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Set-theoretic methods for the social sciences: a guide to qualitative comparative analysis

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BOOK REVIEWS

Set-theoretic methods for the social sciences: a guide to qualitative comparative analysis, by C. Q. Schneider and C. Wagemann, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 367 pp., £60.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-107-01352-0, £23.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-107-60113-0

Since its launch in 1987 by Ragin as a methodology intended to bridge the gap between quantitative variable-based and qualitative case-based research approaches, social science researchers have increasingly turned to Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) for conducting comparative empirical social science research. Throughout the years, QCA has become an umbrella term for a set-theoretic configurational research approach encompassing a number of variants and techniques for systematically comparing cases (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). This textbook by Schneider and Wagemann is ‘dedicated to explaining QCA’ (p. 9), where the ‘focus will be more on the technical aspects’ (p. 11). They concentrate on the most popular variants: crisp sets (csQCA) and fuzzy sets (fsQCA). The book is aimed ‘to cater to both beginners and very advanced readers’ (p. 19).

The book is organized in 12 chapters subdivided into four main parts. Each chapter commences with an ‘easy reading guide’ which provides a succinct overview of the contents of the chapter. Two other ‘didactic devices’ (p. 19) that Schneider and Wagemann deploy are ‘at-a-glance boxes’ which summarize the key points per section or chapter, and the ‘glossary’ (pp. 322–335) which contains definitions and brief descriptions of the most important concepts in QCA. The first part of the book consists of four chapters that set the scene by explaining the very basics of QCA, *inter alia*: what is a set, how are they constructed, how are they combined, how are cases compared as configurations of sets, and what kind of causal statements can be derived? The second part of the book deals with those issues that are derived from the fact that the empirical reality does not ‘present itself in clear and neat patterns’ but that rather ‘social science research based on observational data is characterized by noisy data’ (p. 119): how does this noisiness present itself in QCA and how is it dealt with? Chapter 7 takes stock of the first two parts of the book by describing and showing ‘the current default way of performing QCA’ (p. 178).

The third part of the book will appeal to the more advanced QCA-users. Chapters 8 and 9 provide new and more advanced ways of doing QCA. In addition to the Truth Table Algorithm and the Standard Analysis procedure presented in Chapter 7, Schneider and Wagemann introduce the ‘Enhanced Standard Analysis’ and the ‘Theory-guided Enhanced Standard Analysis’ procedures. These procedures provide solutions for dealing with some pitfalls that remain (partly) unresolved by the defaults presented in Chapter 7. The authors have done an excellent job in explaining these new procedures, but it will require a solid understanding of the basics of QCA to fully grasp these procedures. Chapter 10 briefly introduces some other

existent QCA-variants such as multi-value QCA and temporal QCA. Considering the focus of the book, these are understandably presented in a concise manner, though a bit more empirical guidance could have helped the reader to value these QCA variants for applying them in their own empirical research. The penultimate Chapter 11 is an important one. As announced by Schneider and Wagemann in their introductory chapter, the book focuses for pedagogical reasons on the technical (and rather quantitative) aspects of QCA. Readers are advised, however, to keep in mind that QCA is the first and foremost qualitative research approach and that it should not be applied mechanically. This is elaborated in Chapter 11 that discusses, among other things: the standards for good practice, case selection, and the interpretation of research results. Chapter 12 concludes with a ‘looking back’ on the preceding chapters and ‘looking ahead’ on the future developments.

Schneider and Wagemann have written a needful textbook on QCA. The book provides a comprehensive state-of-the-art of the a–b–c of QCA. The book is well written and structured. It is understandable to beginners and interesting to more advanced users. The different didactic devices are useful, and the structure of the book certainly facilitates using it for educational and research purposes. Some remarks, nevertheless, are the following. First, understandable and argued for (p. 20) but bit of a pity nonetheless is the abundant reliance on empirical examples from political science literature. Readers are advised to look beyond this empirical bias and see the method’s analytical value for their own case-based social science research. Second, this case-based nature would have been worth stressing more. The authors, like many others in QCA literature, tend to explain the method’s features and qualities relative to conventional quantitative methods. However, QCA also has great potential and value relative to qualitative and even grounded-oriented students and researchers. All in all, the book is certainly value-for-money and, keeping in mind the above statements, I would recommend it to anyone, and especially to those interested in familiarizing themselves with QCA.

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Doing Sensory Ethnography, by S. Pink, Sage, London, 2009, 168 pp., £74.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781412948029, £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781412948036

For those of us engaged in ethnographic studies of one type or another, a sense of embodiedness, and with it a sensuous appreciation of the world we encounter, is not new. It is a precondition of and for ethnography, and it offers – repeatedly – a

pressing need for fresh conceptual and theoretical subtleties, and for more and more truthful and nuanced research practices. Pink's recent book embodies what it offers, which is that ethnographic realities are multisensory and corporeal, and it is through a rich array of (interactional) practices we can engage, appreciate and understand these realities.

