what is the appropriate frame or unit of analysis, with the default still being the nation-state.

I am fully in agreement with this case-by-case approach to comparative research, and indeed a logical extension of this argument is to question whether it is always necessary or desirable to investigate macrounits to address this banal methodological nationalism (Billig, 1995). One example should suffice to encourage comparative scholars to consider microunits or at least not macrounits. Imagine that we were interested in working out why some online newspapers are more successful than others in persuading their readers to subscribe. Some are clearly more successful than others. Why? Is it because they contain local news that is difficult to find elsewhere? Or is it because they contain news of interest to international elites? Or based in capital cities or financial centers? In this, case we have diverse outcomes (more or less successful at attracting subscribers) and diverse potential causal conditions operating at local, national, and international levels related both to the content of the newspapers themselves, the fields in which they find themselves, and the characteristics of their audiences. The tendency to consider only macrounits is, I would contend, mostly due to researchers following established lines of communication enquiry rather than thinking through research design from the ground up, starting with a research question and then seeking to design an appropriate comparative method to answer the question. The appropriate unit of analysis may well be a micro, meso or macro, and each decision should be justified in the research design process. This potentially means that comparative modes of analysis can be deployed across the field of communication rather than the situation now, where comparative methods appear to be used only in cross-national or international projects. Indeed, comparative communication has become almost synonymous with international communication, which can deter others working in different areas from considering comparative methods.

Types of Comparison: Large, Medium, and Small *n*

As Hallin and Mancini (2012) state, "Theorizing the role of context is precisely what comparative analysis is about" (p. 515). In other words, it is about using comparative methods to explain what we have. One of the interesting things about comparative research is that the nature of the comparison changes drastically depending on size of *n* and method.

Large *n*, for example, might use regression analysis where researchers are looking for the covariance of independent and dependent variables. There may be a sample divided into subsamples for each macrounit of analysis (e.g., a nation-state, so that results from each nation-state can be compared). What is interesting here is that there is nothing intrinsically comparative in the method itself, and that the results for each subsample are independent and the results valid on their own terms. The method is not comparative as such, and what we are actually comparing are the results that are independently arrived at. Once we have the results of the regression analysis, we compare results and point out similarities and differences, construct typologies, and so on, further on in the chain of research design and method. There are other forms of quantitative analysis, such as cluster analysis, where comparison is central.

For medium and small *n*, where quantitative analysis is inappropriate or deemed undesirable, the method itself becomes genuinely comparative, as the explanation of why something occurs is dependent on comparing the causal conditions found in each of the cases. The presence or absence of causal conditions in other cases determines how the outcome of a particular case is explained. Esser and Vliegenthart (2017) refer to this as a "fundamental choice between most similar and most different systems designs" (p. 1).

This suggests, however, erroneously, that researchers must adopt an either/or approach: either choosing a most similar systems design (MSSD) or most different systems design (MDSD). It overlooks attempts to combine both (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur, 1994) and the difficulties that both face. MSSD looks for systems that share independent variables except for one variable, which is then used to explain the differences in the dependent variable. The problem with this is that independent variables or causal conditions are not usually either present or absent (in other words, they are not usually crisp sets, 0 or 1). The explanation proffered by such an approach is also monocausal when in all likelihood the outcome is the result of a number of causes interacting in a complex manner. MDSD has, in a sense, the opposite problem, as researchers look for very different systems with divergent independent variables, where the presence of a single, shared independent variable explains the dependent variable. However, both approaches predominantly use crisp sets and are reliant on monocausal explanations. The shared problems of crisp sets and monocausality means that we need to look beyond a "fundamental choice" between MSSD and MDSD to find a new way of doing comparative research in the social sciences, including, of course, communication science. Fortunately, our colleagues in other social sciences have made good ground here.

