

CHAPTER 2

The Three Different Variants of Process-Tracing and Their Uses

This chapter develops the argument that there are three different research situations in which process-tracing methods can be used, resulting in three distinct variants of process-tracing. In contrast, the state of the art treats process-tracing as a singular method, resulting in murky methodological guidelines. Whereas most case studies that use process-tracing employ a case-centric variant that we term the explaining-outcome process-tracing, most methodological works prescribe a theory-centric version of process-tracing that involves the deductive testing of whether a generalizable mechanism is present in a single case. The dissonance between what we practice and what we preach has resulted in considerable confusion about what good process-tracing is. We contend that clearer prescriptions can be developed when we differentiate process-tracing into three distinct variants.

We do not suggest this differentiation for its own sake. These differences have important methodological implications for research design that are masked when we treat process-tracing as a single method. We explore these implications throughout the rest of this book. For example, the three variants differ on key questions such as how causal mechanisms are understood, whether the purpose is to make inferences about whether a mechanism is present in a case or to account for a particular outcome, and whether they can be nested into mixed-method designs.

We first summarize the state of the art, showing that existing work on process-tracing treats it as a singular method. We then illustrate that there are three distinct research situations that call for different methodological tools, implying the need to differentiate the method into three distinct variants that reflect these different purposes. We conclude by briefly illustrating

9

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each of the three variants, showing what we are tracing in each of them and how analysis proceeds.

2.1. The State of the Art—One Method

In their chapter-length presentation of process-tracing, George and Bennett (2005) mention the range of different forms of process-tracing as they have been used in practice. The authors argue that process-tracing has been used in a variety of ways, including both detailed narratives and case studies, where “at least parts of the narrative are accompanied with explicit causal hypotheses highly specific to the case without, however, employing theoretical variables for this purpose or attempting to extrapolate the case’s explanation into a generalization” (210–11). In other varieties of process-tracing, “the investigator constructs a general explanation rather than a detailed tracing of a causal process” (211). Yet in the rest of their chapter, George and Bennett treat process-tracing as a singular method, masking the differences that relate to the different uses.

More recent accounts also treat process-tracing as a single method, often defining it as a deductive tool to test whether causal mechanisms are present and function as theorized. For example Gerring (2007a: 172–85) describes a two-stage deductive research process where the analyst first clarifies the theoretical argument and then empirically verifies each stage of this model. Checkel describes process-tracing as the attempt to “trace the process in a very specific, theoretically informed way. The researcher looks for a series of theoretically predicted intermediate steps” (2008: 363). The end result is a middle-range theory. Bennett describes process-tracing as a method that involves “the examination of ‘diagnostic’ pieces of evidence within a case that contribute to supporting or overturning alternative explanatory hypotheses. A central concern is with sequences and mechanisms in the unfolding of hypothesized causal processes. The research looks for the observable implications of hypothesized explanations. . . . The goal is to establish whether the events or processes within the case fit those predicted by alternative explanations” (2010: 208).

Yet treating process-tracing as a singular method results in a large discrepancy between our prescriptions for good process-tracing (which rely on a relatively deductive variant of process-tracing) and what we do in practice (where many scholars want to use the method either to build theories or to account for particularly puzzling outcomes). The result of treating process-

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tracing as one method is a set of murky methodological guidelines, along with confused students and practitioners.

2.2. The Three Different Uses of Process-Tracing Methods

Process-tracing methods have three distinct research purposes. As illustrated in figure 2.1, distinctions exist among having the research goal of testing whether a causal mechanism is present in a case, building a theoretical mechanism, and crafting an explanation that accounts for a particular outcome. There is a clear bifurcation overall between theory-centric and case-centric process-tracing, reflecting a choice between building/testing (relatively) parsimonious causal mechanisms that can be generalized across a bounded context of cases and focusing on explaining particular outcomes through the pragmatic use of mechanistic explanations to account for the important aspects of the case.

