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Response

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Debating the State of Comparative Politics

Views From Qualitative Research

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Gerardo L. Munck and Richard Snyder's analysis is an important effort to systematically characterize the state of comparative politics. The article quite appropriately insists that our portrayals of research practices in the subfield should be grounded in real data. Munck and Snyder's own characterizations accordingly are based on a large-*N* sample of published articles in three leading subfield journals. This data-driven approach to debating the subfield is not often used, and Munck and Snyder are to be applauded for employing it here. The approach helps us move beyond some stale debates that are grounded in false conceptions of research.

In this short reply, I discuss Munck and Snyder's essay from the standpoint of qualitative research and qualitative methodology (my own research orientation). From this perspective, at least two themes from the article are especially noteworthy and merit close consideration. The first concerns the extent to which qualitative research is practiced in the subfield. Munck and Snyder show that 63.3% of articles in the leading subfield journals are mainly qualitative, whereas only 36.7% are mainly quantitative. Furthermore, they find that far less than half of all articles use any kind of deductive methods and only a tiny percentage (4.4%) use formal deductive methods. As Munck and Snyder suggest, however, the situation may be quite different outside of the subfield journals. Hence, we need to look at other journals to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the kind of research that is published on comparative politics.

A second theme concerns Munck and Snyder's discussion of the methodological problems that hinder the generation of knowledge in the subfield. Some of these problems are uncontroversial for qualitative researchers; in

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fact, Munck and Snyder find that certain issues are handled especially well in qualitative research (e.g., linking data to concepts). But others are controversial, and I focus on them here. In doing so, my intention is not to suggest that qualitative research is flawless (or that quantitative research is especially flawed). Rather, I want to use this discussion to try to orient the debate over qualitative research in the most productive directions.

A Different Universe: Findings From the General Disciplinary Journals

Munck and Snyder note that their findings from the three subfield journals may not be generalizable to other kinds of journals. In particular, they note that research on comparative politics published in general disciplinary journals "could diverge systematically from the kind of material published in the three journals on which this article focuses" (p. 7). Is this, in fact, the case?

To explore the issue, a research assistant (Larkin Terrie) and I examined work published in *The American Political Science Review* (*APSR*), *The American Journal of Political Science* (*AJPS*), and *The Journal of Politics* (*JOP*). We looked at all articles ($N = 169$) that focused on comparative politics in these journals for the same years analyzed by Munck and Snyder (i.e., 1989, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2001, and 2004). Given our interest in issues pertaining to qualitative research, we coded empirical articles on comparative politics according to whether they are mainly qualitative or mainly quantitative (see Table 1). We also coded comparative politics articles (empirical and nonempirical) according to whether they engage in formal deductive modeling, informal deductive modeling, or no deductive modeling (see Table 2).

The data in Tables 1 and 2 suggest a dramatic contrast with the results obtained by Munck and Snyder (see also Bennett, Barth, & Rutherford, 2003). Most strikingly, qualitative research on comparative politics is rarely published in the disciplinary journals (i.e., about 8% of all publications). Of the three journals, *APSR* publishes the most qualitative research, but its articles are still nearly 90% quantitative. Furthermore, a majority of all publications (53%) engage in deductive modeling, and one fourth (26%) use formal modeling. Thus, with these journals, deductive theorizing in the study of comparative politics is as common as not, and formal modeling is not at all rare.

It is important to be clear what these new findings suggest. They do not call into question Munck and Snyder's argument that their data represent much of the best work on comparative politics. Munck and Snyder are doubtless

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Table 1
Methods of Empirical Analysis by Journal

	AJPS		*APSR*		*JOP*		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Qualitative	3	(6.6)	6	(11.8)	2	(4.7)	11	(7.9)
Quantitative	42	(93.3)	45	(88.2)	41	(95.3)	128	(92.1)
n	45		51		43		139	

Note: *AJPS* = *American Journal of Political Science*; *APSR* = *American Political Science Review*; *JOP* = *Journal of Politics*.

