

Assignment. Under what theoretical circumstances would primary or interview data not only be desirable but necessary to make causal claims? If appropriate, draw on Yarhi-Milo.

Primary sources and interview data can be vital to accurately trace causal processes. When the goal of a research study is to make causal inferences, particularly via within-case analysis, such sources are important to establish the intervening processes that link the variables outlined in a hypothetical causal relationship (Tansey 2007). In process tracing specifically, researchers will often examine memoirs, archival documents, interview transcripts and other sources to determine whether a hypothesized causal process is in fact evident in the case. Although reliance on such sources carries inherent drawbacks, such as bias and misrepresentation, proper within-case inference often requires close engagement with these data.

Primary and interview data will be most useful where causal theories depend on choices made by individuals.¹ Although political science aims at nomothetic theories, such general claims are often aggregations of specific causal processes that involve individual decisions. In order to determine whether a proposed general theory is in fact operating within a case, it can be important to know the motivations and the choice set available to participants in the events under examination. For example, Yarhi-Milo (2014) finds evidence for her selective attention thesis by examining the manner in which US leaders inferred Soviet intentions. She finds that Reagan's positive impressions of Gorbachev, gleaned through private meetings, outweighed more general Soviet actions (troop buildups in particular). To draw this conclusion, she examines contemporaneous documents (Reagan's National Security Decision Directives), memoirs, and even reports of particular films and other media consumed by leaders. Crucially, she situates these primary data by corroborating them with historians' accounts and other secondary material.

¹ It is worth noting that the term "primary data" is somewhat ambiguous, as memoirs and other source types can be composed years after the events in question occur. As an alternative, Kapiszewski suggests "pre-existing materials" (190).

Primary data is often deployed in the service of theory development and testing, in a process known as qualitative historical analysis (Thies 2002). Such primary data is particularly useful in determining basic information, or “manifest events”. However, it is important to note that the choice of documents to consult will itself be “theory-laden”, and may thus encode the biases of the researcher at the level of selection. In addition, the veracity of primary data can be questioned, particularly where the motives of the participants might lead them to adjust the record in their favor. Internal criticism of documents and external corroboration with contemporaneous records can help establish a more accurate view – this process is known as “triangulation” (Thies 2002).

Interviews play four main roles in process tracing: they can be used to corroborate information already known, to establish the thinking of a set of actors, to make inferences about a larger population, or to reconstruct an event or series of events (Tansey 2007). Such interviews can be particularly useful in uncovering causal processes and identifying causal mechanisms (Kapiszewski 2015). Tansey stresses the additive role of elite interviews as the most relevant use in process tracing, because elites frequently possess private information concerning decision-making processes (Tansey 2007). Yahri-Milo was able to interview several participants in the events she studied, including George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger. The interview with Weinberger seems particularly useful because he gives a thorough account of Reagan’s assessment of Gorbachev’s motives, an account that diverges from the account offered in Reagan’s own memoirs (Yahri-Milo 2014, p. 214). She also consults past interview transcripts with the principal actors (Reagan and Gorbachev).

By incorporating public and private documents along with past and contemporaneous interviews, Yahri-Milo is able to demonstrate that rival theses (involving behavior, capabilities and military doctrine) do not account for crucial pieces of evidence that her selective attention thesis can explain. Gorbachev’s costly signals of reassurance were not interpreted consistently by US decision-makers, and the behavior thesis cannot account for the rapid change in Reagan’s (and Shultz’s) attitudes immediately

following close, positive and repeated interactions with their Soviet counterparts (222). Yahri-Milo's causal claim that vivid events have disproportionate impacts on leaders, and that such leaders' impressions thus differ systematically from the impressions of their own intelligence community, forces consideration of these primary data to accurately trace major and minor factors in the decision process.

We can imagine other circumstances where primary and interview data could be vital to proposed causal claims. While in-depth elite interviews can reveal unique perspectives and uncover sensitive or controversial information, oral history approaches may uncover unique historical perspectives and sharpen the focus on causal processes. Although Tansey places a great deal of emphasis on the probative value of elite interviews, oral history can permit causal inference about the motivations of particular groups.² Random selection may be appropriate in such cases to minimize bias. Oral history projects (and focus groups) can suggest causal explanations that may be further refined through experiments (Kapiszewski 2015). As Yahri-Milo demonstrates, one of the most robust uses for these data is to distinguish a proposed explanation from competing theories. She is able to demonstrate that the empirical record is inconsistent with predictions made by rival theories, and that the outcome of interest (changes in how the United States perceived Soviet intentions) is best explained by her selective attention thesis. This approach is particularly powerful because Yahri-Milo's focus on the primary sources provides evidence for incentives, motives and constraints operating on the principal actors. While the use of primary data has risks, these data are vital for substantiating individual motivation and tracing causal processes.

² Katherine Cramer (2016) uses this technique to superlative effect.

References

Kapiszewski, Diana. Lauren M. Maclean and Benjamin Read, *Field Research in Political Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), Ch. 6.

Tansey, Oisin. "Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-Probability Sampling," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40, 4 (2007).

Thies, Cameron. "A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations." *International Studies Perspectives* 3 (2002): 351–372.

Yarhi-Milo, Keren. *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton 2014), Ch. 1 (14-35) and Chs. 8-10.