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SYMPOSIUM

Am I a methodologist? (Asking for a friend)

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The early part of an academic career frequently entails processes of social identification: am I an Americanist, a comparativist, a theorist, or an international relations-ist (is that a word?); a positivist, a constructivist, or something else; a “quant” or a “qual”; a pluralist, a Perestroikan, an experimentalist; a teacher, researcher, pundit, “alt-ac”, data scientist, or what? Who am I and what am I an expert in? Outside pressures like job applications, conference attendance, funding applications, and teaching responsibilities all drive each of us to answer these questions, in essence to decide who we are as academics and how we want to be seen by our peers. Academic “branding” as part of the process of professional development can thus partially be understood as an exercise in self-categorization, or the act of choosing a role or identity (Turner et al., 1987). One identity that an academic might adopt — and one which carries a variety of connotations — is “methodologist.” In what follows, I discuss “methodologist” as an academic role and the functions thereof, the diversity of those functions, and finally the challenges of wrestling with “methodologist” as an identity and how one might come to decide if they should adopt it.

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A definition of the role

To briefly contextualize this discussion, I have — at various points — found myself asking “am I a methodologist?” I have had some hints at an answer. My postgraduate institution did not offer methodology as a “major” field; I minored in it, so I am not a methodologist. But I took a lot of optional courses, so I feel that I may be a methodologist. “Should I apply for ‘methods jobs?’”, I once asked around among my advisors. “No.” I am not a methodologist. But I took a methods paper to a conference, so I am a methodologist. But it wasn’t published, so I am not a methodologist. I sometimes tell people I study statistics to avoid talking about politics, so I am a methodologist. My CV suggests I mostly publish “applied” research, so I am not a methodologist. My first employer asked me to teach methods, so I am a methodologist. I took a new job that doesn’t involve teaching methods, so I am not methodologist. But I go to methods panels at conferences, so I am a methodologist. I sometimes find I am not familiar with topics discussed at those panels, so I am not a methodologist. I’m worried some people think I am a methodologist but that I am just an imposter. Am I a methodologist?

Let’s start with definitions: what exactly is the role of a methodologist? The distinguishing features of a career as a political methodologist relate to the content of an academic’s core functions as researcher and teacher. Basically, if researching methods and teaching methods seem like enjoyable ways to spend the remainder of your life, then methodology may be for you. Said another way: if you only want to *understand* methods, you are maybe not a methodologist; if you want to *evaluate* and *create* methods, you may be a methodologist. Of course, it is challenging to know that when beginning a career, so let’s tackle these two key functions in turn.

Deciding whether methods research is enjoyable is an easier task. Methodological research is necessarily meta-research — that is, research about research. Investigation into measurement, data gathering processes, and the use of analytic techniques are all themes of methodological research. A methodologist is likely to do a bit of research that touches on these topics somewhere along the spectrum between “applied” and “abstract”. The contents of methodological journals (e.g., *Political Analysis*, *Sociological Research & Methods*) provide some of the clearest guidance on what methods research looks like, as well as the diversity of work that fits that label. If that’s the kind of research you want to be doing, then you may be a methodologist.

Evaluating whether one might enjoy teaching methods is, however, a bit more challenging, not least because the amount of methods teaching a methodologist might do will depend heavily on a given department’s demand for and supply of methods courses.

The diversity of teaching configurations across institutions limits the amount of general clarity that can be brought to discussions of this aspect of a methodologist's career. At a minimum, however, most methods teaching will inevitably entail some cluster of research design and basic applied statistics courses supplemented with other teaching. Whether that is enjoyable can be difficult to evaluate prior to embarking on such a career path in part because the largely auto-didactic experience of gaining methodological expertise hardly resembles the teaching and learning experience for the modal student (who might have limited background and interest in methods coursework). Practicing such a role as a graduate teaching assistant is an excellent opportunity to try out the role.¹ In time it will become obvious whether this aspect of a methodology career is for you.

A diversity of types

If not clear yet, the generality of this role definition — just teaching methods and researching methods — means that it is considerably more diverse than it might seem at first glance. The group of self-identified methodologists are not only those who teach the quantitative graduate methods sequence at PhD-granting institutions, but instead a more heterogeneous population. To understand this, it may be possible broadly (and thus obviously inadequately) to imagine four prototypes of methodologist: quantitative, qualitative, specialists, and pluralists:

- *Quantitative* types research numerical, statistical, and/or computational techniques and are likely to teach courses such as probability, statistics, regression, etc.
- *Qualitative* types research either micro-level observational methods (e.g., interviewing, content analysis, discourse analysis, etc.) and/or macro-level comparative approaches (QCA, Mill's methods, synthetic control, etc.). They are likely to teach courses on comparative methodology, interviewing, textual analysis, etc.
- *Specialist* types more narrowly focus on one or a few methods (e.g., survey sampling, process-tracing, formal theory, panel data) and might teach one or more advanced courses in their area (and the prerequisites thereof) but also teach in applied domains.
- *Pluralist* types are broadly interested in methodology, researching in one or more areas, and are likely to teach courses such as research design or logic of political inquiry.