Table 2
Methods of Theorizing by Journal

	AJPS		*APSR*		*JOP*		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Formal modeling	9	(17.0)	32	(44.4)	3	(6.8)	44	(26.0)
Informal modeling	25	(47.2)	15	(20.8)	6	(13.6)	46	(27.2)
No modeling	19	(35.8)	25	(34.7)	35	(79.5)	79	(46.7)
n	53		72		44		169	

Note: *AJPS* = *American Journal of Political Science*; *APSR* = *American Political Science Review*; *JOP* = *Journal of Politics*.

correct that *World Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies (CPS)*, and *Comparative Politics* publish much of the best work in the field. Instead, the new data here show that the leading disciplinary journals publish an unrepresentative sample of this work. Scholars who employ mainly qualitative methods are virtually shut out from publication in the most prestigious discipline-wide journals.

More generally, I would caution that readers not jump to the conclusion that qualitative research dominates even the subfield journals, especially when we take into consideration issues of prestige among these journals. *CPS*, now the flagship of the subfield, increasingly publishes quantitative research (Bennett et al., 2003). By sampling the full universe of 204 substantive *CPS* articles published during the 2001 to 2005 period, for example, we found that 60% of its articles are now quantitative. Of the three journals analyzed by Munck and Snyder, *World Politics* is often regarded as the most prestigious outlet. Yet its publications on comparative politics are not overwhelming qualitative; they appear to be fairly evenly split between quantitative and qualitative

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research. This leaves *Comparative Politics* as the one journal that primarily publishes qualitative research.

In short, with respect to the publication of qualitative and quantitative work in comparative politics, I would characterize the current situation as follows: (a) The most prestigious disciplinary journals publish almost entirely quantitative work. (b) *World Politics* and *CPS* are pluralistic, though the latter is becoming increasingly quantitative. (c) *Comparative Politics* publishes mostly qualitative articles.

As for formal modeling, Munck and Snyder show that it is not commonly used in the subfield journals. However, the situation is again very different with the disciplinary journals (as Munck and Snyder hypothesize it might be). Formal methods are commonly used in comparative articles in *APSR* and not uncommon in *AJPS*. As a consequence, scholars who use these methods—or even informal varieties of rational-choice theory—may command disproportionate influence in the field. In addition, *CPS* publishes an increasingly large percentage of articles that use informal or formal deductive methods (Bennett et al., 2003). These facts may explain the great attention that rational-choice theory in comparative politics has received, an occurrence that otherwise would seem puzzling in light of its relative absence in certain subfield journals.

Appraising Qualitative Research Practices

Munck and Snyder are right to call on scholars to take methods seriously and to put methodological issues on center stage in future debates about comparative politics. Nevertheless, I argue that some of their specific criticisms of qualitative research methods are based on partial or problematic indicators. I suggest that better measurement itself requires a more qualitative (or at least "case-oriented") approach.

Munck and Snyder argue that qualitative researchers fixate on the country as a unit of observation and thus fail to employ within-case analysis in their research. Yet their measurement of within-case analysis as the percentage of articles that employ country-time periods or subnational regions seems problematic. As a large methodological literature suggests, the fundamental basis of within-case analysis is the identification of "causal-process observations" (to use the language of Collier, Brady, & Seawright, 2004). With causal-process observations, one needs neither to move away from the country level of analysis nor to substantially increase the *N* to achieve powerful leverage for causal inference. In fact, a small number of causal-process observations at the country level may lend decisive support for or against a given theory (George & Bennett, 2005; McKeown, 1999).

