

# Chapter 5

## Researching Parapolitics: Replication, Qualitative Research and Social Science Methodology

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When researching the topic of covert operations—one of the themes of this volume—we must of course use the same type of rigorous methodology we would use for any other social scientific topic. It is often claimed that replicability is one of the most important features for research. This chapter will explore the potential for research replication in social science and history. Though we will define replicability in greater detail later, the basic idea is simple: if an experiment is conducted properly, then another individual should be able to ask the same research question, re-gather data, undertake the experiment a second time—and come up with essentially the same result as the first experiment. In recent years, social scientists also have sought to establish a replication standard, to enhance the field's standing as an authentic science. Major figures in the profession<sup>1</sup> have called upon researchers to make their raw data available, to facilitate future replication studies; and for researchers to engage in publishable efforts, aimed at replicating the findings of others. Increasingly, social science journals are developing policies that facilitate replication.<sup>2</sup>

An obvious complication for advocates of replicability is the widespread use of qualitative techniques in research, which are based on narrative rather than statistical forms of exposition and analysis. However, Gary King and others imply that the replication standard should apply equally to qualitative research studies, just as in quantitatively oriented ones. As a general point, King insists that no fundamental distinction should be made between the techniques of qualitative and quantitative research. The widely influential *Designing Social Inquiry* begins by stating:

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1 King, G. 1995. Replication, Replication. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 28/3, 444–52.

2 Bueno de Mesquita, B; Gleditsch, N. P.; James, P.; King, G.; Metelits, C.; Ray, J. L.; Russett, B.; Strand, H.; Valeriano, B, 2003. ISP Symposium on Replication in International Studies Research. *International Studies Perspectives*, 4/1, 72–107. On the need for replication more generally, see also Firebaugh, G. 2007. Replication Data Sets and Favored Hypothesis Bias: Comment on Jeremy Freese and Gary King. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 36/2, 200–209.

Our main goal is to connect the traditions of what are conventionally denoted “quantitative” and “qualitative” research ... The two traditions appear quite different; indeed they sometimes seem to be at war. Our view is that these differences are mainly ones of style and specific technique. *The same underlying logic provides the framework for each research approach.* [Emphasis added]<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, no distinctions should be made regarding the need for replication. The specific proposal regarding the need for replicability elicited a long series of responses by various social scientists some of whom expressed skepticism at King’s proposal. King’s article and many of the responses focused on whether authors should be required to submit their original documentary sources to journals or publishers; most of the objections to King’s article focused on the purported impracticality of his idea, that it would be excessively time consuming. Other, more fundamental issues raised by the discussion received only light scrutiny. In one reply to this discussion, Miriam Feldblum raised a series of objections and, most notably, she calls into question “the very conceptualization of research as replicable.”<sup>4</sup> While we will not review the full content of the reply, Feldblum was right to note that the debate has so far focused on secondary issues, while it sidestepped the basic issue of whether replicability is an attainable goal.

This chapter will explore the possibility for research replication with regard to qualitative research studies. The basic argument is two-fold. Firstly, that, contrary to *Designing Social Inquiry*, qualitative research involves a distinct and separate logic of inquiry from quantitative studies, one that defies efforts at replication. Qualitative research emphasizes focused interpretation of data, requiring mental activity that is not consistently replicable, even in principle. However desirable the goal of replicability may be, it is one that cannot be applied to certain categories of analysis. Secondly, and more positively, it will be argued that the inability to replicate qualitative research does not by itself undermine the usefulness of qualitative methods.

### Defining Replicability

Researchers in the natural sciences regularly replicate investigations to guard against idiosyncratic findings, tendentious research techniques, mistakes, or even fraud by the original investigator, and thereby ensure the reliability of the original finding.<sup>5</sup> Some qualifications are of course in order: practical considerations (such

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3 King, G., Keohane, R. O. and Verba, S. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 3.

4 Feldblum, M. 1996. The Study of Politics: What does Replicability Have to Do with It? *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 29/1, 7.

5 O’Hear, A. 1989. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 61–2.

as limited time or funds) preclude replication of certain investigations. In research on some types of natural phenomena, such as the formation of supernovae or the evolution of extinct species, the underlying events themselves cannot possibly be replayed (except perhaps in a computer model, which is a very imperfect substitute for the real thing). And, as Thomas Kuhn<sup>6</sup> has famously argued, replicability and other investigational safeguards do not prevent such “irrational” factors as aesthetics or academic politics from influencing the direction of research.

With regard to the social sciences, Paul M. Sniderman has established three different levels at which replicability may occur:

Level I: The researcher replicates previous research, by asking the same research question, using the same data, and using the same units of measure and estimation as the original researcher.