Any of these types perform some amount of methodological research (with varying degrees of abstractness versus application) as well as some degree of methodological teaching. And all involve some degree of specialization in research and teaching. It is not as if every methodologist is simultaneously an expert in all of statistics, focus groups methods, experimental design, survey sampling, process-tracing, time series analysis, ethnography, quasi-experimentation, case selection, data visualization, computer-adaptive testing, meta-analysis, discourse analysis, structural equation modelling, qualitative-comparative analysis, formal theory, machine learning, archival research, software development, and so forth. Understanding all of these topics to the level of indisputable expertise is near-impossible, let alone teaching or researching all of them. In the long term a methodologist's teaching and research may span many or just a few of these areas. Their work will reflect an interaction between personal interests, the trajectory of the discipline, and the needs of their students. Drawing out these "types" highlights the tendency to see methodologists only as those of the first type, a sort of lay statistician, and those of the second, third, and fourth types to deviate sufficiently far from a commonly agreed upon schema as to perhaps not be methodologists at all. Yet any of these types are, by the definition offered here, methodologists.

But if methodology is just a role involving methods research and methods teaching (regardless of the particular form there of), aren't we all methodologists? No, but it's easy to make that mistake. My entirely subjective experience is that a modestly large number of graduate students who use, especially, quantitative research methods are inclined to attempt to portray themselves as methodologists. Often, this identification is expressed in the form "my fields are [insert field name here] and methodology" or "I am a [field]ist and quantitative methodologist." This act of dual identification with a primary field and secondarily with methodology emerges in response to perceptions that methodologists are desirable in an ever-more-challenging academic job market.

Strictly speaking, however, the opposite is true: "pure" methodology jobs are rare. In the 2015–16 political science hiring cycle, only 4% of advertisements on APSA eJobs were for methodologists.² Similarly, only about 1% of job market candidates are (primarily) methodologists,³ likely trained at a narrow set of academic institutions and employed by a similarly narrow set of academic institutions. APSA's 2015–16 data suggest that methodologists do well on the market (an estimated 0% were unplaced) but methodologists took postdocs and non-academic positions at a higher rate than those in other subfields despite nearly all candidates in the field having their PhD in-hand. Particularly in light of the low number of individuals that market themselves as such, it is therefore debatable whether self-identification as a methodologist is per se career valuable relative

to identification with other disciplinary labels.

The decision to research and teach methods should reflect your own interests, not just perceived (and possibly inaccurate) ideas about the academic job market. Likewise the decision to market one's methodological interests in the academic hiring process should entail some reflection upon which of the various types of methodologist a given department might be looking for and which of those types you might enjoy pursuing as a career. "Can you teach methods?" is an inevitable interview question for candidates marketing themselves as methodologically inclined, but answering "yes" to that question is not the same as being or identifying as a methodologist. Outward identification as a methodologist, more than simply researching and teaching methods, sets up an expectation of outside recognition as a member of the group and professional evaluation according to the collective standards established by other (typically more senior) group members.

An act of self-identification

Someone who meets the minimalist definition of methodologist—methods teaching and methods research—can still decide whether or not to identify as a methodologist. Doing so may be per se valuable, or may be useful for achieving some higher-order professional or personal goal (Kruglanski et al., 2002). It may also be costly in terms of marketability for jobs and defining the set of reviewers of one's work and career performance. Perhaps most obviously, labelling oneself a methodologist is a likely prerequisite for outside recognition from others that one is a member of the set of methodologists and thus a means to access the professional networks, academic employment, and career advancement in the subfield that such recognition allows. Identification is thus a decision of some import.

To assess one's identity, a simple and problematic heuristic goes: do you use "we" and "us" or "they" and "them" to refer to methodologists? If the former, you are already identifying as a methodologist; if the latter, you are probably not (yet). Why the gap between membership and identification? Theories of social identity tell us that even when individuals meet objective definitions of group membership, there remains a disconnect between de facto membership and self-identification (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Huddy, 2001). The autobiographical struggles that opened this essay reflect an effort to map my own characteristics onto those associated with the *prototype* (Hogg and Reid, 2006, 10) of methodologist that I had internalized early in my career (based on publication patterns, teaching activities, job titles, etc.). While some might find this process of self-categorization clarifies membership and identity, it can also highlight more contrasts than similarities and thus hinder self-identification (and subsequent recognition).