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Regarding the scope of generalization, Munck and Snyder conclude that "Most comparativists do not attempt to provide generalizations of even a moderate scope" (p. 22). They draw this conclusion from evidence that shows that most researchers analyze only a small number of cases. However, they do not code the domain of cases to which comparativists believe their arguments are applicable. It is quite possible that scholars who analyze single cases or small *N*s occasionally or even frequently attempt to provide broader generalizations than the cases under analysis. In fact, some methodologists go so far as to say that case studies by definition attempt to provide these kinds of generalizations (e.g., Gerring, 2004). One may be skeptical of the validity of these generalizations by case-study and small-*N* researchers, but that concern raises a separate set of methodological issues about how best to generalize (as opposed to the scope of intended generalization, which is what is under discussion).[1]

I would argue that adequately coding both within-case analysis and the scope of generalization requires a more case-oriented approach to measurement. Many previous efforts at analyzing within-case analysis and causal-process observations have taken place though the in-depth analysis of particular pieces of research. The basic process of measurement has involved a close reading of particular works in a way that is akin to qualitative data analysis. Likewise, to the extent that methodologists have assessed the scope of generalization in case-study and small-*N* research, they have done so by trying to carefully appraise whether inferences in particular exemplary works are intended to apply more generally or only to the cases at hand. In the future, it would certainly be desirable to accumulate a large number of these close inspections. At present, however, firm conclusions about the extent of within-case analysis and the scope of generalization in comparative research seem premature.

At the end of their article, Munck and Snyder assert that the most important challenge facing comparative politics involves overcoming certain methodological impediments. One can hardly disagree with them that the field would benefit if data were better linked to concepts, hypotheses were more explicitly and clearly formulated, and variable scores were more systematically reported (numerically or qualitatively). To the extent that qualitative research falls short in the last two of these areas, the remedy probably involves better training in qualitative methods at the graduate level (there are too few qualitative methods courses in our discipline; see Bennett et al., 2003). Two other challenges linked to qualitative research are more controversial: the infamous small-*N* problem (too few cases relative to variables) and the infamous data-mining problem (using the same data to both generate and test

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theories). The small-*N* problem has been extensively debated elsewhere, with opinions differing widely. My own view is that Munck and Snyder's data do not directly speak to the issues that animate this debate. For example, scholars who defend the use of small-*N* comparisons often emphasize causal-process observations, hypotheses about necessary and/or sufficient causation, and the data requirements for testing complex (or "thick") theories. These issues are not picked up in the Munck–Snyder database.

Concerning data mining, I would argue that this is especially a problem in quantitative research. To be sure, data snooping is ubiquitous in both qualitative and quantitative research. However, the practice can be better defended if one's goal is—as it often is in qualitative research—identifying the causes of specific outcomes as opposed to estimating the average effects of independent variables (see Mahoney & Goertz, 2006; McKeown, 1999). Modifying one's theory in the course of making multiple passes through the data may be condemnable given the goal of estimating average effects; it is not necessarily so given the goal of explaining outcomes in particular cases.

Conclusion: Setting an Agenda

In addition to teaching us much about contemporary comparative politics, Munck and Snyder's work should be taken as a call for future scholars to better ground their characterizations of the subfield in systematic data. I have argued here that these future efforts could benefit by examining a larger range of journals (and books too), by developing some alternative measures, and by measuring certain practices in light of a very close reading of individual studies. In addition, I believe that future efforts could benefit by measuring a series of other research practices. For example, in statistical research, one might wish to study questions such as What percentage of articles employ interaction effects? What is the average number of independent variables used in statistical models? What specific statistical techniques are used to test hypotheses? With qualitative research, one might wish to ask, How commonly do these researchers develop deterministic arguments? How often do they formulate path-dependent arguments? How frequently do they emphasize leadership and choice as key explanatory factors? These questions are merely suggestive of some of the directions that one might wish to take this kind of analysis in the future. Nevertheless, they do illustrate the better promise for characterizing the subfield by following the fine example of Munck and Snyder.

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Note

1. There is also potential slippage between indicator and concept in the measurement of the commonality of "big questions" in comparative politics. Munck and Snyder conclude that rational-choice theorists address big questions because these analysts study many of the general topics listed in their Table 1. However, the listing of topics in that table does not specify the actual research question that is addressed in these analyses. For example, one can study the broad topic of revolution using rational-choice theory, but it may be necessary to ask narrow questions about revolution when doing so (see Skocpol, 1994, pp. 321-326).

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