METHODOLOGICAL PRACTICES IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH

EDITED BY DONATELLA DELLA PORTA
Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research
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Donatella della Porta
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A couple of years ago, while walking in the Berliner Gruenewald with a former PhD student I had mentored (now a teacher herself), she told me: “You know, we were talking the other day with two others of your former PhD students about what we have in common, we ‘ddps,’ and we thought, it is the attention to the method.”

It may be that they were right: certainly, this book reflects the methodological awareness that we have long cultivated in the research groups with which I have worked, first at the University of Florence and then at the European University Institute. In a long series of research on social movements of the most different types, I have in fact experimented with most of the empirical techniques available, adopting and adapting from various disciplines and perspectives. In particular, during the Democracy in Europe and the Mobilization of the Society (Demos) project financed under the FP6 program, we devised specific forms of surveys, frame analysis, web-analysis, focus groups, and participant observation. In my ongoing project on Mobilizing for Democracy, financed by an Advanced Scholars’ Grant from the European Research Council, I am using comparative historical analysis, process tracing, oral history, and archival research, as well as protest event analysis and qualitative comparative analysis. I have used in-depth interviews, including life histories, and network analysis, among other methods, in research on political violence. On methods and methodological approaches I have in fact reported in two volumes (Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Approach, Cambridge University Press, edited with Michael Keating; and L’intervista qualitativa, Laterza, from which I take inspiration also in the present one. Besides my personal experience with a broad array of quantitative and qualitative techniques, I have had the good fortune to supervise about 65 empirical PhD theses and to mentor the empirical work of a couple of dozen post-doctoral fellows, learning from them at least as much as they learned from me.

These experiences and human resources now converge around the Centre on Social Movement Studies (COSMOS), which I direct at the European University Institute in Florence, and to which most of the authors of the various contributions belong. Focusing on social movements as part of broader contentious politics, the center gathers about 30 PhD students and 12 post-doctoral Fellows in residence, plus about as many former PhD students and post-doctoral fellows, to promote theoretically driven empirical analyses on forms, dimensions, causes, and impacts of social movements, in established democracies as well as authoritarian regimes. With members...
coming from everywhere in Europe and beyond, the center is a rich and pluralist environment for broad debate on empirical and theoretical matters. Including members with different disciplinary backgrounds—sociology and political science, but also anthropology, political theory, geography, urban studies, gender studies, law, philosophy, and history—Cosmos is also a stimulating arena for methodological reflections.

In this rich environment, some contingencies supported the planning and writing of this volume. In fact, to improve its didactical quality, we have used the complete volume draft in two teaching enterprises. First, the draft chapters were presented to the Cosmos community during a seminar organized in April 2013. Second, in September of the same year, improved drafts were used for teaching an ECPR–Cosmos Summer School at the EUI. I am grateful to the participants in both events for their comments and suggestions, to the two anonymous reviewers, and to Dominic Byatt at Oxford University Press, for very useful and constructive comments. I am also grateful to the European Research Council, which generously supported me in this enterprise through an Advanced Scholars’ Grant.

As always, Sarah Tarrow has provided invaluable assistance in preparing this manuscript for publication.
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Social Movement Studies have grown enormously in the past few decades, spreading from sociology and political science to other fields of knowledge as varied as geography, history, anthropology, psychology, economics, law, and others. With the increasing interest in the field, there has also been an increasing need for methodological guidance for empirical research. This volume aims to address this need by introducing the main methods of data collection and data analysis as they have been used in past research on social movements. The focus is on the how-to-do-it, rather than, for example, on reviewing existing research using specific methods. Each chapter of *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research* presents specific discussions on the main steps of research using a certain method: from research design to data collection and the use of the information. In this, dilemmas and trade-offs are presented, illustrated mainly by materials from the authors’ own research.

This chapter introduces the main methodological trends in social movement studies. It suggests that some of its main characteristics as a field of knowledge favored the development of methodological pluralism, with a dialogue between different epistemological approaches and frequent triangulations of methods. It then discusses the main methodological steps in research design that will be addressed in the presentation of each method. Finally, it introduces the structure of the book.

**Social Movement Studies as a Pluralist Field**

Research on social movements has used very different methods, bridging qualitative and quantitative methodologies. While there has been criticism
and self-criticism related to the planning and implementation of specific methods (from case studies to protest event analysis), no methodological war is recorded.