Qualitative Comparative Analysis

Though the implications of Charles Ragin's development of a sophisticated fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) has received some attention in the field of political communication, it has failed to gain much traction in comparative communication research as a whole (Downey & Stanyer, 2010). Though it is a method increasingly used (one might even claim that it is becoming widely adopted) in other social sciences, its use in communication is limited, an indication of the methodological turn to quantitative approaches of comparative methods in the field and to a lack of development of more systematic qualitative approaches. An fsQCA offers clear benefits over MSSD, MDSD, case study, and arguably over quantitative approaches. It is not necessarily incompatible with quantitative approaches, but is used mostly in the case of medium or small *n*, where quantitative methods are not appropriate. Quantitative and QCA can be used together, and their results can be compared. To do so, of course, relies on an agile approach to methods

and a willingness to park deep-seated disagreements about epistemology and ontology, at least temporarily, in the spirit of exploration.

In contrast to quantitative approaches, fsQCA is based on set theoretic reasoning rather than on establishing correlational connections. It develops calibrations based on measurements rather than using measurements themselves; it looks for causal conditions rather than independent variables; and for causal complexity rather than individual discrete or net effects. It uses truth tables, counterfactual reasoning, and minimization to offer the most parsimonious explanations of outcomes (and so is wedded to the ideal of parsimony in social explanation). Rather than presenting qualitative researchers with the dilemma of a fundamental (and false) choice between MSSD and MDSD, fsQCA offers a way of calibrating degrees of presence of various causal conditions, and degrees of presence of the outcome to be explained.

It is worth spending a little time introducing some of the key concepts of fsQCA for the uninitiated, with the hope of whetting appetites of colleagues in the field.

The principle of fuzzy sets is easy to grasp. If we operate with crisp sets, we have to place, for example, countries as either democracies or not democracies, whereas it seems clear that some countries, while democracies, are less democratic than others. If we operate with fuzzy sets, we can think about in-between cases, where countries may be more or less democratic. With democracies, we might decide to use a four-value fuzzy set: fully democratic = 1.0; more democratic than not = 0.67; less democratic than not = 0.33; and not democratic = 0. In principle though, there can be various fuzzy sets, from three-value fuzzy sets to continuous fuzzy sets. Though the principle is easy to grasp, the question arises of how such calibration of set membership is operationalized as the type of fuzzy set (four value, six value, and so on) must be justified theoretically and substantively (Ragin, 2008, p. 32). Though this is an example drawn from political science, it is straightforward to think of a mainstream communication case. Take the existence of public service broadcasting. The strength of public service broadcasting varies considerably from country to country in terms of funding, programming, and audience share. It is clearly stronger in some countries than others (think of the Scandinavian countries compared with the United States), but it is difficult to maintain that there is a crisp set (there are some public service media in the United States and there are cases in mid-table that have public service media stronger than the United States but weaker than Scandinavian countries. The key to this is taking measurements (of funding, audience share, and so on) and then developing appropriate fuzzy set calibrations.

Ragin (2008) outlines two methods—the direct and the indirect—of doing calibrations on the basis of interval data. The direct method is based on an analysis of the log of odds of full membership in a particular set and tends to yield continuous fuzzy sets. The indirect method relies on the researcher organizing, for example, countries into broad groupings based on interval data (Ragin, 2008, pp. 89–97). Researchers can calibrate fuzzy sets both for the outcome they wish to explain and for the causal conditions that they suspect may help to explain the outcome.

Using truth tables, researchers can identify the different combinations or configurations of causal conditions that lead to the same outcome in different cases. There may well be more than one causal recipe or combination of causal conditions that produces the outcome. This is known as equifinality. A truth table

is based on all the possible combinations of causal conditions thought to be potentially relevant by the researcher. The number of possible combinations is 2^k, where k is the number of causal conditions, and so if there are thought to be four causal conditions, there would be 16 potential causal paths leading to a possible outcome. Analysis of truth tables allows researchers to determine which causal conditions make no difference to the outcome, and can be therefore thought redundant. This helps to lead to more parsimonious understandings of outcomes.

