Efficient Process Tracing
Analyzing the Causal Mechanisms of European Integration

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1 Introduction

Why a separate chapter on the European Union (EU) in a volume on process tracing? Is there anything distinct about the analysis of European politics that would merit a special treatment? In general, the answer is no. The methodological challenges of studying the EU are pretty much the same as in other areas of research (although, see Lyall, this volume, on process tracing and civil war), and EU scholars have used the same toolboxes as those working on other polities. There is one major field of inquiry, however, in which process tracing has taken pride of place for both empirical and theoretical reasons: the study of European integration.

The study of European integration is about the development of the EU: the transfer of tasks from the state to the European level of governance, the growth of EU competences, and the expansion of membership. By contrast, the study of EU politics and policies deals with elections, legislation, compliance, and other topics that are well established in the analysis of other political systems. Standard methods of quantitative or comparative analysis are commonly used in these areas.

The study of European integration, however, starts from the premise that the EU is a rare or extreme phenomenon. According to a much criticized but also very durable assumption of EU research, the EU is a polity *sui generis*, “less” than a state but “more” than an international organization (Wallace 1983). Even if one treats the EU more openly as an instance of regional integration or multi-level governance, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the combination of deep supranational centralization and broad functional scope – the EU covers all policy areas and some of them are exclusive competences of the Union – makes it an outlier in the population of international organizations. As a consequence, most students of European integration prefer focusing on within-case analysis rather than comparing the development of the EU to that of other organizations and polities.

In addition, European integration is generally studied as a series or sequence of individual big decisions: for instance, to establish the common market or monetary union, to expand to Eastern Europe and start accession negotiations with Turkey, to empower the European Parliament, or to conclude separate treaties on free travel (Schengen) and fiscal stability outside the Community framework. In the first decades of European integration, such big decisions were arguably too rare, too causally heterogeneous, or too dependent on each other, to qualify for comparative analysis.

Even though these obstacles do not necessarily hold any more, there are theoretical reasons for process tracing as well. Many of the theoretical controversies in the study of European integration...
have to do with motivation and process. Take the traditional theoretical debate between intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism (or supranationalism). Both schools of thought broadly agree that governments negotiate and decide on integration in order to cope with international interdependence. They disagree, however, regarding the sources of interdependence, the nature and sources of government preferences, the relevant actors in negotiations, and the ways in which decisions are reached. Liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1993; 1998) claims that interdependence is exogenous (to the integration process); government preferences are conditioned by the interests of powerful domestic interest groups; negotiations are intergovernmental; and outcomes are determined by the relative bargaining power of governments. By contrast, supranationalists (Pierson 1996; Stone-Sweet and Sandholtz 1997) argue that interdependence is endogenous, i.e. generated by the “spillover” of previous integration decisions; government preferences are reshaped and constrained by such spillovers in addition to transnational interest groups and supranational institutions; and both negotiations and their outcomes are influenced by supranational actors such as the Commission. The more recent arrival of constructivism added more variation to this debate. According to constructivism, ideas matter for how governments deal with interdependence; government preferences are constituted by identities; and negotiations and their outcomes are constrained by European norms (Schimmelfennig 2012). Finally, on a more methodological note, studies of European integration are often outcome-centric and focus on examining cases of successful integration. In other words, they select cases on the dependent variable. This case selection procedure is useless for establishing sufficient conditions in comparative analysis (King et al. 1994; Geddes 2003).

Theory-testing analyses of European integration thus cannot rely on studying covariation between independent variables (e.g. interdependence and convergence of government preferences) that do not vary sufficiently across theories and a dependent variable (integration) that does not vary sufficiently across cases. For theoretical reasons, such analyses would most probably run into problems of overdetermination or equifinality. For methodological reasons, they would not be able to draw valid causal inferences. Rather, theory-testing requires examining how factors such as interdependence and government preferences are produced and in which causal order they affect the outcomes. In other words, theory-testing analyses of European integration require process-tracing for both theoretical and methodological reasons.

It is therefore small wonder that many influential studies of European integration follow a process-tracing design – implicitly or explicitly. This methodological choice cuts across theoretical positions. Andrew Moravcsik’s Choice for Europe “is a series of structured narratives” of the EU’s grand bargains designed to test observable “process-level” implications of competing theories of
preference formation, bargaining, and institutional choice (1998: 2, 79). The critics of liberal intergovernmentalism have objected to Moravcsik’s selection of units of analysis and cases or his interpretation of data but not the design as such. Paul Pierson illustrates his historical-institutionalist, process-level explanation of the “path to European integration” with a case study of European social policy (1996). Craig Parsons traces the process of how a specific set of ideas on the construction of European regional organization prevailed over its competitors in the French political elite and was institutionalized subsequently (2003). Adrienne Héritier (2007) examines institutional development in the EU on the basis of process implications of several theories of institutional change. This list could be extended easily.