Methodological pluralism seems indeed to dominate the field (on methodological pluralism, see della Porta and Keating 2008b). While a narrative that is widespread in several subfields in the social sciences tends to present a Manichean picture, pitting positivist versus interpretivist (hermeneutic) views at the epistemological level, or contrasting ontological assumptions about the existence of a real world, social movement scholars tend to develop more nuanced views. Even researchers driven by more neo-positivistic assumptions have recognized the importance of the construction of concepts, and constructivists have not predicated abandoning the search for inter-subjective knowledge. Most research has indeed combined attention to structures and perceptions (e.g., political opportunities and the framing thereof) as intimately linked. Similarly, most research in the field has combined some skepticism about the capacity to discover general laws with a desire to go beyond a-theoretical case studies. An inclusive view has indeed brought about cross-fertilization and a certain capacity to build up common knowledge. Inductive and deductive approaches have mostly been combined in this process, as have qualitative and quantitative methodologies, recognizing that “two styles of works do place differing emphasis on the understanding of specific historical or ethnographic cases as opposed to general laws of social interaction. But the two styles also imply one another. Every analysis of a case rests, explicitly or implicitly, on some general laws, and every general law supposes that the investigation of particular cases would show that law at work” (Becker 1996, 53–4). Mixed-method strategies, with a triangulation of different methods, have been widely practiced. And, while few social movement scholars seem to believe either in the neutrality of science or in its subjection to political aims, the degree of political commitment promoted in scientific work has varied on a continuum, with interesting normative and ethical debates. In fact, as this volume shows, social movement studies have been very pragmatic in the use of all techniques potentially available for data collection and data analysis. So, the “absence of methodological dogmatism” (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002a, xii) has been praised as a beneficial characteristic of the field of social movement studies, as “a full range of methods has been fruitfully applied in the study of social movements” (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002a; see also 2002b).

This pluralist attitude might have various explanations. First, given the lack of reliable databases (as one may find, for instance, for studies on elections or on social stratification), social movement scholars need to invest in data collection through various techniques. Existing surveys on the entire
population are of little help for investigations of active minorities, and social movement organizations rarely keep archives, or even lists of participants. Importing and adapting methods of data gathering and data analysis from other fields, as well as inventing new ones, appears therefore as a necessity for challenging empirical analysis.

Second, it has often been observed that social movement scholars have tended to focus attention on social movements to which they are themselves sympathetic. In fact, “To a much greater degree than in related areas, like voting or interest groups’ behavior, social movement scholars knew and shared the concerns of those they studied” (Klandermans, Staggenborg, and Tarrow 2002, 318). This has often brought about a normative urgency towards a knowledge oriented towards not only scientific theorization, but also towards societal intervention. Together with demands from the field, suggestions also came for co-research planned together with the object of the study, and related methodological reflections (e.g., Touraine 1981).

Third, problem-oriented, rather than method-oriented, social movement studies have been open to different research techniques. As in other fields of studies endowed with similar characteristics (such as, e.g gender studies or queer studies), social movement studies have been very pragmatic about the means through which to collect that knowledge. Theoretical disputes and innovations have not developed into methodological wars, but rather have “encouraged scholars to use a variety of methods, build on one another’s research findings and constructively criticize each other’s theoretical perspective” (Klandermans, Staggenborg, and Tarrow 2002, 315).

Fourth, social movement studies have also been quite eclectic in theoretical terms. As they emerged through the bridging of different disciplinary approaches—from symbolic interactionism to organizational sociology, from sociological theory to political science—they have constructed their toolkit of concepts and hypotheses by combination and cross-fertilization. This has made them more open in methodological terms too, as social movement scholars became acquainted not only with a variety of disciplinary approaches, but also with the methodological practices that had been widespread within them. In fact, a main basis for the success of social movement studies in terms of capacity to expand and reputation for sound research has been singled out in “its characteristic openness to criticism and new approaches, but only in so far as this has been accompanied by a readiness to put new ideas to the empirical test” (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002a, ix).

Fifth, given an emphasis on middle-range theory, rather than the search for grand theory or mere empiricism (Klandermans, Staggenborg, and Tarrow 2002, 317), interdisciplinary cross-fertilization has contributed to these methodological innovations. In fact, the infusion of multiple inputs from various disciplines and new trends within them (from history from below
to gender studies) has enriched the field from the theoretical and methodological perspectives. While controversies have existed, and taken sometimes harsh tones, they have rarely developed into incommunicability; rather, they have been beneficial in “exposing weaknesses in the field and directing scholars to clarify ideas, develop new evidences, and adjust concepts and propositions” (Klandermans, Staggenborg, and Tarrow 2002, 320).

While these developments have been overall positive, by-and-large avoiding methodological wars and contributing instead to reciprocal enrichment, there are some shortcomings. First and foremost, there has been little methodological reflection. Problem-oriented rather than method-oriented, social movement studies have occasionally discussed the advances and limits of specific techniques (such as protest event analysis, e.g., Koopmans and Rucht 2002; surveys at demonstrations, e.g., Fillieule and Blanchard 2008; or network analysis, Diani 2002), but rarely engaged in broader methodological debates. Methodological pluralism seemed to emerge naturally, rather than as a conscious choice. New methods have entered the field through a process of stratification, rather than critical engagement vis-à-vis the old.

Notwithstanding the exponential growth of the discipline, there have in fact been only two efforts to put together methodological introductions: Studying Social Movements, edited by Mario Diani and Ron Eyerman in 1992, and Methods of Social Movement Research, edited by Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg ten years afterwards. No in-depth discussion of methodological practices is provided in any of the general introductions to social movements (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Snow, Kriesi, and Soule 2004; della Porta and Diani 2006; Staggenborg 2011). The recent Encyclopedia of Political and Social Movements, edited by David Snow, Donatella della Porta, Bert Klandermans, and Doug McAdam (Snow, della Porta, Klandermans, and McAdam 2013), includes only short entries on some methods, and no methodological discussion is covered in the forthcoming Oxford Handbook of Social Movement Studies (della Porta and Diani forthcoming).

