Advances in qualitative methods and recent developments in the philosophy of science have led to an emphasis on explanation via reference to causal mechanisms. This book argues that the method known as process tracing is particularly well suited to developing and assessing theories about such mechanisms. The editors begin by establishing a philosophical basis for process tracing – one that captures mainstream uses while simultaneously being open to applications by interpretive scholars. Equally important, they go on to establish best practices for individual process-tracing accounts – how micro to go, when to start (and stop), and how to deal with the problem of equiﬁnality. The contributors then explore the application of process tracing across a range of subﬁelds and theories in political science. This is an applied methods book which seeks to shrink the gap between the broad assertion that “process tracing is good” and the precise claim “this is an instance of good process tracing.”

Andrew Bennett is Professor of Government at Georgetown University. He is also President of the Consortium on Qualitative Research Methods, which sponsors the annual Institute on Qualitative and Multi-Method Research at Syracuse University. He is the co-author, with Alexander L. George, of Case Studies and Theory Development (2005), which won the Giovanni Sartori Prize in 2005 for the best book on qualitative methods.

Jeffrey T. Checkel is Professor of International Studies and Simons Chair in International Law and Human Security at Simon Fraser University. He is also a Global Research Fellow at the Peace Research Institute Oslo. He has published extensively in leading European and North American journals, and is the author of Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War (1997), editor of International Institutions and Socialization in Europe (Cambridge University Press, 2007), co-editor (with Peter J. Katzenstein) of European Identity (Cambridge University Press, 2009), and editor of Transnational Dynamics of Civil War (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
Strategies for Social Inquiry

Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool

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Process Tracing

From Metaphor to Analytic Tool

Edited by

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When the editors of the Strategies for Social Inquiry Series at Cambridge University Press first approached us to write a book on process tracing, our response was “yes, but . . .” That is, we absolutely agreed there was a need for such a book, but, at the same time, we were leery – hence that “but” – of writing a standard methods text. Of course, process tracing is a method, so there was no getting around writing a methodology book.

Yet, from our own experience – be it working with Ph.D. students, reviewing manuscripts and journal articles, or giving seminars – we sensed a need, indeed a hunger, for a slightly different book, one that showed, in a grounded, operational way, how to do process tracing well. After discussions (and negotiations!) with the series editors, the result is the volume before you. We view it as an applied methods book, where the aim is to show how process tracing works in practice, using and critiquing prominent research examples from several subfields and research programs within political science. If the last fifteen years have seen the publication of key texts setting the state of the art for case studies, then our volume is a logical follow-on, providing clear guidance for what is perhaps the central within-case method – process tracing.

All chapters have been through numerous rounds of revision. The broad outlines of Chapter 1 were first presented to the Research Group on Qualitative and Multi-Method Analysis, Syracuse University, in June 2010, where we received critical but constructive feedback from some of the sharpest methodological minds in the business. A fully revised version of the first chapter together with drafts of most of the others were then critiqued at a workshop held at Georgetown University in March 2012. During this meeting, Peter Hall and Jack Snyder – in their role as “über-discussants” – gave indispensable help, assessing the project as a whole, but also providing trenchant criticisms and constructive suggestions on individual chapters. At this same workshop, we also received valuable feedback from Colin Elman and the Georgetown scholarly community, especially Kate McNamara and
Dan Nexon. In the summer of 2012, three anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press evaluated key parts of the manuscript. Their comments were invaluable in helping us (re)frame the project, but also – and more specifically – in pushing us to rethink and justify key arguments we lay out in the opening chapter.

We owe thanks to many people and institutions, with the most important intellectual debt to our authors. Throughout, they rose to our challenge – “to make process tracing real!” – while diligently responding to multiple rounds of requests for changes and improvements in their chapters and providing insightful feedback on our own. For helpful comments on various parts of the manuscript, we thank – in addition to those already named – Derek Beach, Aaron Boesenecker, Jim Caporaso, Marty Finnemore, Lise Howard, Macartan Humphreys, and Ingo Rohlfing, as well as seminar audiences at the Freie Universität Berlin, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In addition, we received excellent feedback from what is perhaps our main target audience – Ph.D. students – in courses and workshops at Georgetown University, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research, Syracuse University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Research School on Peace and Conflict, Peace Research Institute Oslo, and the Oslo Summer School in Comparative Social Science Studies.

The academic editors of the series – Colin Elman, John Gerring, and Jim Mahoney – are owed a special thank you. From the beginning, they pushed us to produce the best possible book. We often agreed with their criticisms; when we did not, their help made us more aware about our central aim.

Checkel also thanks the Kolleg-Forschergruppe “The Transformative Power of Europe,” Freie Universität Berlin and its directors – Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse – for providing a stimulating and collegial setting during the book’s final write-up.

Last and certainly not least, we owe a debt of gratitude to Damian Penfold, who carefully – and cheerfully – copy-edited and formatted the entire initial manuscript, and to Barbara Salmon for preparation of the index. At Cambridge University Press, we thank John Haslam for organizing an efficient and rigorous review process, and Carrie Parkinson and Ed Robinson for overseeing the production of the book.

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University, and by the School of Foreign Service and Mortara Center, both at Georgetown University.

One issue that can arise for readers who seek to interpret any co-authored text is the division of labor among the authors or editors. This book was a joint effort from the start, with equal contributions from the two editors. Bennett wrote the first draft of Chapter 1, while Checkel did the same for Chapter 10, and we each revised the other’s draft, so the results are truly collaborative. In addition, both editors provided feedback to each of the contributing authors. It is thus not fair to list one editor’s name first, but we have followed alphabetical convention in doing so to avoid any impression that our partnership was unequal, and we have listed the authorship of our co-authored chapters to reflect which of us wrote the first draft of each.

The two of us each have a special relation to rock. If one—Bennett—relishes the challenge of climbing straight up cliffs and rock faces around North America, the other—Checkel—enjoys the thrill of climbing iced-up rock ridges at 4,200 meters in the Swiss Alps. For all their differences, these passions are united by a common thread. It is called a rope—or, for Checkel, a Seil—and, without it, we are in grave peril. After four intense years working on this project, we are happy to report that neither of us dreams of secretly cutting the other’s rope. In fact, it is the opposite. We now better appreciate the intellectual core of that rope we have never shared when climbing—a joint commitment to empirically rich, rigorous, but pluralistic knowledge production. It is our hope that this book contributes to that goal.

AB and JTC
Washington, DC and Vancouver