In this chapter, I draw on several of these studies in addition to an example of my own work in order to illustrate how process tracing is done in the study of European integration. Before doing so, however, I make an argument in favor of “efficient” process-tracing (Section 2). The core point of efficient process tracing is that it maximizes analytical leverage in relation to the invested resources. It starts from a causal relationship provisionally established through correlation, comparative, or congruence analysis and from a causal mechanism that is specified ex ante; it selects cases that promise external validity in addition to the internal validity established by process tracing; and it confines itself to analyzing those process links that are crucial for an explanation and for discriminating between alternative explanations. As a result, efficient process tracing is designed to avoid three major problems of the method: the potential waste of resources, the temptation of storytelling, and the lack of generalizability. In elaborating the concept of “efficient process-tracing”, I focus on deductive, theory-testing process tracing in contrast to inductive, theory-building process tracing (Bennett and Checkel, this volume, chapter 1, xx; see also Beach and Pedersen 2013) and emphasize the design over the actual conduct of process-tracing analysis.

On the basis of this standard, I go on to present and discuss examples of process-tracing in studies of European integration (Section 3). Andrew Moravcsik’s “Choice for Europe” (1998) and Paul Pierson’s “Path to European Integration” (1996) represent the intergovernmentalist-supranationalist debate in the theory of European integration. “A Certain Idea of Europe” by Craig Parsons (2003) and my analysis of enlargement in “The EU, NATO, and the Integration of Europe” (2003) are two ideational accounts of European integration. All studies are examples of efficient process tracing but the criteria established in Section 2 also provide grounds for partial criticism. In the concluding section (Section 4), I summarize the insights gained from the comparison of these studies and discuss the prerequisites, trade-offs, and limitations of efficient process-tracing.
2 Efficient process-tracing

Challenges of process tracing

As a within-case method focusing on the causal mechanism linking factors or conditions to outcomes, process tracing occupies a unique position among observational research designs. Other single-case designs such as the “congruence method” (George and Bennett 2005: 181-204), which relies on the consistency between the theoretically expected and the observed outcome, are fraught with problems of causal interpretation such as omitted-variable bias or equifinality. Comparative or large-n analysis gives us more confidence in the relationship between “independent” and “dependent variables” but does not provide information on the causal mechanism linking the two. By analyzing process-level evidence on causal mechanisms, process tracing can claim, in principle, to increase the internal validity of causal inferences dramatically and thereby strengthen our causal interpretations of both single case studies and studies based on co-variation. Yet these unique and useful features of process tracing also produce severe challenges. I will focus on four core problems here: the resource problem; the measure-of-fit problem; the storytelling problem; and the problem of generalization.

Resources. It is generally agreed that process tracing can “require enormous amounts of information” (George and Bennett 2005: 223). To some extent, the standards of good process tracing proposed by Bennett and Checkel are general standards of good scientific practice: the search for alternative explanations, the consideration of potential bias in sources, and the gathering of diverse evidence (Bennett and Checkel, this volume, xx). In addition, any research design needs to make a decision on how far “down” and “back” the researcher wants to go in the search for “the cause”. In process tracing, however, the per-unit (case) investment of time and resources is likely to be much higher than in comparative analyses. This has mainly to do with design: whereas comparative analysis may work with a few data set observations per case measuring the independent variables and the dependent variable, the sequence of causal-process observations in process-tracing analysis can become very long. This is especially true if process taking is of the “soaking and poking” kind requiring immersion in the details of a case (Bennett and Checkel, this volume, xx) or if researchers heed the warning by George and Bennett that process tracing “provides a strong basis for causal inference only if it can establish an uninterrupted causal path” (George and Bennett 2005: 222). Because we never really know whether we have soaked and poked enough, and any causal path can always be more fine-grained and extended into history, process tracers are at risk to end up in an “infinite regress”. Moreover, process-tracing analyses cannot use the standardized, computer-based data-processing techniques on offer for comparative analysis. Finally, process-tracing analyses generally take up much more space – again on a per-case basis – for presenting findings than comparative analyses.
Measures of fit. How do we know that the process-tracing evidence is good enough to accept or discard a hypothesis? Statistical analyses work with levels of significance for individual factors or measures of fit for entire models. QCA tests for necessity and sufficiency of conditions and uses consistency and coverage to assess the fit of causal configurations. Both designs benefit from analyzing a dataset with clearly delineated and (ideally) independent units of analysis and a defined number of observations. Such formal measures of significance and fit do not seem to exist in process tracing. In part, this has to do with “the noncomparability of adjacent pieces of evidence” in process tracing (Gerring 2007: 178; Beach and Pedersen 2013: 72-76). The units of process-tracing, the individual steps in a causal path or the elements of a causal sequence, are neither independent nor comparable. Moreover, Gerring claims that the elements of the causal process the researcher chooses, and how many of them, can be arbitrary (2007: 179). It is also difficult to say what qualifies as an “uninterrupted” causal path in George and Bennett’s criterion for causal inference. Finally, whereas Bayes’s Theorem provides a general standard for evaluating process-level evidence (Bennett 2008: 708-709), its application to process-tracing remains informal and less quantifiable than the measures of fit for QCA with which process-tracing shares the non-frequentist mode of inference (see Bennett’s appendix in this volume).