This volume aims to fill this gap at a moment when this seems most opportune, given the development of social movement studies well beyond sociology, political science, or history. In particular, recent waves of protest, such as the global justice movement of the beginning of the millennium and the anti-austerity movements ten years later, have in fact attracted the attention of scholars from the most different disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, geography, economics, law, normative theory, and international relations. While this process is extremely positive, in that it introduces new ideas and perspectives, it also requires some shared basic knowledge, including on methodological issues. Moreover, as new generations of scholars enter the field with new interests and skills, spaces for cross-fertilization are all the more necessary.
Methods within Research Designs

In this volume, we aim to provide these basic resources by presenting a critical view of methodological practices in social movement research. For each chapter covering a specific method, we address all the important steps in its use within research.

Following a pluralist approach (della Porta and Keating 2008b and 2008c), we do not assume that there is a neat cleavage in the social sciences between consistent pillars involving ontological, epistemological, and methodological preferences. Rather, we observe that most methods have been used within various ontological and epistemological preferences. To give some examples, ethnographic methods have been adopted by those scholars who believe in observing reality, as well as by those who focus on social construction; life histories have been used to collect information on specific events, as well as to study memories; in-depth interviews and surveys have often been triangulated in an attempt to reduce specific bias.

At the same time, we believe that each method has specific strengths and weaknesses of which one needs to be aware when planning research. In other words, the fit between research questions and empirical instruments is of central importance for any successful project. Additionally, while all research methods need to be embedded in a research design where issues of theorization, conceptualization, case selection, and choices of methods are connected, these steps are addressed differently in research using different methods.

Let us start with the broad discussion on quantitative and qualitative methodologies, or large-n and small-n studies. Each method has to address the main steps in a research design, usually defined as “a plan that shows, through a discussion of our model and data, how we expect to use our evidence to make inferences” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 118). Main steps for all include:

- the selection of the problem;
- the theoretical references;
- the selection of cases;
- conceptualization;
- the choices of methods.

Some differences in the implementation of a research design are linked to the specific characteristic of some methods. In general, it has been observed that, while research using quantitative instruments needs to strictly separate these steps, when using qualitative methods the procedures are more flexible (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2). In research based upon quantitative methods, the very instruments for the empirical analysis are built upon the theoretical models, as concepts have to be operationalized into variables, and these
to be measured (della Porta and Keating 2008b; della Porta 2010). This also means that theories and concepts pre-exist the empirical analysis. In research using qualitative methods, instead the research problems are constructed in part during the empirical work, during which new concepts might emerge. Also, case selection tends to be random (or made using approximately random criteria) when using quantitative analysis, as the aim is for the sample to represent the universe. This is not the case when using qualitative methods, which aim instead to cover cases that are theoretically relevant. The lack of a standardized means for data gathering allows researchers using qualitative

### Table 1.1 Some Differences Between Designing Research When Using Quantitative versus Qualitative Methodologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Quantitative (large N)</th>
<th>Qualitative (small N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research strategy</td>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>Unstructured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format of research design</td>
<td>Rigid design</td>
<td>Emerging design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between theory/concepts</td>
<td>Confirmation</td>
<td>Emergence</td>
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<tr>
<td>and research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations between cases</td>
<td>Assumes independence</td>
<td>Looks at processes of interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection criteria</td>
<td>Statistical representativity</td>
<td>Substantive representativity—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>paradigmatic cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of concept</td>
<td>Operationalized</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection tool</td>
<td>Standard (same for all units of analysis)</td>
<td>Adapted (varies for each unit of analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregation of data</td>
<td>Variables (cases are anonymous)</td>
<td>Cases (with capital letter) and casing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1.2 Some Differences in Implementing Research Design When Using Quantitative versus Qualitative Methodologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the field:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations researcher/subject</td>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher stance in relation</td>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>Insider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to subject</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of data</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of data</td>
<td>Hard, reliable</td>
<td>Rich, deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of knowledge</td>
<td>Testing causal relations</td>
<td>Explaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures for data analysis</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Interpret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between dimensions</td>
<td>Causal/effects (external)</td>
<td>Mutual understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main focus</td>
<td>Causation</td>
<td>Classification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data presentation:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>Cross-tabulation and correlation index</td>
<td>Dense narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of knowledge</td>
<td>Generalizing</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation as</td>
<td>Statistical correlation</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Context-free</td>
<td>Context-bound</td>
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methods to adapt their instruments according to the empirical research. Finally, while the use of statistics for data analysis requires an assumption of the independence of units and variable-based analysis, qualitative analysis tends to see cases in a more holistic view.

Some differences between research using qualitative and quantitative methods also emerge during fieldwork. While contacts with the research object are more rare when using quantitative methodologies, they are instead intense in most qualitative analysis. And while quantitative analysis tends to separate sharply between the observer and the observed, some empathy is unavoidable when using qualitative analysis. The analysis of the results also tends to take on different nuances, being driven by a preference for numbers when using quantitative techniques, while qualitative techniques provide dense narratives—and are in fact more challenging from the point of view of a synthetic narrative. Hard data are contrasted with soft ones, systematic accounts with dense (Bryman 1988), even if “messy and unorganized.” Procedures for data analysis are in fact better codified and oriented to test causal relations in quantitative analyses than in qualitative ones, and considered stronger for discovering the meanings actors give to their actions.