In theory-testing process-tracing, a causal mechanism is hypothesized to be present in a population of cases of a phenomenon. The researcher selects a single case where both X and Y are present, and the context allows the mechanism to operate. Here the goal is to evaluate whether evidence shows that the hypothesized causal mechanism linking X and Y was present and that it functioned as theorized. The ambition is to go beyond correlations and associations between X and Y, opening up the black box of causality to study more directly the causal mechanism whereby X contributes to producing Y (see section 3.3).

Theory-building process-tracing involves building a theory about a causal mechanism between X and Y that can be generalized to a population of a given phenomenon, starting from a situation where we are in the dark regarding the mechanism.

Third, and most common in practice, is the situation where we want to explain a particularly puzzling historical outcome. Here the ambition is not the theory-centric one of building or testing a generalizable theorized mechanism; instead, the aim is to craft a sufficient explanation of the outcome. Instead of studying mechanisms that cause war (Y), the analysis would focus on explaining a particular outcome such as World War I.

The bifurcation into case- and theory-centric variants of process-tracing captures a core ontological and epistemological divide within the social sciences. On the theory-centric side are both neopositivist and critical realist positions, where the understanding is that the social world can be split

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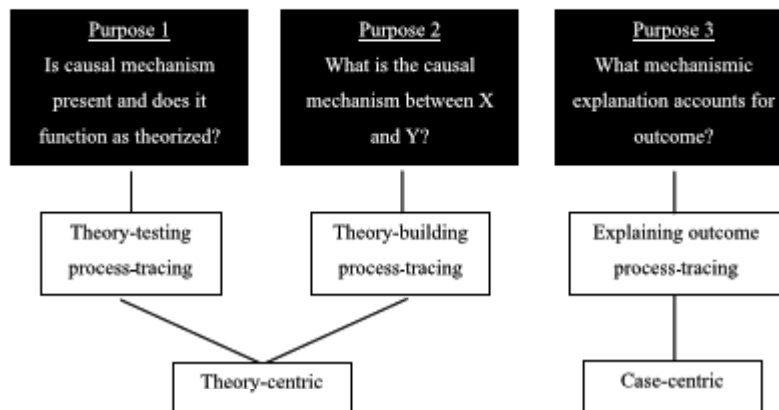


Fig. 2.1. Three different uses of process-tracing methods

into manageable parts that can be studied empirically (Jackson 2011). The ambition here is to build generalizable theories, irrespective of whether we have the more narrow ambition of working with midrange theories that are bound within specific contexts or the (perhaps unattainable) ambition to find law-like generalizations. As chapter 3 discusses, causal mechanisms in theory-centric studies are understood to be systematic factors, meaning that they can be generalized across cases that are within the context in which they are expected to operate (Falleti and Lynch 2009). Here, causal mechanisms are understood as relatively simple, parsimonious pathways whereby X contributes to producing Y, but they are not theorized as sufficient causes of Y by themselves.

Case-centric process-tracing methods operate with a different ontological understanding of the world. The philosophy of science offers many different paths to the case-centric position. One path is described by Jackson, who illustrates the difference between what he terms a dualistic ontology of mind-world relations where the world exists independent of its human observers and a monist ontology where “the objects of scientific investigation are not inert and meaningless entities that impress themselves on our (natural or augmented) senses or on our theory-informed awareness” (2011: 114). The monist ontology implies that instead of attempting what is perceived to be the mission impossible of building and testing law-like generalizations (theory-centric research), we should instead adopt a form of instrumentalism aimed at accounting for outcomes in particular cases.

Irrespective of the philosophical path to this position, case-centric re-

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searchers agree that the social world is very complex, multifactored, and extremely context-specific. This complexity makes the ambition of producing knowledge that can be generalized across many cases difficult, if not impossible. Instead, the ambition is to account for particularly puzzling outcomes.

Theories are used here in a much more pragmatic fashion—that is, as heuristic instruments that have analytical utility in providing the best possible explanation of a given phenomenon (Peirce 1955). Case-centric research scholars contend that it makes little sense to distinguish between systematic and case-specific parts, given the impossibility of generalization in the complex social world. Further, theories that are developed are much more eclectic, often including conglomerates of different mechanisms along with more case-specific mechanisms.