Indeed, there is a stereotype that methodologists are a small group of individuals with similar personal characteristics who work in a narrow set of academic institutions on a niche set of research and teaching endeavors, with an unending love for \LaTeX . Yet there is not strictly a secret cadre of completely homogeneous academic elites that have absolute control of the definition of that identity label. (Of course, there are institutions — journals, the PolMeth conference, conference divisions — that might resemble such a cadre. These individuals hold particular sway over the careers of those who aim to identify solely or primarily as methodologists in that decisions about publication, promotion, and so forth will drift to subfield expert, as in any subfield.) While there are certainly some, occasionally strong, norms about what methodologists do—conferences showcase these norms well—they are not as narrow or strict as they might seem. The plurality of methodologist types discussed above and the APSA statistics on the methodological job market both highlight that it is the third and fourth types — those of us with some particular methodological interests but also non-methodological research and teaching concerns — who fill the methodological niche at most departments and who constitute the bulk of the individuals that might be referred to as or self-identify as “methodologists.”

Aside from comparison to the research- and teaching-related features of a prototypical methodologist, a self-identification process might also entail comparisons along unrelated dimensions. The heuristic device of measuring of “we” and “us” versus “they” and “them” will tend to sort those that more closely resemble the extant group’s members into the category and exclude those that diverge in some way. If methodologists feel more like a “we” than a “they” (and you’re not saying “we” because you think you have to or only because you think doing so might carry some ill-defined career advantage), then there’s a good chance you’re a methodologist. But the opposite is not strictly true.

In particular, the demographic composition of political science as a whole has remained fairly homogeneous despite substantial changes in undergraduate and graduate enrolment (women, for example, make up 40% of new PhDs). Methodology as a subfield is particularly male-dominated (at least as measured by PolMeth conference attendance). The demographic lag at the level of senior faculty means that it is easy to glance at identified methodologists and come away with a prototypical image of a senior, male pseudo-statistician working at a PhD-granting research university. The composition of published (especially quantitative) research might give a similar impression (see Teele and Thelen, 2017).

This stereotyping along lines of personal characteristics is problematic. Self-categorization on the grounds of teaching and research interests is useful to avoid slippage: contrasting one’s sole research interest, e.g. in a particular case context, against the methodological

research activities of methodologists restricts the label to those doing research in the sub-field. That's useful. But comparison to group members along characteristics orthogonal to research and teaching activities risks inducing inappropriate exclusion from the group. Both in deciding whether to identify and in deciding whether to recognize others' identification as methodologists, a focus on research- and teaching-related functions is far more important than the psychologically unavoidable tendency to rely on stereotypes defined by other features of the group's extant membership.

A path to "I, methodologist"

In sum, methodologists are those who teach and research about methods. We come in many forms. Pursuing a methodologically focused career thus entails deciding what kind of methodologist one wants to be (in terms of research and teaching), looking to guidance from those in that sub-subfield, and professionalizing one's self accordingly. There is no archetypical methodologist, only variations on some overlapping categories. Particularly helpful is to remember that no one is born a methodologist. Obtaining methodological expertise is facilitated by personal choices about coursework, autodidactic activities (e.g., reading books and papers, attending ICPSR or ECPR summer schools), conference attendance (e.g., attending PolMeth, the various methods sections' panels at APSA, regional conferences like East and West Coast experiments conference or the UK Causal Inference Meeting, etc.), formal group membership (e.g., joining an APSA section), social interaction (e.g., talking to other methodologists; attending Visions in Methodology), research programs (e.g., writing papers about research methods), and publication decisions (e.g., submitting papers to *Political Analysis*). Being seen as and feeling like a methodologist can follow logically from engaging in these activities, which constitute membership in the set of methodologists. None is individually necessary for such membership, but together help satisfy some of the various sufficient paths to becoming a methodologist *and identifying as one*.

Ultimately "methodologist" is a role and also an identity. Fitting the role follows from practices of formal and informal learning and concludes with the production of methodologically focused research and the teaching of (some) methodological courses. It is nothing more than that. Fitting the identity—and obtaining the benefits (recognition, coauthorship, employment, etc.) and costs that accompany it—requires a process of self-categorization that may not be easy and may not even be desirable. Like any social identity, this self-identification can fluctuate over time and is complicated by the unavoidable politics and stereotyping that accompanies attachment to a social label. But

if the aspiring methodologist remembers that being a methodologist at a minimum only requires a passion for research and teaching methods, then they can rest assured that with those boxes ticked they are already on the path to being—and possibly identifying as—a methodologist.

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