These are, however, only general trends, as in reality research design and implementation tend to locate themselves on continua on each dimension, rather than being conceived in a polarized way. In what follows we pay attention to the specificities in the implementation of research designs through qualitative and quantitative methodologies, going even further in the discussion of several different quantitative and qualitative techniques. In fact, we show that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative could be misleading if it serves to hide the internal differences within each camp as well as the similarities and potential combinations. The opposition between qualitative and quantitative methods has created much tension in political science and sociology. As Mahoney and Goertz noted, “Comparing differences in qualitative and quantitative research in contemporary political science entails traversing sensitive ground. Scholars associated with either tradition tend to react defensively and in exaggerated ways to criticism or perceived mischaracterization of their assumptions, goals and practices. The possibilities for misunderstanding are manifold. Misunderstandings are enhanced by the fact that the labels quantitative and qualitative do a poor job capturing the real differences between the traditions” (Mahoney and Goertz 2006, 245). However, pitting the two camps as fighting each other on a battlefield is grossly misleading. In fact, while “in a very general sense, we can talk of a distinction between hard methods (usually based on a positivist epistemology and a belief in the reality of social concepts) and soft methods (relying more on interpretation). Yet matters are in practice a great deal more complicated, with different forms of information being suitable for different forms of analysis. There is scope for combining methods through triangulation, but,
in order to do this, we need to be clear of the assumptions that underlie each and to understand that they are not incompatible” (della Porta and Keating 2008c, 4).

This recognition of complementarity does not imply any attempt at building a unified social science, but rather aims to improve opportunities for cross-fertilization, based on knowledge of and respect for different traditions. This counters the idea that there is only one approach (and thus one paradigm) in the social sciences, a common ideal to which any actual quantitative and qualitative research should aim. In this direction, King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 6) provided the following definition of “scientific research” as applicable to both quantitative and qualitative research:

1. The goal is inference. Scientific research is designed to make descriptive or explanatory inferences on the bases of empirical information about the world.
2. The procedures are public. Scientific research uses explicit, codified, and public methods to generate and analyze data whose reliability can therefore be assessed.
3. The conclusions are uncertain.
4. The content is the method. . . . scientific research adheres to a set of rules of inference on which its validity depends.

These general rules, as applied in their methodological suggestions, tend, however, to propose the standards for quantitative analysis as universal, pointing at the de facto weaknesses of qualitative research to reach those standards and misrecognizing its many comparative strengths. In particular, the rich methodological debates in both qualitative and quantitative areas tend to remain confined within each field.

In this volume, we instead consider the social sciences as non-paradigmatic, assuming that “there never can be one hegemonic approach and set of standards, but that the social world is to be understood in multiple ways, each of which may be valid for specific purposes; or even that it is multiparadigmatic, with different paradigms either struggling against each other or ignoring each other.” In fact, we agree that “it is possible to encompass much of the field, not by imposing a single truth, but by setting certain standards of argumentation and debate while recognizing that there are differences in approaches and types of evidence. Although these do not inevitably constitute fundamentally different world views, they are not necessarily all compatible. Researchers need to be aware of the various approaches, the differences among them, and the extent to which they can be combined” (della Porta and Keating 2008b, 21).

This means challenging a vision in which each method necessarily belongs to a certain epistemological and ontological pillar, and instead presenting each method within the different conception to which it has contributed.
Competing approaches are often contrasted according to their *ontological* base, related to *what* we study, the object of investigation, with debates on the existence of a real and objective world; their *epistemological* base, related to the *how* we know things, with controversies on the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge; and a *methodological* base, which links preferences for specific technical instruments to broader theories of knowledge, and then techniques for data collection and data analysis (della Porta and Keating 2008b; see also Crotty 1998; Corbetta 2003; Silverman 2006). In this sense, it would be a simplification to assume that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods overlaps with that between positivist and interpretivist epistemologies: “Questions about methods do, however, come together with epistemology and theory in discussions about *methodology*, which refers to the way in which methods are used” (della Porta 2008; della Porta and Keating 2008b).

In fact, the argument that social sciences must have a consistent set of ontologies and epistemologies owes a lot to the natural sciences and a related conception of knowledge as consistent and cumulative. It is assumed in this analogy that science is about generating theories that reflect the material world as accurately as possible. In reality, however, the natural sciences have also gone on for long periods without agreement on some of the fundamental building blocks of knowledge (della Porta and Keating 2010).