The ambition is not to prove that a theory is correct but instead to prove that it has utility in providing the best possible explanation. Explanations are case-specific and cannot be detached from the particular case (Humphreys 2010: 269–70) (see chapter 5).

2.3. The Three Variants of Process-Tracing

What are the core elements of each of the three variants of process-tracing? A number of commonalities exist across the three variants. For example, all variants share the goal of studying causal mechanisms. Ontological assumptions about the nature of causal relationships are also shared. These include the use of deterministic theorization and a mechanistic understanding of causation that focuses on the process whereby causal forces are transmitted through a series of interlocking parts of a mechanism to produce an outcome (see chapter 3). The three variants of process-tracing share a theoretical understanding of mechanisms as invariant; they are either present or not (see chapter 4). In addition, all three methods draw on a Bayesian logic of inference to make within-case inferences about the presence/absence of causal mechanisms (see chapter 5).

What differentiates the three variants is

- whether they are *theory-centric* or *case-centric* designs
- aim to *test* or *build* theorized causal mechanisms
- their understanding of the *generality of causal mechanisms* (from systematic mechanisms expected to be present in a set of cases [population] to case-specific mechanisms)

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- the types of inferences being made, where theory-testing or -building variants make inferences about the *presence/absence* of a mechanism, whereas explaining-outcome process-tracing enables inferences about the *sufficiency* of the explanation to be made.

We now turn to a presentation of what each variant is actually tracing, illustrating a typical research process for each variant.

Theory-Testing Process-Tracing

In theory-testing process-tracing, we know both X and Y and we either have existing conjectures about a plausible mechanism or are able to use logical reasoning to formulate a causal mechanism from existing theorization.

Figure 2.2 illustrates a simple abstract example of a theory-testing case study. The first step in testing whether a hypothesized causal mechanism was present in the case is to conceptualize a causal mechanism between X and Y based on existing theorization along with making explicit the context within which it functions. In this example, a two-part mechanism between X and Y is deduced, with each part composed of entities engaging in activities. This theorized causal mechanism then needs to be operationalized (step 2), translating theoretical expectations into case-specific predictions of what observable manifestations each of the parts of the mechanism should have if the mechanism is present in the case. In practice, theory-testing has inductive elements, especially regarding the operationalization of empirical tests, where we draw on existing empirical work to make case-specific empirical predictions about what evidence we should see if the theory is valid (see chapter 6).

Once the mechanism and context are conceptualized and operationalized, the analyst proceeds to step 3, where she collects empirical evidence that can be used to make causal inferences, updating our confidence in (1) whether the hypothesized mechanism was present in the case and (2) whether the mechanism functioned as predicted or only some parts of the mechanism were present. The bold lines in figure 2.2 illustrate the inferences made in theory-testing process-tracing, where we infer from the empirical evidence collected that a causal mechanism was present in the case.

The empirical analysis in step 3 proceeds stepwise, testing whether evidence indicates that each part of the mechanism was present. Most important, the evidence necessary to test whether the different parts are present can be very different, making evidence for the parts noncomparable with each other. Therefore, a case study usually does not read like an analytical