Level II: The researcher asks the same research question and uses the same data. However, he/she uses different units of measure and estimation, to establish whether the original results can be replicated under a variety of conditions.

Level III: The researcher once again asks the same research question. This time, however, entirely new data and new units of measure are used.

Levels I and II may be considered as largely technical exercises. Level III replication is by far the most useful from a research standpoint and, in the words of Sniderman, it constitutes “a necessary condition of scientific progress.”<sup>7</sup>

## Source Subjectivity

With this taxonomy of replication, let us now consider how well it applies to qualitative social scientific research. The difference between the natural and social sciences is most apparent when one looks at the types of source materials. A large percentage of sources in social science and history comprise documentary information, such as government materials, news accounts and memoirs, as well as secondary sources based on these. From these materials, the researcher endeavors to ferret out “the facts” that are useful for testing various theories. These types of narrative sources predominate in qualitative research. Ascertaining the facts from such sources is a highly subjective process. Uncertainties and inconsistencies in the factual record can create a serious, and potentially insurmountable, barrier to efforts at replicable research. All this points to a crucial difference between research in social science and in physics: the narrative sources of information

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6 Kuhn, T. S. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 144–59.

7 Paraphrased from Sniderman, P. M. 1995. Evaluation Standards for a Slow Moving Science. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 28/3, 464.

used in qualitative political research cannot be read with the same standards of objectivity or consistency as can the instrument panel on a cyclotron.

There is no clear-cut method, no algorithm that can help researchers discriminate among sources. The social scientist using qualitative sources faces the difficult task of determining which ones are correct and which are incorrect—a process unlikely to be replicated with any consistency. Consider such classic works as Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*; Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions*; Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*; Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System*; Arno Mayer's *The Dynamics of Counter-Revolution in Europe*; or Rueschemeyer, Huber and Stephens' *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.<sup>8</sup> What each of the above studies has in common is that they reach general conclusions by extrapolating from several historical case studies of specific events pertaining to the selected research questions. For sources, each uses (primarily) a wide ranging survey of secondary literature, mostly by historians. The problem with this technique, as Ian Lustick remarks, is that the secondary studies are often in disagreement, and social scientists using historical studies tend to *select* particular works, often cited as especially "excellent" or "outstanding" in some way, to the exclusion of other studies that hold opposing points of view.<sup>9</sup> Lustick provides the specific example of Moore, who based his discussion on the development of English feudalism, and its relationship to the political development of England, on a specific study (that of R. H. Tawney) whose findings are controversial.<sup>10</sup>

The results are rendered essentially non-replicable, since one could have cited a different study on English feudalism and arrived at very different conclusions. This problem can of course be compensated for, at least to some extent, if authors of such studies were to justify their use of sources; Moore, for example, could have provided some justification as to why he chose to rely on a particular interpretation of feudalism and to reject others (and, indeed, at various points in his book, this was precisely his method). Such justifications undoubtedly make such studies more intellectually satisfying, but they fail to resolve the basic problem of replicability. Even if various authors were to provide justifications for their decisions to rely on certain sources and to slight others, their conclusions would

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8 Moore, Jr., B. 1996. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press; Skocpol, T. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Huntington, S. 2006. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Wallerstein, I. 1974. *The Modern World System*. New York: Academic Press. Mayer, A. J. 1971. *The Dynamics of Counter-Revolution in Europe, 1870–1956*. New York: Harper & Row. Rueschemeyer, D., Huber, E. and Stephens, J. D. 1992. *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

9 Lustick, I. S. 1996. History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias. *American Political Science Review*, 90/3, 605–18.

10 Lustick, I. S. 1996. 608–9.

probably remain controversial. Another scholar re-evaluating the controversy—in essence attempting to replicate the findings—could easily arrive at a different conclusion.

In general, comparative studies such as Moore's and the others cited above tend to base their overall conclusions on many hundreds of smaller conclusions, a significant portion of which are vital to sustaining the overall argument. Moore's judgment that a bourgeois revolution *did* in fact occur in England must itself rely on a series of secondary and tertiary judgments, rendered by Moore during the course of research, on how to interpret various bits of evidence regarding English historical development. If one considers the various data that were excluded from discussion—and given space constraints, all authors must exclude data—then the number of separate judgments might well run into the thousands.

With regard to Sniderman's hierarchy of replication, level II would not even apply, since this requires changing the standards of measurement and estimation; with Moore and most of the other works cited above there are no specified units of measure or estimation to allow such changes. Level I replication remains a hypothetical possibility: a second researcher could read the same source materials and seek to repeat the basic "experiment." For reasons noted above, it seems most unlikely to replicate the conclusions of the original authors. And if level I replicability is unlikely, then surely level III replicability—undertaking the research using different source materials—is virtually impossible.