It is therefore misleading to imagine neatly separated borders between ontology, epistemology, and methodology. In fact, “While a researcher may prefer to use one to the relative exclusion of the other, if the research problem invites a combined approach there is little to prevent such a strategy, other than the usual reasons of time, money and possibly inclination” (Bryman 1988, 107). Many empirical researchers hardly reflect on ontological implications or have elaborated epistemological views—rather, “Researchers were able to produce highly regarded ethnographic studies without recourse to the programmatic statements surrounding qualitative research” (Bryman 1988, 124). In general, we are not faced . . . with a stark choice between words and numbers, or even between precise and imprecise data; but rather with a range from more to less precise data. Furthermore, our decision about what level of precision is appropriate in relation to any particular claim should depend on the nature of what we are trying to describe, on the likely accuracy of our descriptions, on our purposes and on the resources available to us; not on ideological commitments to one methodological paradigm or another. (Hammersley 1992, 163)

In sum, this volume shares the assumption that:

The methodological question refers to the instruments and techniques we use to acquire knowledge. At one level, this is independent of the ontological and epistemological questions just discussed, since there are multiple ways of acquiring each type of knowledge. In practice, they tend to be linked, since positivistic social science
lends itself naturally to “hard” methods, seeking unambiguous data, concrete evidence and rules and regularities, while more interpretive approaches require “softer” methods allowing for ambiguity and contingency and recognizing the interplay between researcher and the object of research. (della Porta and Keating 2008b, 25–6)

The range of methodological debates is therefore broad, and endowed with several (not entirely overlapping) cleavages, as

Partisans articulate their positions with passion and intensity, yet the nature of what divides them is hard to pin down. At times we hear of a stand-off between “qualitative” scholars, who make use of archival research, ethnology, textual criticism, and discourse analysis and “quantitative” scholars, who deploy mathematics, game theory, and statistics. Scholars in the former tradition supposedly disdain the new, hyper-numerate approaches to political science as opaque and overly abstract, while scholars of the latter stripe deride the “old” ways of studying politics as impressionistic and lacking in rigor. At other times the schism is portrayed as being about the proper aspiration of the discipline—between those who believe that a scientific explanation of political life is possible, that we can derive something akin to physical laws of human behavior, and those who believe it is not. . . at still other times the rivals are portrayed as “rational choice theorists,” whose work is animated by the assumption that individuals are rational maximizers of self-interest (often economics, sometimes not) and those who allow for a richer range of human motivations. (Shapiro, Smith, and Masoud 2004, 1)

In sum, in social movement studies as in others, the opposite narratives that describe the social sciences either as institutionalizing towards a positivistic vision or as resisting it are both misleading (della Porta and Keating 2008a). Social science being a collective endeavor, it is instead important to facilitate communication between scholars using different methods, or even subscribing to different methodologies and epistemological views. With this volume, we hope to contribute to a broader mutual understanding.

The Contents of Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research

Each of the chapters in Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research addresses a specific methodological practice, which implies the presentation of the technical aspects of the method, but also the specific academic habitus that has developed around it. Each author has been invited to write on a method with which s/he is very familiar, having used it extensively in his/her own work. Chapters are developed around a common structure, with an introduction, including the definition of the method and a short review of its use in social movement studies; a part on designing the research, addressing
theoretical implications, conceptualization, and case selection; a part on the implementation of the research, addressing the main dilemmas in data collections; and a part on how to use the data, discussing their analysis and presentation.

While recognizing that the distinction among research designs, methods of data collection, and methods of data analysis is not always neat, the volume starts with chapters that speak more to general design, followed by those mainly focusing on data collection and then those which include more reflections on data analysis.

In Chapter 2, Alice Mattoni (2014) looks at the potentials of grounded theory in the study of social movements. She suggests that grounded theory is an encompassing research strategy that is widely used in the social sciences, but is still disregarded in social movement studies, where it has received scant, if any, attention. The chapter starts with an overview of empirical research based on grounded theory to illustrate its potential for scholars interested in studying grassroots contentious politics. In particular, it shows that two foundational traits of grounded theory—the attention to meanings produced by social actors, paired with systematic and comparative coding procedures—render this research strategy suitable for empirical investigations of perceptions, identities, emotions and, more in general, the cultural dimensions of social movements. First, the chapter briefly presents some of the general traits of grounded theory—including the use of sensitizing concepts and the features characterizing the constructivist approach to this research strategy. It then discusses data collection and data analysis in grounded theory, casting light on the peculiar coding procedures that characterize it. The conclusions summarize the main features of grounded theory to clarify in which cases this research strategy can be fruitfully employed to investigate social movements.

In Chapter 3, Claudius Wagemann (2014) presents Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which has been established as an important addition to the methodological repertoire of the social sciences over the past 25 years. The chapter departs from the observation that QCA can be understood both as a research design in the set-theoretic tradition and as a technique that is built on Boolean and fuzzy algebra. QCA is then placed in the general debate on comparative research designs, discussing in detail what is comparative about it; what is analytical; and what is qualitative. It illustrates how researchers can derive statements on the sufficiency and necessity of conditions, and how QCA also informs about the rather sophisticated causal patterns of INUS and SUIN conditions. This is linked to a discussion about the equifinal, conjunctural, and asymmetric character of causality in QCA. The chapter also includes a presentation of the various steps needed in research based on QCA, namely calibration, the analysis of necessary conditions, the conversion of data matrices into truth tables, the assessment of sufficiency through the parameter of consistency, and the minimization of truth tables. Some studies
on social movements or adjacent fields are introduced in order to show the applicability of the approach.