There are key advantages of fsQCA over either MSSD or MDSD in that it can respond to the complexity of the world and the different degrees to which outcomes are present, and it can provide complex causal explanations of why these outcomes occur. The causal recipes are not the end of the analysis, however. They need to be supplemented by a compelling coherent narrative of the process by which these causal conditions interact to produce the outcome. QCA is, therefore, impossible without deep individual case knowledge, but it effectively makes case comparison more systematic, which is particularly useful when contemplating undertaking multilevel analysis with a number of causal conditions at local, national, and transnational levels.

Incorporating Multilevel Analysis in Comparative Qualitative Research Design

Esser and Hanitzsch (2012) argue, "Transnational diffusion poses a considerable challenge to comparative communication research if understood as the comparison of separate cases. Intensified diffusion, adoption and imitation can cause systems, cultures and markets to become less independent and self-contained" (p. 503). Sonia Livingstone (2012) makes a similar point. While globalization has encouraged the development of cross-national research, the frame of reference theoretically and methodologically is still most commonly and illogically the nation-state (p. 417), pointing to the issue that comparative research does not know how to include a transnational diffusion of practices in its analytical model.

Kohn (1989), in contrast, already suggested how a transnational model could be developed in comparative sociology that treats countries not as separate containers but as places of cross-border flows. Such insights need to be translated into comparative communication research. As Esser and Vliegenthart (2017) point out, one aspect of this could be to examine the national domestication of transnational media, such as Al Jazeera investigating so-called glocalization. Another aspect would be to examine communication flows that are not confined by the borders of nation-states, but are generated by people communicating across nation-states. There are various expressions for this this, including but not limited to transnational public spheres.

Esser and Vliegenthart (2017) suggest four necessary additions to comparative communication research to cope with transnational flows and influences. The first is that communication scholars must be able to include nondomestic independent variables in their explanations. The second is that the relation between nondomestic and domestic variables should be considered. A third is to include deterritorialized (or perhaps better put, reterritorialized) transnational actors in comparative designs. Though the fourth would be to conduct a multilevel analysis, with the national as merely one level of the analysis.

These are clearly crucial considerations for anyone wishing to understand contemporary communication that is often thought to be "globalizing." But what is the next stage for qualitative researchers? How can these extensions be incorporated into a coherent and sophisticated qualitative comparative research design?

They can, I suggest, be incorporated without too much trouble into fsQCA, as such multilevel approaches are employed in other social sciences. For example, we may be interested in the extent to which national media cultures are "global." We may decide on several relevant measures (ownership of media institutions, prevalence of nondomestic programming on television, etc.). Using several indicators or measures, we could develop fuzzy-set membership of the set of more or less "global" national media cultures, showing that some "national" media cultures are more global than others. The different extent of globalization in different territories would be the outcome that is to be explained. The causal conditions that might explain this might include the practices of transnational media companies (again, that vary across space), transnational governance structures (e.g., World Trade Organization), domestic circumstances (the size of the country's media market, strength of public service broadcasting, strategies of domestic commercial media companies), and the relative presence of transnational publics and flows.

Through developing fuzzy-set membership for two outcomes (a global national media culture and a domestic dominated national media culture) and fuzzy-set membership of the causal conditions, we can use truth tables to determine the causal recipes that lead to both outcomes and also see which causal conditions are redundant, thus developing the most parsimonious explanations for the outcomes. Such an approach is a way of operationalizing insights, such as those made by Hallin and Mancini (2004), that cross-national media flows are becoming more important, but this is clearly not to the same extent in every territory, and the explanations for this will undoubtedly be situated in a complex recipe of transnational and national causal conditions. Introducing this sort of multilevel qualitative analysis could prove to be highly beneficial, as clearly something like "globalization" is happening, but it is a highly uneven process, affected not only by transnational actors but also by local and national conditions.

Qualitative Comparison Across Time: Sequencing and Change Over Time

So far, I have been essentially arguing that all subfields of comparative communication research should take more notice of fsQCA as it currently stands, without contributing at all to the development of QCA as a method. Methodological debate about whether QCA can be more than a static method is ongoing, and this could potentially be of significant benefit for comparative communication research that has been centrally concerned with change over time, but has not developed qualitative methods to capture such change.