In the field of history, where the idea of "historical science" never gained widespread acceptance, the non-replicable nature of research is well understood. Consider the observations of Bernadotte Schmidt, writing on controversies regarding the origins of World War I:

[Sidney] Fay's *Origins of the World War* published in 1928, took a lenient view of Germany's responsibility, whereas my book *The Coming of the War, 1914* (1930), laid the chief burden on Germany. This has always troubled me. We had both taken advanced degrees at eminent universities ... We used the same documents and read the same biographies and memoirs in preparing our respective books – and came up with quite different interpretations. It is sometimes asserted that we are both prejudiced because Fay studied in Germany and I in England, but surely there is more involved than that. Is there something wrong with our methods of historical study and training when two scholars draw such conflicting conclusions from the same evidence?<sup>11</sup>

One may consider the above case as a crude experiment regarding the potential for replicability in history, with a negative verdict. It is also interesting to note that in this case replication failed at level I, since the authors used basically the same sources of information. In the natural sciences, a failure to replicate an experiment

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11 Schmidt, B. quoted in Allison, G. T. 1971. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Boston: Little. Brown. 14–15. The ellipses appears in the original.

at level I often reflects poorly on the capabilities of the researchers who performed the original experiment; in the above cases however, replication failed despite the fact that both Schmidt and Fay were major figures in the history profession. The non-replicable nature of the research does not necessarily result from some obvious flaw in the study, or some incompetence on the part of the researcher. It is intrinsic to qualitative research.

It is easy to see that the above “experiment” can be and has been undertaken many times. Norman Cantor has “described the enormous variability in historians’ images of the Middle Ages and hence the absence of a single [presumably replicable] ‘historical record.’”<sup>12</sup> In debates concerning the causes of the French Revolution or the American Civil War, there is relatively little consensus on basic issues. Often, to the extent that a consensus exists for a period of time—for example, the “consensus” that existed among American historians during the 1950s regarding the origins of the Cold War—it soon becomes apparent that what existed was really a pseudo-consensus, predicated upon a unique mindset that existed for some interval, only to be contested later. The “finding” of one qualitative researcher often resists efforts by a second to replicate it. Current debates about whether hard-line U.S. policies led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, had no effect, or merely hastened it, show few signs of definitive resolution.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, debates on whether or not the USSR was the primary aggressor power during the Cold War remain unresolved; while recent revelations from the ex-Soviet archives have greatly influenced and informed debate on this topic, they have not come close to settling basic issues.<sup>14</sup> My point is *not* that historical or qualitative research is inherently invalid or relativistic; I only note that it is not replicable.

Until now we have been emphasizing the varied interpretations expressed in diverse secondary sources, and the impediments that this poses for replicable research. Similar problems exist with primary sources, a problem Eugene Genovese acknowledges in his classic study of American slave society:

I have readily and easily used some plantation diaries and ex-slave accounts while slighting others. Two decades of work in this history of southern slave society have helped form my own estimates of what is and what is not typical – what does and does not ring true. *Another historian ... might well interpret*

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12 Lustick, I. S. 1996. 606.

13 See the following sources: Stoner-Weiss, K. and McFaul, M. 2009. Domestic and International Influences on the Collapse of the Soviet Union 1991 and Russia’s Initial Transition to Democracy 1993. Working Paper 108, Center on Democracy, Development, and The Rule of Law, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University; Dudney, D. and Ikenberry, G. J. 1992. Who Won the Cold War? *Foreign Policy*, 87; Brown, A. 2007. Perestroika and the End of the Cold War. *Cold War History*, 7/1, 1–17.

14 See Leffler, Melvyn P. 1996. Inside Enemy Archives: The Cold War Reopened. *Foreign Affairs*, 75/4, 120–35. Layne, C. 2007. *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 223.

*the record differently; indeed many have.* I offer my reading as one historian's considered judgment and can only warn non-specialists that all sources are treacherous and that no "definitive" study has been or ever will be written. [Emphasis added]<sup>15</sup>

Historians and social scientists must select among conflicting primary sources, just as they must select among conflicting secondary sources. This process too is inherently subjective and non-replicable.

Finally, any *single* source of information can yield diverse, complicated or conflicting information, leading to multiple ways of reading the same material. How one chooses to read such a source will determine how one processes the information and, accordingly, what substantive conclusions to draw. This problem exists for a wide range of documentary materials, but is particularly acute when dealing with potentially controversial matters. Consider these excerpts from a forum<sup>16</sup> on U.S. secret interventions abroad:

[Ralph] McGehee: ... the CIA prepared a study of the 1965 Indonesian operation that described what the agency did there. I happened to have been custodian of that study for a time, and I know the specific steps the agency took to create the conditions that led to the massacre of at least half a million Indonesians ...