In Chapter 4, Phillip M. Ayoub, Sophia Wallace, and Chris Zepeda-Millán (2014) analyze triangulation in social movement research. Given the dynamic nature of contentious politics and the array of research methods that can be used to study it, it is not surprising that prominent social movement scholars have promoted the use of multiple data sources and collection methods, or triangulation, when conducting research. Alongside the many merits of triangulation, the chapter introduces several complexities related to systematically combining and analyzing different types of data in unison. The authors address these concerns with illustrative examples of how to select and effectively apply the appropriate methods with which to answer a given research question. Drawing examples from their own work on transnational LGBT rights movements in Europe and the US immigrant rights movement, they demonstrate empirically how the use of multiple methods, data sources, and levels of analysis can shed light on often-neglected areas of social movement research, such as the diffusion of norms across borders, and the relationship between time, space, and protest.

In Chapter 5, Daniel Ritter (2014) addresses the use of comparative historical analysis in the study of social movements and revolutions. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to the method by discussing its origins and its logic, as well as its compatibility with the objectives of social movement and revolution research. The second part of the chapter provides the reader with a practical guide to “doing comparative historical analysis” by highlighting five main steps in the research process: 1) the formulation of a puzzle; 2) the identification of useful data; 3) the “mining” of that data; 4) the data analysis; and 5) the writing process. The section also emphasizes the use of modern technology in the research process. Rather than providing a blueprint for comparative historical work, the chapter is meant to inspire others to think creatively about comparative historical analysis and devise their own research strategies.

Chapter 6, written by Lorenzo Bosi and Herbert Reiter (2014), is instead devoted to historical data. The chapter departs from the observation that, while historical data have been very often used in social movement research, methodological reflections are rare. The authors therefore address interrelated research questions concerning historical approaches in social movement research. What kind of specific difficulties are social movement scholars bound to encounter when using historical materials? How do social movement scholars use and interpret such materials? What can social movement scholars learn specifically from historiography? In order to provide answers to these questions, they survey different kinds of data collection and investigation, taking up current debates on archival sources, printed sources (including newspapers), oral history, and so on. In the discussion of these issues, they draw especially on their own empirical work on contentious politics in
Germany, Italy, and Northern Ireland, in particular the history of the First of May since 1890, the civil rights movement, and political violence between the 1960s and 1980s.

Philip Balsiger and Alexandre Lambelet (2014) address, in Chapter 7, *participant observation*. They start by noting that a growing number of scholars use participant observation when studying movements: through active participation, researchers attempt to gain insights into mobilization processes as they take place, and understand activism from within. The chapter aims, in fact, to present this method and to offer a practical guide to doing participant observation in social movements. An introductory section addresses how participant observation has been used in social movement studies, defines the method, and situates it historically. The authors then guide the reader through the different stages of a typical piece of research using participant observation—“preparation of observation,” “when on the field,” and “analyzing observations”—and discuss the main methodological issues that arise, using examples from their own work and from ethnographic studies analyzing movements. This leads them on to approach issues like multi-sited ethnography, how to get in contact with the field, what roles the researcher plays, reflexivity and interaction with activists, what to observe, and how to learn from participating, note taking, or generalization. Overall, the chapter discusses the numerous methodological choices and problems researchers typically encounter when doing participant research on social movements.

In Chapter 8, Stefan Malthaner (2014) addresses the main choices and dilemmas of *fieldwork* by focusing on the most difficult settings for research. While many settings can be “hostile” environments for social science research, violent conflicts and authoritarian regimes pose particular challenges for fieldwork. As a result of political polarization and the breakdown of trustful social relationships, high levels of surveillance and control by government agents or non-state armed groups, or because of insecurity and unpredictability in violence-ridden contexts, researchers may face problems in negotiating access, difficult field relations, and threats to the security of their respondents and themselves. In addition to ethical issues, these obstacles raise questions of sampling bias, and the validity of results obtained. Rather than considering field research in the context of violent conflict and authoritarian regimes merely in terms of its shortcomings, the chapter emphasizes that access negotiations constitute an analytical resource and that different settings offer opportunities as well as obstacles and restrictions. It also lists some practical recommendations for applying methods and dealing with moral dilemmas and matters of security.

In Chapter 9, Lasse Lindekilde (2014) discusses *discourse and frame analysis*, formulated initially as a theoretical critique of the dominant resource mobilization perspective as scholars of social movements began to pay attention to the cognitive mechanisms by which grievances are interpreted,
and how consensus around the goals of political activism was constructed and mobilized in the early 1980s. New and more linguistic, cognitive, and discourse-sensitive methodological approaches to the study of social movements were thus developed. These approaches to the in-depth study of qualitative data in the area of social movement studies are the focus of this chapter, which presents discourse and frame analyses as two closely related techniques, based on similar ontological and epistemological assumptions, but which can serve different purposes in the tool kit of social movement scholars. The chapter provides in fact a comparison of and introduction to the two approaches, offering a road map to the development and implementation of research designs using the two techniques, including discussion of definitions and aims of the methods, conceptualization and theoretical implications, sampling and data collection, and extensive examples of data analysis and data presentation.