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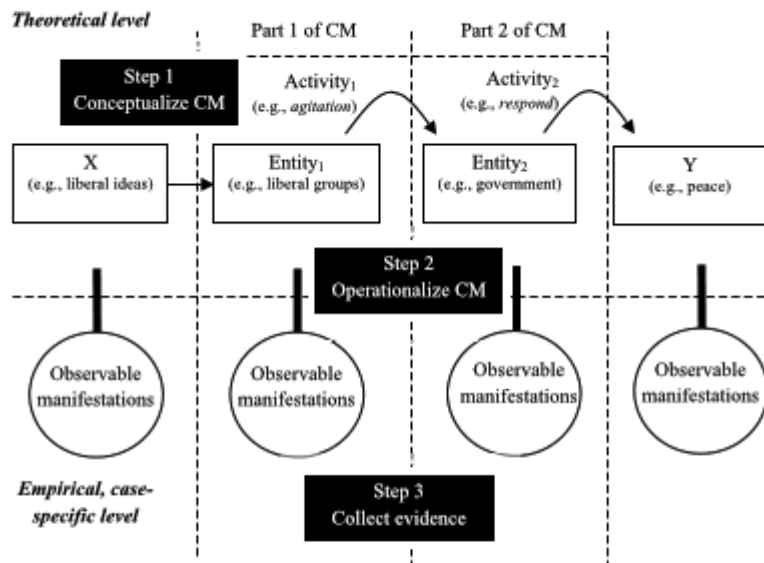


Fig. 2.2. Theory-testing process-tracing

narrative, in that while evidence in the form of events can be an observable manifestation of one part of a causal mechanism (depending on the type of observable implications that are predicted), other types of evidence, such as pattern evidence (e.g., the number of documents produced by different agencies) can be equally relevant (see section 3.3.).

What, then, are we actually tracing when we engage in theory-testing process-tracing? What is being traced is not a series of empirical events or narratives but instead the underlying theorized causal mechanism itself, by observing whether the expected case-specific implications of its existence are present in a case (see chapter 3).

Theory-testing process-tracing enables inferences to be made about whether a causal mechanism was present in a single case along with whether the mechanism functioned as expected. However, theory-testing process-tracing does not enable us to test the relative explanatory power of competing mechanisms against each other except in the rare situation where two competing mechanisms can be conceptualized so that they are composed of the same number of diametrically opposite parts with observable implications that rule each other out (see chapter 5). Further, given that we can make inferences only about whether a mechanism was present in the single

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case, no claims about the necessity of the mechanism can be logically made. To do so requires cross-case analysis (see chapter 8).

Theory-Building Process-Tracing

The second identifiable variant of process-tracing also has theoretical ambitions beyond the confines of the single case. In its purest form, theory-building process-tracing starts with empirical material and uses a structured analysis of this material to detect a plausible hypothetical causal mechanism whereby X is linked with Y. While it is mentioned as a possibility in the literature, this inductive, theory-building variant of process-tracing is surprisingly neglected. To our knowledge, the literature contains no attempts to show how it is done in practice.

Theory-building process-tracing is utilized in two different research situations: (1) when we know that a correlation exists between X and Y but we are in the dark regarding potential mechanisms linking the two (X-Y-centric theory building) as we have no theory to guide us; or (2) when we know an outcome (Y) but are unsure about the causes (Y-centric theory building). In the second instance, the analysis first traces backward from Y to uncover a plausible X, turning the study into an X-Y-centric analysis.

What is also being traced here is a theoretical causal mechanism that is expected to be present across a population of cases (i.e., it is a systematic mechanism). The core difference between theory-testing and -building process-tracing involves theory before fact versus fact before theory. In theory-building process-tracing, empirical material is used to build a hypothesized theory, inferring first that what is found reflects the observable implications of an underlying causal mechanism. A second leap is then made by inferring from these observable implications that they reflected an underlying causal mechanism. However, both variants share a focus on tracing a generalizable causal mechanism by detecting its empirical manifestations.

While theory-building process-tracing as an inductive method has some elements that overlap with explaining-outcome process-tracing, the key difference between the two is that theory-building process-tracing seeks to build a midrange theory describing a causal mechanism that is generalizable outside of the individual case to a bounded context (e.g., spatially or temporally bounded), whereas explaining-outcome process-tracing focuses on building a minimally sufficient explanation of the outcome in an individual case. Theory-building process-tracing studies do not claim that the detected causal mechanism is sufficient to explain the outcome.