Hugh Tovar: ... I am rather shattered by these allegations ... I was in charge of CIA operations in Jakarta at the time, so I would have been the primary instigator of the massacres that allegedly took place. In fact the CIA served *primarily* as an intelligence collecting operation in Indonesia, and *did not engage heavily in covert action* ... We certainly did not instigate the 1965 revolt. We had nothing to do with it. [Emphasis added]

A researcher might read the above in several different ways. First, one could conclude that the United States must have intervened in Indonesia to some extent, because even Tovar concedes this point (the United States "did not engage *heavily* in covert action"); Tovar's statement may sound like a denial, but under scrutiny it becomes apparent that he concedes some of what McGehee alleges. A second reader might conclude that the United States clearly was not involved in the Indonesian coup, because the charges to that effect, raised by McGehee, were firmly denied by Tovar ("we had nothing to do with it"), and the denial settles the matter. A third might conclude that alleged U.S. intervention in Indonesia could not be a very important matter, because the issue receives only a brief mention in the overall discussion (which was on covert war in general), and because many

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15 Genovese, E. 1974. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Pantheon. See A Note on Sources.

16 Moynihan, D. P. 1984 [moderator of forum] Should the CIA Fight Secret Wars? *Harpers*, September, 44.

reputable sources on U.S. foreign policy make no mention of it. Therefore it is not necessary to evaluate the validity of McGehee's allegations or to acknowledge these allegations in one's own research.

Some postmodernists<sup>17</sup> will view the above as an illustration regarding the existence of "multiple truths," and the need to avoid "privileging" any one truth or "marginalizing" any other truth. Such nihilistic views are both theoretically and empirically untenable and must be rejected. My point here is *not* to endorse a relativist view of empirical research; I proceed from the assumption that in any situation there is only one truth. The problem is that efforts to discover truth will in practice lead to multiple interpretations, including incorrect interpretations. For example, the above discussion of covert operations in Indonesia could yield at least three different, and mutually incompatible, interpretations about what actually happened in 1965.

Thus, the problem of multiple contradictory readings exists with a wide range of primary and secondary materials. Various sources from the same documentary collection—or even from the same author—frequently contradict one another. Different readers will generate diverse conclusions (including possibly inaccurate conclusions), and the phenomenon of multiple readings will constitute a major impediment to replication of research findings. There is no obvious way that this impediment can be surmounted.

### The Problem of Biased or Incomplete Source Material

Another problem is that factual information in political science and related fields is often incomplete, owing to major gaps in the documentary record. Efforts to fill in the gaps, and the variety of ways in which researchers achieve this, can produce very different outcomes. Gaps in data records are also a problem for the natural sciences, but with a fundamental difference: in social science, the objects of our study—particularly governments, organizations and powerful individuals—often *deliberately* withhold information, if such information may be unflattering to them or contrary to their interests. That the objects of our study can act strategically and deliberately to deceive the researcher is a problem with few counterparts in the natural sciences, and this constitutes a fundamental difference between the two realms of research.

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17 Terry Eagleton offers this definition for postmodernism: "a style of thought that is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity, and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives, or ultimate grounds of explanation." For this quote and for an extended discussion of how such perspectives often lead to an untenable form of relativism, see Gibbs, D. N. 2000. Is There Room for the Real World in the Postmodernist Universe? in *Beyond the Area Studies Wars*, edited by N. Waters. Hanover: University Press of New England. 18, [dgibbs.faculty.arizona.edu/sites/dgibbs.faculty.arizona.edu/files/pomo-critique.pdf](https://www.dgibbs.faculty.arizona.edu/sites/dgibbs.faculty.arizona.edu/files/pomo-critique.pdf) (accessed August 17, 2012).



States often withhold embarrassing or discrediting information sources through the simple expedient of classifying them as state secrets, and they actively disseminate information that is flattering to official policy. While government secrecy is often justified “in the national interest,” such claims often prove, under inspection, to be mere rationalizations.<sup>18</sup> Official efforts to mislead the public will often mislead researchers as well. The varied ways that researchers seek to cope with this problem, and the necessarily subjective character that many coping strategies require, may further frustrate replication efforts.

