

The deliberate quest for causal explanations will reinvigorate social science's relevance in mass media and policy

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/02/03/smoke-but-no-fire-causality/

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Daily news reports and journalistic coverage highlight the powerful traction of causality for our everyday understanding of events and phenomena. From the 2011 UK riots to traffic accidents, [Kamila Pieczara](#) argues social scientists offer a competitive advantage when it comes to case-specific explanations on how various mechanisms work in relation to other factors. But this relevance also calls to question the danger involved when making general explanations, which may lead to inflated or disproportionate causal understandings.



Rerum cognoscere causas (“to know the causes of things”), the motto of the London School of Economics, expresses the best objective that social science can possibly have. It is also the most challenging one, for even as almost everyone in social science needs to explain something, good explanation requires an answer that is specific, well-tailored, and unambiguous.

By drawing from daily news stories, our recent article “[Smoke, but No Fire? In Social Science, Focus on the Most Distinct Part](#)”, with Yong-Soo Eun in *PS: Political Science & Politics*, presents the challenge of building and presenting social science explanations. Two points are in order. First, highly valuable for political science, and other social sciences, is the use of fresh, relevant themes, in order to teach how to build an explanation that is based on evidence. Second, what a loss it would be to the social sciences not to use these widely available examples for the sake of improving methods.

We refer to ‘smoke’ as a plausible, untested first answer that is frequently rashly taken for explanation. Just as we notice smoke before we perceive, if at all, the fire—visualize smoke coming from the windows!—so the ‘fire’, the real cause in explanation, will often emerge only after a deliberate quest. Smoke is a superficial cause or a consequence rather than a cause; the fire is a real cause, but finding it is often mired in difficulties so familiar to social scientists explaining events or comparing cases. “Smoke, but no fire” comes from contrasting the discovery of a cause—let’s call it ‘fire’—with conditions such as ‘smoke’. What is the distinct part? It is an element that stands out in a row of similar events.



Causality in social science is hard to establish even through the finest comparative research. To elaborate on that, we propose to focus on the distinguishing features of an examined example. In Britain’s summer 2011 riots, the suggestion is made to understand the stealing of brand goods. What happens is that saying “youth unemployment and discontent were a *cause*” is not effective, as such factors underlie almost every social uprising, also recently in the Middle East. Value added comes only after we are able to talk about the example at hand, which is different, even in tiniest details.

The prime example we drew from in our article was a Taunton accident, also from Britain, 2011. Including a traffic accident—with a horrifying row of fatalities—may seem problematic. Yet, an important side of the debate after the catastrophe was how to prevent any future accident of the sort. In Taunton, a massive pile-up crash occurred, one of the largest in Britain. As it happened on the “Bonfire weekend” (on Friday, November 4, 2011), the blame went to the smoke coming from a nearby fireworks display. This was debated in the media over subsequent, long months. Our take on the issue is that a cause in this situation needs to be specific and exclusive to the case.

Was the Taunton fireworks display the only one that took place in the country? Definitely not, as it was the national celebration of the Bonfire weekend. Indeed, thick smoke witnessed on the side might have been [the effect of burning vehicles](#). One needs to look at surrounding conditions, any factors that were decisive for the accident to occur on the M5 highway near Taunton. Otherwise, smoke from fireworks would have caused tragedies near London, Edinburgh or Aberystwyth. The Taunton accident sends a powerful message to social scientists about the danger of making general statements in their explanations, which may lead to inflated or disproportionate causal understandings.

The M5 Highway in Southwestern England



Source: [Highways Agency](#) (last accessed 24 January 2014).

Our article also appeals to concerns about the impact of social science under the siege from the social and traditional media. The question is that of a competitive advantage: with our degrees and theories and tools, what do we add to the debates on social protests, or phenomena outside of our immediate interest, like maybe plane crashes? First, we can add a comparison with earlier events—a longer perspective. Second, we can explain a mechanism of how a cause worked in relation to other factors. For Taunton: it was true that fireworks smoke played a role, but it would not have been disastrous without other conditions, specific to Taunton at that moment (being located near a road? wet conditions? many trucks—this is yet unresolved). For such an understanding of this complexity, we would need knowledge of transport experts and other investigators. But the key is to be able to ask the right questions.

The lesson the article draws is that social scientists can harness the journalistic wisdom coming from the daily news, with benefits for teaching and research on methods. Expert knowledge has little value when simple questions are

not asked first: “In this particular protest or event, what are the distinguishing features?” This way of addressing the question also improves the potential impact of social science. Experts need to know exactly when and how emergencies had occurred, so as to prevent similar situations by designing more effective ‘escape routes’ or preparing better ‘fire doors’, be it for social or other catastrophes. More specific explanations are then ready to be used for policymaking. If our explanations are specific, we do not have to leave behind objectivity, or purely intellectual curiosity, in order to become more policy-relevant.

By leaving behind us the jargon that often puts our thinking as if in a corset, we shall have better explanations and better social science on the way.

Post based on the article: Kamila Pieczara and Yong-Soo Eun, “Smoke, but No Fire? In Social Science, Focus on the Most Distinct Part,” PS: Political Science & Politics 47 (1): 145-148. (Copyright: American Political Science Association, 2014).

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About the Author

Kamila Pieczara is the author of “What Is ‘Vintage’ in IR? A Writer’s Note” in *PS: Political Science & Politics*, with Yong-Soo Eun (July 2013). Her PhD dissertation at the University of Warwick is on the Trilateral Cooperation of Japan, the Republic of Korea and China. In 2013, she participated in the IISS-SAIS Young Strategists Programme and became a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

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