Chapter 10, by Donatella della Porta (2014a), analyzes in-depth interviews, defined as a fundamental tool for generating empirical knowledge through asking people to talk about certain themes. In social movement studies, the relative scarcity of systematic collections of documents or reliable databases gives in-depth interviews even more importance. The chapter looks at the main approaches that have made use of qualitative interviews, observing that they have been preferred especially where the researcher is aiming to make a detailed description, attention is paid to the process, and interest taken in the interpretations interviewees give of the process itself. In social movement studies, in-depth interviews have provided information on (and from) rank-and-file activists, on which few alternative sources are available, and have been of fundamental importance for the study of motives, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as the identities and emotions of movement activists. The chapter addresses the methodological issues referring to the different steps of a research design based on in-depth interviews, with attention to the specific challenges of research on social movements. First, it addresses general dilemmas referring to the questions to ask and the way to ask them. It then discusses strategies for the selection of interviewees, based mainly on theoretical considerations rather than randomness. Further, it reflects on the delicate relations between interviewers and interviewees, on good practices, possible mistakes, and existing trade-offs. It ends with some reflections about how in-depth interviews are analyzed by social movement researchers. Throughout, the author’s research on the policing of protest is referred to in order to illustrate the various points.

In Chapter 11, Donatella della Porta (2014b) looks at a specific type of in-depth interview: life histories. Defined as a particular type of in-depth interview in which a subject tells about his/her life, life histories are widespread in research on deviance, youth, and families, but less so in political sociology and political science, as well as in social movement studies. Nevertheless,
the chapter suggests, their use is very promising in social movement studies, especially for those who are interested in the ways in which historical events and individual lives are intertwined, as well as in activists’ construction of external reality. The chapter addresses the different phases of research, and the main dilemmas in each, when using life histories: from theories and concepts, to the research outline, the selection of the interviewees, the relations between interviewer and interviewee during the interview itself, and the analysis of the empirical results. It discusses the main topics to be addressed in a narration, the main reasons behind the selection of partners, and the best ways to contact them, and the special challenges of developing a balanced relationship between interviewers and interviewees in the discussion of often very delicate issues. Finally, it provides some examples of the analysis and presentation of materials collected through life histories. The author’s research on militants in clandestine political organizations is referred to during the chapter.

In Chapter 12, Donatella della Porta (2014c) presents focus groups as a technique of data collection based on discussions within a small group, moderated by a researcher, and oriented to obtain information on a specific topic. The chapter departs from the discussion of the main theoretical questions focus groups might help answer, with particular attention to the analysis of collective identities—a central topic for social movement research. In addressing the method’s implementation, the author notes that, based on a modality of discussion among equals, focus groups allow us to recreate—almost as in an experiment—conditions similar to those considered as belonging to paths of opinion formation, particularly in social movements. The chapter then discusses the different methodological challenges met when using group interviews in social movement studies, looking at major milestones such as the preparation of the outline, the selection of participants, the conducting of the group interview, and the analysis of the transcriptions. Some classic social movement studies, as well as the author’s own research on social forums, are referred to in order to illustrate the trade-offs of the various choices.

In Chapter 13, Massimiliano Andretta and Donatella della Porta (2014) address the surveying of social movement activists. The chapter starts with the observation that, some 15 years after select scholars argued that a “strange lacuna” in social movement studies—the paucity of research based on surveys—was over: activists’ characteristics and motivations are more and more often investigated within international projects thanks to the use of surveys during protest events. Originally thought of as a methodological device to capture the degree of overlap between the ideological themes of the movement and the individual beliefs of demonstrators, the survey has since been used for addressing a larger number of research questions concerning individuals getting involved in collective action, becoming an established methodology. The chapter discusses some of the main challenges in the use of the
(very established) survey method during protest events. It discusses problems and solutions referring to bias in the implementation of random sampling, ways to control response bias, main trade-offs in the preparation of the questionnaires, as well as main caveats in the analysis of results. The authors’ own use of surveys in research on the global justice movement at the beginning of the millennium as well as during protests in times of austerity are referred to by way of illustration.

In Chapter 14, Swen Hutter (2014) discusses another quantitative technique often used in social movement studies: Protest Event Analysis (PEA) and its offspring, as a form of quantitative content analysis. In contrast to most other methods presented in this volume, PEA is a key methodological innovation that emerged within the social movement field and has more recently been adapted and refined to study other research topics. The chapter starts by briefly summarizing four generations of PEA research: the history ranges from the initiators in the 1960s to the latest generation, which has shifted from protest events to alternative coding units, either by covering a broader set of units (e.g., political claims) or by disentangling single events. While this part highlights the wide range of questions that can be addressed by PEA and its offspring, the bulk of the chapter is devoted to the “how to” questions: moving from data collection to data analysis. Among others, it discusses the main questions faced by any scholar who wants to conduct a PEA when it comes to the coding unit, the sampling unit, and the coding process. Overall, the chapter underscores that PEA is (still) a very powerful and flexible tool for social research. However, every scholar needs to make fundamental decisions that are based on both research interests and more pragmatic considerations.