Another important primary source material consists of published memoirs by officials—and these too often contain biased or misleading information. Memoir writers themselves are often aware of this bias. While writing his own memoir about experiences at the United Nations, Conor Cruise O’Brien warned his readers:

Memoirs occupy – for quite sound reasons – a lowly place in the regard of the professional historian. They are suspect for fallibility of memory, for intent of polemic or self-exculpation and for that extra share of human vanity which must be presumed in people who trouble to write and publish the story of events in which they were personally involved. For any retrospective account the historian prefers, when he can get them, scraps of contemporary evidence, not intended for the public eye, and, above all, not intended for “posterity.” Only when he has wrung all that he can from such contemporary evidence does he fall back, reluctantly and skeptically, on the memoir material and even then what he is likely to take from it will be declarations against interest, if he can find any.<sup>19</sup>

O’Brien writes of historians but exactly the same issues are faced by social scientists who often rely on memoirs, official histories, government press releases, presidential speeches, and the like. The problem is accentuated by the fact that the resulting distortions and omissions are not random, but systematic: participants can be expected to systematically exaggerate (or fabricate) information that favors them, while omitting unfavorable information.

Such “partial” sources present serious challenges, since there is no consensus on how to address biases and gaps in the record. Researchers tend to fall into two categories. The first category are those who readily accept O’Brien’s advice; they read source materials generated by interested parties with a suspicious eye and remain alert to the possibility that the author is simply trying to cast a favorable light on his or her own conduct. Unfilled gaps in the factual record are explicitly acknowledged. The second category tends to avoid issues of partiality and interest, and accepts information from memoirs and similar sources uncritically. Quite a few

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18 This issue is explored in Gibbs, D. N. 2009. Secrecy and International Relations, in *Government Secrecy: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by S. L. Maret and J. Goldman. Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 360–80.

19 O’Brien, C. C. 1962. *To Katanga and Back*. New York: Universal Library. 6.

social scientists, whether for better or worse, fall within the second category.<sup>20</sup> It is not necessary to decide which research strategy is more appropriate to recognize there are two distinct, and to some extent incompatible, methods of evaluating certain types of commonly used source materials. Because different strategies of research yield different results, and because there is no reason to assume that these differences are likely to be reconciled any time soon, we have an additional barrier to efforts at research replication.

The basic problem may be illustrated with regard to the case of U.S. intervention in the Congo during the period 1960–1961.<sup>21</sup> A point of controversy concerns the assassination of the Congo’s elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, which occurred in January 1961. The key question is whether Lumumba was assassinated exclusively by his Congolese adversaries; or if the assassination was in fact directed by the Central Intelligence Agency (possibly in cooperation with Belgian intelligence). On this issue, it might be said that we have multiple and inconsistent sources of information. On the one hand, the U.S. government has long denied that it played any role in the assassination; indeed that it had any interventionist role at all in the Congo. In 1964, the U.S. delegate to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, stated: “From the beginning we have opposed – and remain opposed – to foreign intervention in the internal affairs of the sovereign and independent state of the Congo.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, this would imply that the United States also played no role in Lumumba’s assassination.

On the other hand, there is a vast body of documentary evidence suggesting that, on the contrary, the Central Intelligence Agency intervened extensively in the Congo, and that it plotted Lumumba’s assassination. During a 1975 Senate hearing, for example, former CIA officer Lawrence Devlin testified that he was authorized to “eliminate” Lumumba, which led to the following exchange with the investigator:

Question: By eliminate do you mean assassinate?

Devlin: Yes, I would say that was ... my understanding of the primary means.

I don’t think it was probably limited to that, if there was some other way of ... removing him [Lumumba] from a position of political threat.<sup>23</sup>

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20 For examples of naïve use of memoir material, see Scott, J. M. 1996. *Deciding to Intervene: the Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 125–6; Smith, T. 1981. *The Pattern of Imperialism: The United States, Great Britain, and the Late Industrializing World since 1815*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 156–7.

21 See Chapter 6, this volume.

22 Quoted in Kwitny, J. 1984. *Endless Enemies: The Making of an Unfriendly World*. New York: Congdon and Weed. 82.

23 U.S. Senate. 1975. *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. 24. The ellipses appeared in the original report. Note that the report refers to Devlin by a pseudonym, “Victor Hedgman.” For detailed discussions regarding later document releases on this topic see Weissman, S. R.

We thus have conflicting evidence, allowing researchers with different ideological and political agendas to present varying accounts. Researchers who wish to emphasize CIA intervention can cite the Senate investigation, while those seeking to exonerate American officials can cite the official denials; or they can simply avoid any mention of the issue at all.