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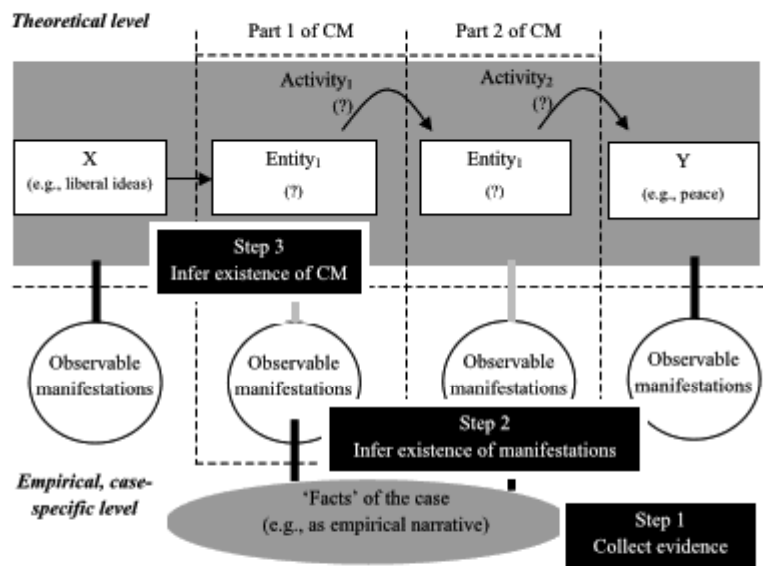


Fig. 2.3. Theory-building process-tracing. (Bold lines = direct inferences; shaded lines = indirect (secondary) inferences; shaded area = what is being traced.)

Figure 2.3 illustrates the basic framework of a theory-building process-tracing case study. After the key theoretical concepts (X and Y) are defined, theory-building proceeds to investigate the empirical material in the case (step 1), using evidence as clues about the possible empirical manifestations of an underlying causal mechanism between X and Y that fulfills the guidelines for a properly conceptualized causal mechanism (see chapters 3 and 5). This process involves an intensive and wide-ranging search of the empirical record.

Step 2 involves inferring from the observable empirical evidence that these manifestations reflect an underlying causal mechanism that was present in the case. Evidence does not speak for itself. Theory-building often has a deductive element in that scholars seek inspiration from existing theoretical work and previous observations. For example, an analyst investigating socialization of administrative officials within international organizations could seek inspiration in theories of domestic public administration or in psychological theories of small group dynamics while also reading more descriptive accounts of the workings of international organizations for plau-

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sible causal mechanisms. Here, existing theory can be conceived as a form of grid to detect systematic patterns in empirical material, enabling inferences about observable manifestations. In other situations, the search for mechanisms is based on hunches drawn from puzzles that are unresolved by existing work. In step 3, the secondary leap is made from observable manifestations to infer that they reflect an underlying causal mechanism.

Figure 2.3 illustrates that theory-building process-tracing is examining an underlying theoretical causal mechanism, depicted as the shaded area that forms the backdrop of the theoretical level (X, causal mechanism, Y). In contrast to theory-testing process building, the empirical analysis itself, understood as the collection of the “facts” of the case, is two inferential leaps removed from the theorized causal mechanism (i.e., the inferences are indirect). This is illustrated by the bold lines linking the “facts” with observable manifestations (direct inferences) and the subsequent secondary inferential leap from these observable implications to the inference that parts of an underlying causal mechanism existed.

In reality, theory-building process-tracing is usually an iterative and creative process. Hunches about what to look for that are inspired by existing theoretical and empirical work are investigated systematically, with the results of this search forming the background for further searches. This means that steps 1 and 2 are often repeated before step 3 is reached.

Explaining-Outcome Process-Tracing

The goal of many (if not most) process-tracing studies is to explain a particular interesting and puzzling outcome. While existing prescriptions for process-tracing speak almost exclusively about what we understand as the theory-centric variants, what most scholars are actually using is explaining-outcome process-tracing.