Chapter 15, by Manuela Caiani (2014), addresses Social Network Analysis (SNA), considered as particularly interesting for the study of social movements, which are networks whose formal characteristics have been referred to in the development of theories of collective behavior. Indeed, network analysis enables the researcher to emphasize the meso level of social analysis, filling the gap between structure and agency, and connecting the micro and macro dimensions of social movements. The chapter presents this method and offers empirical examples of how to apply social network analysis in social movement research. The introduction gives an overview of the theoretical background of SNA, discussing the main characteristics, as well as the advantages and challenges, of this approach. In the second section, the issues of research design and conceptualization when adopting SNA are discussed alongside the differences between social network data and “conventional” sociological data. In the third section, the main dilemmas of sampling and data collection are addressed. Finally, the last two sections draw on research on the multi-organizational field of the extreme right to empirically show how to study networks at a macro level by discussing the structural properties of the whole network; at a micro level by showing
the characteristics and relational resources of single groups or organizations (nodes); and finally at a meso level by focusing on subgroups of nodes and their coalitional dynamics within the network.

*Online research* is addressed, in Chapter 16, by Lorenzo Mosca (2014). Despite the growing role of new media in mobilizing protest and even changing its logic, reflections on online methods for studying activism, protest, and social movements have been quite limited until now. Although a few recent books address the topic, at least partially, the most recent handbooks on social movement studies do not take into account the issue of online methods per se. The chapter thus aims to fill this gap in the literature. While social movement studies have not devoted enough attention to online methods, there are plenty of publications in the social sciences that provide useful insights when reflecting on online methods for studying social movements. Some of them focus on specific techniques (i.e., digital ethnography), while others address both quantitative and qualitative online methods. In presenting them, the chapter covers (a) the methodological problems related to archiving online data; and (b) the overall picture of online methods for researching social movements; providing a specific focus on (c) online surveys; and (d) digital ethnography.

In Chapter 17, Nicole Doerr and Noa Milman (2014) introduce *working with images*. They observe that visual analysis has become a field of growing attention, attracting a generation of students interested in the visual dimension of protest in the context of globalized societies, Internet communication, social media, and repeating waves of transnational diffusion. Social movements have always worked with symbols and visual posters or signs. However, most social movement scholars have focused on text-based concepts, methods, and materials, without considering images as an “independent variable” structuring the dynamics of political conflict and its framing in public discourse. To fill this empirical gap, the chapter presents an interdisciplinary body of methods of visual analysis, to explore the actors and strategies behind visual mobilization, their constraints, cultural resources, and the impact of symbolic struggles in broader media arenas and individual participation.

Last but not least, Chapter 18 deals with the *ethics of social movement research*. Stefania Milan (2014) starts with Karl Marx’s observation that “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” At the dawn of the twenty-first century, she observes, his verdict is still valid for students of social movements, who face a constant tension between objectivity and subjectivity, detachment and full participation. With the progressive institutionalization of social movement research, scholars have increasingly (and rightly so) concentrated on theory development, partially at the expense of a fruitful connection with their research subjects. As a result, “movement theorists often speak to themselves (...) the field often produces work that is distant from, and irrelevant to, the very struggle
it purports to examine. The consequence is an artificial divide between the practice of social change and the study of such efforts’ (Croteau et al. 2005, xii–xiii). The chapter addresses the ethics of studying social movements by reflecting on the costs and benefits of the “artificial divide” of which Croteau and colleagues spoke, and addresses the methodological and epistemological consequences of ethical choices in social movement research. It explores the tension between “research about” (social groups, processes, events) and “research with” (i.e., in collaboration with) the subjects under study. It investigates the differences in organizational cultures that might hinder collaboration, and suggests how to overcome them. It illustrates the potential risks to which research can expose social movement activists, and how to avoid harming individuals and groups. Finally, it addresses the ethn-methodologist’s concern with bringing the findings back to the field.

**NOTE**

1. This volume has been produced on the basis of a seminar on methods for research in social movements, which was organized as part of the activities of the ERC advanced researchers’ grant I received for my project on Mobilizing for Democracy.

**REFERENCES**


The Potentials of Grounded Theory in the Study of Social Movements

Alice Mattoni

An Introduction to the Origins of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is an encompassing qualitative research strategy that can be used to develop concepts that emerge from the empirical data through a comparative coding process, holding a central position in the analysis. Far from being a specific method to collect and analyze data, grounded theory is best understood as a “family of methods” (Bryant and Charmaz 2010, 11) able to guide researchers in the systematic elaboration of concepts and theories that are rooted in the empirical materials at the center of the investigation.

Grounded theory began to develop in the 1960s when Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, two sociologists in the field of health and nursing studies, conducted a qualitative investigation on the meaning and awareness of dying for patients affected by terminal illness (Glaser and Strauss 1965). The result was not only a seminal work on the subject matter, but also a preliminary sketch of what soon became a consistent and systematic research strategy that could be used to investigate a variety of empirical phenomena (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Elaborated in a period in which qualitative methods were in the middle of a deep credibility crisis, grounded theory quickly became a popular research strategy in the social sciences (Charmaz 2006). In offering a clear array of guidelines to undertake systematic qualitative studies, it showed that qualitative methods could go beyond the analytical description of social realities: through the systematic analysis of data, scholars using grounded theory were able to elaborate explanatory abstractions grounded in the empirical materials. Conceptualization, indeed, is at the core of grounded theory (Glaser 2008). In their seminal work on the meaning of dying, for instance, Glaser and Strauss (1965) theorized the importance of the contexts...