I am tempted to take sides in this debate, and to underscore that the CIA was obviously plotting to assassinate Lumumba; the documentary record is clear on this point. Official denials by Stevenson and others—that the United States opposed all intervention—are not credible. Nevertheless, some researchers will naively accept the truthfulness of the official denials and will pretend that the United States was not running covert operations in the Congo.<sup>24</sup> In making these points, I am not suggesting a relativist position, nor do I imply that we cannot determine the truth regarding the Congo. My only point here is that the process of finding truth will defy notions of replicability.

### Newspapers and Replicability

Many researchers have placed special faith in independent journalistic sources of information, which (in contrast to memoirs) are considered disinterested. Much source material in both qualitative and quantitative social science research is derived from newspaper or magazine articles. Yet, newspapers too can present multiple, contradictory readings.

The problem may be illustrated by this observation regarding information sources on Israeli politics:

The Hebrew-language press is an absolutely indispensable window into Israel-Jewish society. Coverage of local politics and issues is far more hard-edged than most of what is carried in either the reports of the resident correspondents of the foreign English-language press or the English-language *Jerusalem Post*. Israelis themselves are conscious of this difference. An Israeli who immigrated from Poland in the 1950s recalled for us how his Hebrew teacher would give

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2010. An Extraordinary Rendition. *Intelligence and National Security*, 25/2, 198–222; and De Witte, L. 2003. *The Assassination of Lumumba*. London: Verso. Note that the Senate report argued that the CIA *plotted* Lumumba's death, but that these plots were unsuccessful; and that the actual assassination of Lumumba in January 1961 was undertaken without any CIA involvement. However, Weissman provides considerable evidence that the CIA *did* play a role in assassinating Lumumba.

24 Two lengthy publications pertaining to the Congo published by the State Department's Office of the Historian make almost no mention of any U.S.-directed covert operations. Reading these volumes, the reader would get the impression that no covert operations existed. For an extended critique, see Gibbs, D. N. 1996. Misrepresenting the Congo Crisis. *African Affairs*, 95/380, 453–9.

his class the exercise of translating *The Jerusalem Post* coverage of a particular story or issue into Hebrew and the *Haaretz* [a Hebrew-language newspaper at the time] coverage of the same story into English. The class soon noted that the *Haaretz* coverage was invariably far more informative and critical than the *Post*, and pointed this out to the teacher. “You must understand the function of the *Jerusalem Post*,” replied the teacher. “It is to give the American ambassador a happy breakfast!”<sup>25</sup>

This quotation nicely illustrates what readers of the international press have long recognized: different newspapers are motivated by varied worldviews that inform their coverage and, accordingly, they may print divergent accounts of the same news. The Parisian daily *Le Monde* offers substantially different interpretations of international affairs than the *New York Times* (and the divergence is greater if one compares the *Times* Sunday Review with its French counterpart, *Le Monde Diplomatique*). Al Jazeera television presents a different picture of Middle Eastern politics than that available through American networks. Within the United States, one can discern some differences among various newspapers, especially in Washington, DC, where the unabashedly conservative *Washington Times* offers a somewhat different perspective than the more centrist *Washington Post*.

Of course, press sources do not always contradict each other and, in some cases, newspapers can present consistent versions of events. The phenomenon of “monolithic” press coverage presents a different, though equally problematic, set of issues. The fact that newspapers report consistently and support each other’s coverage does not necessarily mean they are reporting in an accurate and unbiased manner. Even in democratic countries, newspapers can suffer from a variety of biases, and these may occur simultaneously in a range of different publications. The phenomenon of “pack” journalism—whereby journalists tend to reinforce, rather than challenge each other’s views—may accentuate such biases.<sup>26</sup> The problem of press bias is widely accepted in certain fields, notably communications. According to one authority:

It is an article of faith among virtually all scholars of communication that media in Western democracies speak with one, narrow voice and that they restrict rather than enhance political debate. It would be hard to find a paper presented at the meetings of the International Communication Association challenging this premise.<sup>27</sup>

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25 Cockburn, A. and Cockburn, L. 1991. *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israeli Covert Relationship*. Toronto: Stoddart. 361.

26 On the issue of bias, see Klaidman, S. and Beauchamp, T. L. 1987. *The Virtuous Journalist*. New York: Oxford University Press. 59–92.