The book is divided into three parts, each containing 2–3 chapters, which together accomplish a research narrative that aims to address the sensoria in ethnographic sites, as well as to how they would be discussed academically and represented in academic (and other) publications. The first part, titled 'Rethinking Ethnography through the Senses,' holds nearly half of the book's pages, and offers a thorough discussion of recent developments in sensory ethnography, covering a variety of conceptually as well as methodologically innovative and updated studies that have employed and presented sensory research. By the term 'sensory ethnography,' Pink holds that ethnography should take, as its starting point, 'the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing, and practice,' and specifically that ethnographic processes aim to account 'for how this multisensoriality is integral to the lives of people who participate in our research *and* to how we ethnographers practice our craft' (p. 1, italics in the origin). This part offers a literature review drawing on anthropology (with its sensitivity to embodiedness), sociology (with its sensitivity to interaction as a practical and situated accomplishment), and geography (with its sensitivity to the notions of place and space). Hence, contemporary sensory ethnography occupies a truly interdisciplinary nexus of knowledges and methods. In addition, Pink's background in visual anthropology further contributes to this part, as the author is broadening the scope of her research to include all senses (and their inter-relations) over and above visibility. Indeed, one of the interesting discussions that recur throughout the book touches on the relations between the input of the different senses, and how in effect the social knowledge that our senses supply us with is essentially intertwined (through hearing we can feel, thought touching we can smell, etc.).

If the book's first part laid down the theoretical grounds occupied by the sub-field of sensory ethnography, the second part, appropriately titled 'Sensory Ethnography in Practice,' moves forward with both descriptions and more practical knowledge as to how sensory ethnographies are conducted and what they look like. This part combines sensibilities from the phenomenological tradition to suggest what Pink calls 'the ethnographer as a sensory apprentice' (p. 6). Pink persuasively suggests that the path leading to sensory ethnography entails taking the role of an embodied apprenticeship, where as part of the research the scholar not only observes, notes, and reflects, but also engages in and learns the embodied skills involved in the community and in the practices and preferences of those who are studying. In one of Pink's earlier research projects (Pink, 2007), this involved learning certain tastes and the practices of eating – unknown to her hitherto. In other studies, the 'practical acquisition of listening skills' (Rice, 2006) was an ethnographic challenge, or more programmatically, the fact that ethnographic knowledge and learning are *embodied and situated*, rather than cognitive and abstract (Ingold, 2000). It is the work of ethnography to develop sensitivities and the appropriate skills – a few of which have to do with subtle multisensory perception of the study environment.

After supplying various examples of (and for) sensory ethnography, the book's third part expectedly moves to consider issues related to 'Interpreting and Representing Sensory Knowing.' The book's last two chapters engage in the

interpretation of multisensory research and in representing multisensory findings and insights. Here, after nicely addressing in brief the complexities (and perhaps paradoxes) associated with the ethnographic studies as such, that is as social sciences that are supposed to be generalizable, Pink offers the perspective that the analysis of the data ‘should be situated *in relation* to the phenomenological context of the production of the materials’ (p. 121, italics in the origin). This suggests to me that analysis and interpretation are inter-linked or associated with the ‘field’ or site of research, and that the ethnographic acts that are performed with and upon the data present a (nother) social site within the epistemological landscape of the research as a whole (Noy, 2007, 2011). This requires a certain degree of reflection, where researchers address the corporeality that is involved with their bodies and with the technologies of research that they employ (audio and video recordings, taking notes, storing and processing technologies, etc.). As for the representation of sensory research, Pink begins – perhaps surprisingly – by avoiding a call for a sweeping, revolutionary shift of representational modes and media. Rather, she insists on the central and crucial role that scholarly writing holds with regard to any ethnographic representation. In light of this, Pink attempts to tie newer and more innovative genres and media with more traditional and verbocentric ones, thus admitting on the one hand to the pros of writing, while on the other hand offering a qualitative expansion of the cursive medium of scholarly production through combining it with promising possibilities for visual, auditory, tactile, and even olfactory ways of communication of knowledge. It seems to be that this approach holds much merit in that it acknowledges the traditional politics of academic publications, which are still overwhelmingly cursive, and yet aspires to broaden them through associations (a-la Latour, 2005) with other media and other senses.

Doing Sensory Ethnography is designed to be reader-friendly: the book’s appearance is pleasant and it is arranged like a textbook: every chapter is concluded with a short and clear ‘summing up’ section as well as with a list of recommended further readings. Moreover, the language throughout the book is kept simple and clear, and from reading, it one can – perhaps imaginatively – see the author’s merits as an ethnographer: the book communicates a sense of intimacy and closeness, which is joined by a practical and welcoming approach. I personally found the book helpful not only in relation to sensory ethnography, but also as a source for good and updated descriptions of ethnographic practices and processes (mainly urban or urban-related ones), which extend from contemplating and planning possible research, to conveying the researcher’s findings and discussing them within academic circles and to audiences. The book would be a good addition to ethnographic courses (both initial and as part of advanced studies), and is surely already part of the core literature dealing with the ‘how questions’ with regard to sensory ethnography, and how we as ethnographers, and how those who study, sense and make sense of the world we all inhabit.

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