This type of process-tracing can be thought of as a single-outcome study, defined as seeking the causes of a specific outcome in a single case (Gerring 2006).¹ Here the ambition is to craft a minimally sufficient explanation of a particular outcome, with sufficiency defined as an explanation that accounts for all of the important aspects of an outcome with no redundant parts being present (Mackie 1965). This approach marks a significant departure from the two theory-centric variants. For example, in theory-testing process-tracing, no claims are made about whether the mechanism is sufficient; rather, inferences are made only about whether the postulated mechanism is present or absent in the single case.

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While explaining-outcome process-tracing studies sometimes more closely resemble historical scholarship, this type of process-tracing is in our opinion still social science research, as the ultimate explanation usually involves more generalized theoretical claims than historians feel comfortable with. In addition, explaining-outcome studies often have theoretical ambitions that reach beyond the single case.

It is vital to note that the term *causal mechanism* is used in a much broader sense in explaining-outcome process-tracing than in the two theory-centric variants. First, whereas theory-testing and -building variants of process-tracing aim to test/build mechanisms that are applicable across a range of cases, crafting a minimally sufficient explanation almost always requires combining mechanisms into an eclectic conglomerate mechanism to account for a historical outcome (see chapter 3). Second, given that the ambition is case-centric and seeks to craft a minimally sufficient explanation of a particular outcome, it is usually necessary to include nonsystematic parts in the causal mechanism, defined as a mechanism that is case-specific.

Explaining-outcome process-tracing is an iterative research strategy that aims to trace the complex conglomerate of systematic and case-specific causal mechanisms that produced the outcome in question. The explanation cannot be detached from the particular case. Theorized mechanisms are therefore seen as heuristic instruments whose function is to help build the best possible explanation of a particular outcome (Humphreys 2010; Jackson 2011).

While explaining-outcome process-tracing as an iterative strategy most closely resembles abduction, which is a dialectic combination of deduction and induction (Peirce 1955), for our purposes it is more helpful to disaggregate two alternative paths that can be chosen when building the best possible explanation of an outcome—deductive and inductive paths, as shown in figure 2.4. This figure does not split the mechanism into parts, as the previous figures do, because of the complexity of a pictorial depiction of the parts of an overlapping, conglomerate mechanism.

The deductive path follows the steps described previously under theory-testing, where an existing mechanism is tested to see whether it can account for the outcome. This process is illustrated using black arrows for each of the three steps. The first arrow is where a theory is conceptualized as a mechanism. In the second step, empirical tests are developed that are then evaluated against the empirical record. Finally, the third arrow illustrates the stage where the analyst assesses whether a sufficient explanation has been crafted.

However, in most explaining-outcome studies, existing theorization cannot provide a sufficient explanation, resulting in a second stage of research

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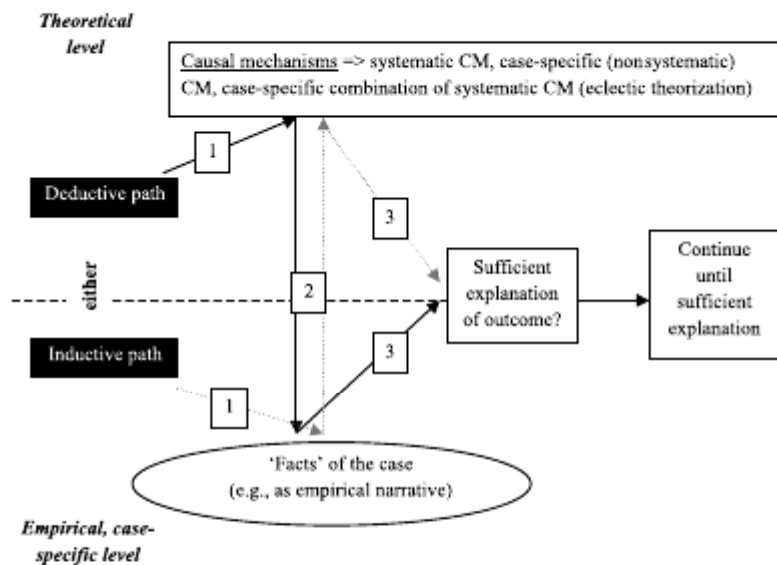


Fig. 2.4. Explaining-outcome process-tracing

where either a deductive or inductive path can be chosen, informed by the results of the first empirical analysis. If the deductive path is chosen again, alternative theories must be tested to see whether they provide a sufficient explanation. Alternatively, the inductive path can be chosen in the second iteration, using empirical evidence to build a better explanation.