27 Stevenson, Robert J. October 3, 1997. Letter to the Editor, *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Stevenson was Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina. While Stevenson’s statement, above, is somewhat

Newspaper coverage of warfare has been especially problematic, and journalists may become simple conduits for official propaganda. Writing of French soldiers during World War I, Marc Bloch observed:

The prevailing opinion in the trenches was that anything might be true, except what was printed ... The role of propaganda and censorship was considerable, but in a way exactly the reverse of what the creators of these institutions expected of them ... The men [in the trenches] put no faith in newspapers.<sup>28</sup>

Such suspicion may be regarded as a perfectly rational response to newspaper complicity in disseminating disinformation. It is easy to find evidence of questionable press reporting in more recent conflicts as well. The press accounts of the Tonkin Gulf incident of August 1964 presented in U.S. papers would read very poorly if compared with information on this incident contained in the *Pentagon Papers*. Research by Daniel Hallin<sup>29</sup> on reporting during the Vietnam War indicated that even after 1968—when the press was at its highest level of independence—news accounts still relied heavily on official sources for information about the war. Regarding the Afghan war of the 1980s, newspaper reports on the Mujahiddin guerrillas tended to celebrate the guerillas' virtues, and to eschew their weaknesses—a point that was conceded freely by journalists after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.<sup>30</sup> Retrospective analyses of press coverage during conflicts in Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf, and Yugoslavia revealed a high level of dependence on official information and a low level of reliability.<sup>31</sup> In such circumstances, the resulting inaccuracies are unlikely to be random—the press record may contain *systematic* bias.

The phenomenon of pack journalism gives rise to two very different research strategies. Some researchers assume press accounts are basically reliable, independent sources, and they assume that contrary evidence is insufficient to undermine the accounts' overall credibility. These researchers use news articles (or at least those found in reputable publications) more or less uncritically, as

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exaggerated, it is true that a wide literature in communications accepts the idea of a systematically biased media. On this issue, see also McChesney, R. 2000. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. New York: New Press.

28 Quoted in Fischer, D. H. 1970. *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial. 290. The ellipses appear in the original.

29 Hallin, D. 1984. The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media. *The Journal of Politics*, 46/1, 25–59.

30 Burns, J. F. February 4, 1990. Afghans: Now They Blame America. *The New York Times Magazine*; and Walsh, M. W. 1990. Mission: Afghanistan. *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February.

31 Sharkey, J. E. 1991. *Under Fire: U.S. Military Restrictions on the Media from Grenada to the Persian Gulf*. Washington, DC: Center for Public Integrity. Regarding press distortions on Yugoslavia, see Merlino, J. 1993. *Les Vérités Yougoslaves ne sont pas Toutes Bonnes à Dire*. Paris: Albin Michel.

repositories of accurate factual information, requiring little interpretation or double-checking against primary sources. Their assumption—that whatever biases exist will not seriously affect the end results—amounts to a central, if often tacit, research assumption. Other researchers, by contrast, assume press accounts contain systematic flaws, due especially to their dependence on official sources for primary information, and that such dependence could be highly significant. Researchers from this second school of thought subject press articles to a critical reading and evaluate them for evidence of bias, over-reliance on official sources, or inherent implausibility. We thus have two distinct and to some extent mutually incompatible strategies of research. The varied strategies for using newspaper sources of information present an additional impediment to replicability in qualitative research (at least for replication at level III).

### The Critical Reading Approach

The foregoing discussion is not meant to suggest that valid research through press accounts is impossible, only that it is difficult to achieve. It is possible to use even the most biased sources and come up with fairly balanced assessments, as practitioners of Kremlinology amply demonstrated during the Cold War. Barrington Moore, for example, undertook a classic study of domestic policymaking in the USSR during the Stalin era, which was based on (obviously biased) Soviet sources.<sup>32</sup> Allen Whiting's analysis of Chinese foreign policy during the Korean War was based on Chinese sources.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, intelligence analysts have long understood the art (it surely is not a science) of uncovering information based on careful reading of news stories.

The same techniques could be applied to studies of U.S. foreign policy, which could also use the technique of critically reading newspaper reports; such research would be considerably easier than was the case for the Moore and Whiting studies, given the exceptional restrictions on information in these two cases and the relative absence of such official restrictions in the United States. Through critical reading of source materials from various Western newspapers, and through systematic comparisons of information and interpretation, one could compensate for possible newspaper biases, in the way the Kremlinologists did, with a comparable (and reasonably high) degree of success. Indeed, historians such as Bruce Cumings<sup>34</sup>

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32 Moore, Jr. B. 1950. *Soviet Politics: The Dilemma of Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

33 Whiting, A. S. 1960. *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War*. New York: Macmillan.

34 Cumings, B. 1988. Preface to Stone, I. F. *The Hidden History of the Korean War, 1950–1951*. Boston: Little, Brown. For a similar approach, see also Gibbs, D. N. 2011. Sigmund Freud as a Theorist of Government Secrecy. *Research in Social Problems and*

advocate the method of critical reading of newspapers and magazines in situations where archival materials are not readily available.