Comparison across time as well as space has been an important consideration for comparative communication research for nearly three decades (Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992). Not only is comparison across time essential to understand and explain the process of change (or indeed stasis), but also taking different points in time can be useful methodologically in that it allows researchers to conduct pooled quantitative time series analysis addressing the problem of too few cases.

How we might qualitatively and systematically explain change over time has not as yet been adequately addressed in the field of communication (Stanyer & Mihelj, 2016). At first sight, QCA would appear not to offer much prospect of methodological innovation or advantage here. It has often been criticized with good reason for being atemporal and leading to static analysis. In recent years, however, there have been some attempts to introduce a temporal dimension to QCA, which are definitely worth exploring in the field of communication, as we appear to be concerned with processes of change (think of the use of the concepts of mediatization and globalization, to name just two in the field).

Caren and Panofksy (2005) modify QCA with the addition of sequence analysis to develop temporal QCA, or TQCA. What motivates Caren and Panofsky is to find out whether the temporal ordering of causes makes a difference to the outcome: Does A have to be followed by B, or can B precede A? In response Ragin and Strand (2008) show how sequence ordering can be incorporated into fsQCA by adding in additional causal conditions to take account of the sequential ordering of causes. Because of the additional complexity of the resulting truth table, Ragin and Strand (2008, p. 10) recommend that we consider the sequence of only up to four causal conditions. Incorporating sequential analysis into QCA does require a method to determine which causes come first, and so an additional case study method such as process tracing becomes applicable (see George & Bennett, 2005).

Though the analysis of the sequencing of causes is a welcome addition to comparative research, to my mind the most beneficial and methodologically original potential line of inquiry is to develop time-series methods to be able to explain change from one point of time to another, or indeed multiple points of time. Such forms of analysis are yet to receive sustained attention (for an exception, see Hino, 2009). This is surprising, given the appetite of social sciences for process words. Comparative communication research will often liberally draw on a number (think of the frequent use of globalization, mediatization, personalization, polarization), which of course begs the question of what has changed between two or more points in time, and what are the possible causes or causal recipes for this change.

Although I have not had the opportunity as yet to develop a time-series QCA (tsQCA) approach in an empirical project, I think this may be possible to operationalize in different ways. The first step would be to develop truth tables of fuzzy-set outcomes and fuzzy-set casual conditions. The second step is to compare Point in Time 1 and Point in Time 2 and create an additional three-value fuzzy set for changes over time for both causal conditions and outcomes. If the outcome had increased, it would be given a score of 1; if it had stayed the same, then it would be given a score of 0.5; and if it has decreased, then it would be given a score of 0. The third step would be to do a standard truth table minimization analysis, looking for patterns of causes and redundancy of causes across the cases. There are potentially more complex alternatives available that would compare changes in causal conditions and the outcome between points in time and then allocate fuzzy set scores (so if a causal condition has increased more than the outcome, it would receive a 0, and vice versa). If we were interested in media globalization, for example, we would then be able to have explanations of why some states have more (or less) global media cultures at two or more different points in time, plus an explanation of what causes media globalization by comparing outcomes and causal recipes at different points in time. Such an approach could potentially shed considerable light on many contentious debates in the field that concern the extent of change over time, where conceptual confusion and empirical insufficiency currently reigns (see Deacon & Stanyer, 2014). The widespread concern for

understanding change over time in comparative communication research means we must develop robust methods of qualitative analysis to back up any grand claims we seem to be fond of making. Often, these grand claims require a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to stand them up properly. In other words, we need to think more about how to integrate comparative communication research with other comparative social sciences to develop holistic, interdisciplinary explanations that recognize the causal complexity of outcomes. Again, QCA is potentially up to the task.

Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity: Thinking Outside Communication Research

Given that comparative communication research has been playing catch-up with other comparative social sciences, it may seem unduly harsh to offer the criticism that in this desirable and overdue process there is a danger that the importance of interdisciplinarity in furnishing explanations of the social world can be overlooked. Here, the concern is that comparative communication research may become too narrow and too communication or media-centric, simultaneously both over- and underestimating the importance and significance of media causes if the social world is viewed holistically. To avoid this tendency, we should consider not only how broader economic, social, political, and cultural causes contribute to media outcomes but also how media causes may contribute to broader economic, social, political, and cultural outcomes. In a sense, this involves a different conception of our own identities, away from being comparative communication researchers toward being comparative interdisciplinary social scientists with a goal of bringing communication science to the interdisciplinary table. Not everyone should or needs to do this work, but it would be beneficial for both the field and for social sciences generally if more communication scholars were to take this broader purview. Disciplinary comparative communication needs to happen, and it could be used to inform the contribution of comparative communication research to the interdisciplinary endeavor, but there is clearly, at the moment, not enough of the latter.

If we consider non-media causal conditions that may contribute to media outcomes, an example would be to think about how strong or weak commercial television is across states. Clearly, not only the size of a state's economy and income per capita are important for explaining the degree to which revenues can be generated through subscriptions and advertising. It just does not make sense to see commercial television, except in the context of the development of capitalism as a whole.

If we consider the contribution of media causal conditions in combination with nonmedia casual conditions to nonmedia outcomes, an example would be assessing the extent to which media reporting of populist parties contributes to increasing representation of such parties in national parliaments. The rise of populism is often explained through a combination of demand-side and supply-side factors (e.g., levels of unemployment and immigration to explain demand for populist parties) and the presence of populist parties and favorable electoral systems (e.g., some version of proportional representation that permits smaller challenger parties to gain a foothold) on the supply side, with the outcome being explained by the combination of demand-and supply-side conditions. There are additional media supply-side conditions that are rarely considered in mainstream political science, such as the extent of mainstream media coverage that these parties receive and the extent to which such parties use social media to mobilize support. Neither of these conditions nor both together are sufficient to explain why some populist parties gain access to national parliaments, but I would argue that they contribute to the causal combination of demand- and

supply-side conditions. The danger is that in comparative political communication research, we focus exclusively on the communicative or media causal conditions of populism, divorced from other causal conditions. Adopting QCA as a method of communication research can become more interdisciplinary both in terms of thinking about extra-media causes of media outcomes and also how media causal conditions contribute to nonmedia outcomes when combined with nonmedia causal conditions. Because fsQCA is good at handling causal complexity, it is a method ideally suited to providing explanations of outcomes informed by interdisciplinary considerations, enabling comparative communication to take its proper place at the table of social science, contributing interdisciplinary explanations of social phenomena. Again, it is worth emphasizing that the production of causal recipes is not an end point, but rather the beginning for the production of a compelling, coherent narrative of analyzing the interaction of causal conditions that together produce the outcome.

Conclusion

In this assessment of the state of comparative communication research, I hope to have acknowledged the distance travelled in certain subfields while pointing to some fruitful lines of inquiry and sources of qualitative methodological impetus. The distance travelled also comes at a potential cost in terms of methodological diversity and in interdisciplinarity. The problem still lies essentially with a methodological divide on the part of comparative communication research, between quantitative and qualitative approaches that means not enough attention has been paid to methodological innovations that have taken place in other social sciences. Greater methodological training and interdisciplinary awareness of methods from across the social sciences would help enormously to make our field more robust and systematic. We could be more flexible about the scales of our comparisons, from small to large, from transnational to subnational; we could analyze causal complexity across a range of more or less similar cases; we could engage in multilevel analysis dealing with causes that are local and ones that cross borders and cultures in the same analysis; we could introduce time-series qualitative approaches to explain change over time (and this would also be a valuable methodological contribution to social sciences generally); and we could become more interdisciplinary, highlighting the importance of communication to social scientific explanation generally, where it has often in the past been ignored or assumed. The best thing is that these advances are easily within our grasp, given the ground covered elsewhere, even if they are proved elusive in our field thus far.

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