QCA Background

QCA's home base is *comparative sociology/comparative politics*, where there is a strong tradition of case-oriented work alongside an extensive and growing body of quantitative cross-national research.

The case-oriented tradition is much older and is populated largely by *area and country experts*. In contrast to the situation of qualitative researchers in most social scientific subdisciplines, these case oriented researchers have *high status,* primarily because their case knowledge is useful to the state (e.g., in its effort to maintain or enhance national security) and other corporate actors.

Case-oriented researchers are often critical of quantitative cross-national researchers for ignoring the gap between the results of quantitative research and what is known about specific cases. They also have little interest in the abstract, high-level concepts that often characterize this type of research and the wide analytic gulf separating these concepts from case-level events and processes.

QCA, plain and simple, attempts to bridge these two worlds. This attempt has spawned methodological tools which are useful for social scientists in general.

Four (relatively abstract) answers to the question, "What is QCA?"

1. QCA is a method that bridges qualitative and quantitative analysis:

Most aspects of QCA require **familiarity with cases**, which in turn demands in-depth knowledge. At the same time, QCA is capable of pinpointing decisive cross-case patterns, the usual domain of quantitative analysis. QCA's examination of cross-case patterns respects the **diversity** of cases and their **heterogeneity** with regard to their different causally relevant conditions and contexts by comparing cases as configurations.

2. QCA provides powerful tools for the analysis of causal complexity:

With QCA, it is possible to study "**INUS**" conditions—causal conditions that are insufficient but necessary parts of causal recipes which are themselves unnecessary but sufficient. In other words, using QCA it is possible to assess causation that is very complex, involving **different combinations of causal conditions** capable of generating the same outcome. This emphasis contrasts strongly with the "net effects" thinking that dominates conventional quantitative social science. QCA also facilitates a form of counterfactual analysis that is grounded in case-oriented research practices.

3. QCA is ideal for small-to-intermediate-N research designs:

QCA can be usefully applied to research designs involving small and intermediate-size *N*s (e.g., 5-50). In this range, there are often **too many cases** for researchers to keep all the case knowledge "in their heads," but **too few cases** for most conventional statistical techniques.

4. QCA brings set-theoretic methods to social inquiry:

QCA is grounded in the analysis of set relations, not correlations. Because **social theory is largely verbal** and verbal formulations are largely set theoretic in nature, QCA provides a closer link to theory than is possible using conventional quantitative methods. (Most conventional quantitative methods simply parse matrices of bivariate correlations.) Note also that important causal relations, **necessity and sufficiency**, are indicated when certain set relations exist: With necessity, the outcome is a subset of the causal condition; with sufficiency, the causal condition is a subset of the outcome. With INUS conditions, cases with a specific combination of causal conditions form a subset of the cases with the outcome. Only set theoretical methods are well suited for the analysis of causal complexity.