There are two problems. Firstly, the method of critical reading being discussed is very time consuming. Critical reading calls for painstaking research, close attention to detail, and enough subject familiarity to set up a framework for analysis whose results will resemble reality. According to Cumings, critical reading seeks “the ‘one very queer detail,’ the ‘one odd shaped piece that doesn’t fit,’ and [can] thus demolish the official logic or construct an alternative logic.” Secondly, the researcher “reads a document the way Sherlock Holmes looks for fingerprints.”<sup>35</sup> This technique of critical reading would be difficult if not impossible to replicate, even at level I. To assess even a single event requires many separate judgments, always subjective in nature, regarding the reliability of certain sources and interpretations, and the unreliability of others. Different researchers, with different assumptions and theoretical frameworks, will render such judgments in complex and largely non-replicable manners.

## Conclusion

Overall, our verdict on the possibility for replication for qualitative research must be a negative one, given the subjectivity that is inherent to this genre. However, this finding does *not* mean that we lose the ability to distinguish valid from invalid theories, arguments or explanations. Even without the tool of replication, we can still assess a theory with regard to well understood criteria: we can assess the theory’s internal consistency, its simplicity, and how well its predictions accord with the empirical record.<sup>36</sup> We can also evaluate the quality of the source materials used to test theories. Finally, we can assess how well (or badly) certain theories meet these evaluation criteria, in comparison with other, competing theories.

Thus, replication may be one of the ways to establish validity, but it is surely not the only way. Some readers will nevertheless frown upon a social science that does not include the possibility of replication. This view ignores the fact that there are many areas of inquiry that are non-replicable. For example, argumentation in the legal profession is non-replicable. Legal arguments often contain novel features, the product of a specific interpretation by a particular lawyer; a second lawyer arguing the same case, with exactly the same evidence, may present a substantially different argument. In criminal trials, the decisions of

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*Public Policy*, 19. 5–22, [dgibbs.faculty.arizona.edu/sites/dgibbs.faculty.arizona.edu/files/FreudArticle.pdf](http://dgibbs.faculty.arizona.edu/sites/dgibbs.faculty.arizona.edu/files/FreudArticle.pdf) (accessed August 17, 2012).

35 Cumings, B. 1988. xv. Cumings is actually summarizing the approach of I. F. Stone, whose work Cumings regards as an exemplary use of the critical method of interpreting sources.

36 Hempel, C. G. 1966. *Philosophy of Natural Science*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. Chapter 4.

judges and juries are not necessarily replicable either. The process of evaluating the credibility of witnesses, for example, often entails a measure of subjective judgment, and this subjectivity will impede replication. Lawyers are well aware that who serves as judge and who serves on the jury can affect the outcome of a case (and thus, trial lawyers will expend considerable time vetting potential jurors). This constitutes an implicit recognition regarding the non-replicable character of the whole process, as a different judge and set of jurors may render a different verdict. Nevertheless, legal arguments and decisions can be evaluated for the adequacy of their reasoning, according to highly rigorous and well established criteria.<sup>37</sup> Few would argue that the non-replicable nature of legal decisions and legal argument renders the entire process invalid.

There is another analytical process that is widely accepted as valid, but is nevertheless non-replicable: tenure assessments at universities. The evaluation of a tenure candidate's record is once again a subjective process, as faculty assess research "quality" in a variety of often inconsistent ways. In close cases, such subjectivity may prove decisive in determining whether or not the candidate is granted tenure. The non-replicable character of tenure decisions is clear: a different tenure committee, composed of different members with divergent views, might well write a different report. True, the tenure process could be *altered* in ways that would make it replicable. Rules could be established that candidates must publish a certain number of articles in specified journals. Candidates who meet or exceed these criteria would automatically be granted tenure, while those who fall below would be denied. The process would then become replicable, as all subjective factors would be removed. But few faculties, even in physics departments, would consider this an acceptable procedure, as it would trivialize the process of evaluation and create an overly simplistic basis for assessing scholarship quality. The existing (non-replicable) system of tenure evaluation is clearly the superior one.

Thus, replicability is not an appropriate standard for establishing validity in certain areas of human inquiry, and these areas include both legal and tenure granting processes. Qualitative social scientific research too entails subjective features, which cannot be eliminated or simplified, and these form an insuperable barrier against replication. In qualitative research, as in law, one validates theories and interpretations through persuasiveness of argument, according to rules of logic, rather than through replicable experimentation, as might occur in the hard sciences. The expectation that replication can become a universal standard is thus unattainable. Whether for better or worse, we must accept a large measure of subjectivity in qualitative social science, with all of its implications for parapolitical scholarship.

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37 Levy, E. H. 1948. *An Introduction to Legal Reasoning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.