The inductive path is often used when we are examining a little-studied outcome. This path is depicted in figure 2.4 as gray arrows, starting from the empirical level. Here, the analyst can proceed in a manner more analogous with historical methodology or classic detective work (Roberts 1996)—for example, working backward from the outcome by sifting through the evidence in an attempt to uncover a plausible sufficient causal mechanism that produced the outcome. This is a bottom-up type of analysis, using empirical material as the basis for building a plausible explanation of causal mechanisms whereby X (or multiple Xs) produced the outcome.

The important question is then when should we stop this process—that is, How do we know a minimally sufficient explanation when we see it? There is no foolproof answer to this question; instead, the decision that we have a minimally sufficient explanation is based on an assessment of whether all of the relevant facets of the outcome have been accounted for adequately

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while ensuring that the evidence is best explained by the developed explanation instead of plausible alternative explanations. This is an iterative process where we update the model until it provides what can be thought of as the best possible explanation (Day and Kincaid 1994). We can never confirm a theory with 100 percent certainty; instead, we stop when we are satisfied that the found explanation accounts for the most important aspects of the outcome (see chapter 5).

2.4. Conclusions: A New Understanding of Process-Tracing

We need to differentiate process-tracing methods into three distinct variants to bring alignment between what we practice and what we preach. Common to all three variants is the ambition to trace causal mechanisms, although

TABLE 2.1. Summary of the Main Differences between the Three Variants of Process-Tracing

	Theory-Testing	Theory-Building	Explaining-Outcome
Purpose of analysis—research situation	<i>Situation one</i> Correlation has been found between X and Y, but is there evidence that there exists a causal mechanism linking X and Y?	<i>Situation two</i> Build a plausible causal mechanism linking X:Y based on evidence in case	<i>Situation three</i> Explain particularly puzzling historical outcome by building minimally sufficient explanation in case study
Ambitions of study	Theory-centric	Theory-centric	Case-centric
Understanding of causal mechanisms	Systematic (generalizable within context)	Systematic (generalizable within context)	Systematic, nonsystematic (case-specific) mechanisms and case-specific conglomerates
What are we actually tracing?	Single, generalizable mechanism	Single, generalizable mechanism	Case-specific, composite mechanism that explains the case
Types of inferences made	(1) Parts of causal mechanism present/absent (2) Causal mechanism is present/absent in case	Observable manifestations reflect underlying mechanism	Minimal sufficiency of explanation

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the term *causal mechanism* as used in theory-testing and theory-building variants refers to relatively parsimonious mechanisms that are generalizable to a bounded population of cases, whereas in explaining-outcome process-tracing, mechanisms refer to systematic mechanisms, case-specific, non-systematic mechanisms (events leading to an outcome), and eclectic case-specific conglomerates of different mechanisms.

Table 2.1 summarizes the main points of difference across the three variants of process-tracing. There are three different purposes of process-tracing methods: (1) testing whether a generalizable causal mechanism exists in a case and functions as expected; (2) building a generalizable mechanism from evidence in a case; and (3) explaining a particular outcome. The methods differ regarding whether they are theory- or case-centric, along with what they are actually tracing and the types of inferences they enable.

The rest of this book addresses the commonalities and differences across the three variants of process-tracing with regard to their ontological and epistemological foundations (chapter 3), the practical guidelines for each stage of the research process from working with theories (chapter 4), and the types of inferences being made (chapter 5). The book also explores developing empirical tests (chapter 6), working with evidence (chapter 7), and answering questions of case selection and nesting case studies in broader, mixed-method research designs (chapter 8).

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