Storytelling. Because the standards for selecting causal-process observations and making valid inferences are relatively open and malleable in process tracing, it is relatively easy to select, arrange, and present the material more or less consciously in a way that appears plausible to the reader. We may extend Popper’s classical critique of empiricism by saying that humans do not only have an innate propensity to seeing patterns and regularities (1963: 62) but also for constructing and telling coherent stories.

Generalization. Whereas process tracing maximizes the internal validity of causal inferences, it does not generate any external validity per se. In all fairness, process tracing is not meant to produce external validity, and other methods suffer from the same trade-off between internal and external validity. However, in combination with the high costs of process tracing for producing a highly valid explanation of a single event of the past, the uncertainty about generalizability can be discouraging (see also Checkel, this volume).

The 10 criteria of good process tracing proposed by Bennett and Checkel go a long way in acknowledging these challenges and devising ways to bound them (Bennett and Checkel, this volume, xx). “Efficient process tracing” builds on these criteria, in particular on the Bayesian intuition guiding process tracing inferences, but seeks to increase the efficiency of theory-testing process-tracing designs.
Efficient solutions

I suggest that process tracing deals best with these challenges and is used most efficiently if it is complementary to the analysis of congruence or co-variation; if it is used on cases that promise a maximum of external validity; if the causal mechanism is specified ex ante; and if the process links to be examined are carefully selected to provide for crucial, competitive theory tests.

Complementarity. First, process tracing is best used to complement analyses of congruence for (single cases) and comparative analyses (for two or more cases). The high investment in process tracing is most efficient if we have an “initial suspicion” that the causal mechanism has actually been at work and effective. For a single case, preliminary evidence is given if the values for the outcome and the explanatory factor(s) match the hypothetical expectation (congruence). Statistically significant and substantively relevant correlations serve as a useful starting point in quantitative studies. In QCA, conditional configurations with high consistency and substantial coverage are worth exploring further. Process tracing then serves the purpose of checking the causal mechanism that is supposed to link the factors or configurations with the outcome. Sometimes, it may also be interesting to find out why a condition that is present and that we assumed to be causally relevant did not produce the outcome – but even for process tracing of a deviant case, we need to establish the relationship between cause and effect first in order to know that it is deviant. By contrast, purely X-centered (“effects-of-cause”) or Y-centered (“causes-of-effect”) process-tracing is too open-ended and unfocused to justify the effort.

Case selection. If process tracing follows a single-case congruence analysis or explores a deviant case, case selection is not an issue. If it is designed to probe further into the causal validity of small-n or large-n correlations, however, the researcher needs to decide which case or cases to select for process tracing – assuming that it is so resource-intensive that it can only be conducted for one or two cases. This selection should again be based on considerations of efficiency: to maximize external validity while checking internal validity. Gerring and Seawright suggest selecting a typical case, which represents a cross-case relationship well, to explore causal mechanisms (Gerring 2007: 93; Seawright and Gerring 2008: 299). If there is time for two process-tracing analyses, the study of diverse cases that illuminate the full range of variation in the population is also advisable in order to see how the causal mechanism plays out for different starting conditions (Gerring 2007: 97-99; Seawright and Gerring 2008: 300-301). Both typical and diverse case studies types maximize external validity on the basis of the assumption that the findings of process-tracing in the selected case(s) are representative for the entire population. Alternatively, the process-tracing analysis of a crucial case also promises to be efficient. When dealing with positive outcomes, the best case is a hard or least-likely case. Based on theoretical expectations, the researchers chooses a case in which the presumed cause is only
weakly present whereas presumed counteracting factors are strong. If process tracing shows that the causal process triggered by the presumed cause produces the positive outcome nevertheless, there is good reason to conclude that this will be the case even more so in cases in which the causal condition is more strongly present and counteracting factors are weaker.

Ex-ante specification of the causal mechanism. As a safeguard against storytelling, process tracing should be based on causal mechanisms that are derived ex ante from theories and follow a basic analytical template. Such causal mechanisms tell us what to look for in a causal process rather than inducing us to make up a “just so” story of our own. “Coleman’s bathtub” (1986)\(^1\) or similar standards for a fully specified causal mechanism in the analytical social sciences (e.g. Hedström and Swedberg 1998) provide a useful template. They usually stipulate

(a) who the relevant actors are;
(b) how their beliefs and preferences are formed (macro-micro link or situational mechanism);
(c) how they choose their actions (micro-micro link or action formation mechanism); and
(d) how the individual actions of multiple actors are aggregated to produce the collective outcome (micro-macro link or transformational mechanism).

In addition, Gerring claims that “process tracing is convincing insofar as the multiple links in a causal chain can be formalized, that is, diagrammed in an explicit way” (Gerring 2007: 181; see also Waldner in this volume). I concur with his advice that “the formal diagram is a useful heuristic, forcing the author to make a precise and explicit statement of her argument” (2007: 182).

Selection of theories and causal-process observations. Embedding a process-tracing analysis in competitive theory testing provides a further safeguard against the “infinite regress” and “storytelling” problems, and it helps allocate research investments efficiently. Usually there is a manageable number of theories or causal mechanisms that are relevant for the case at hand and compatible with the initial finding of congruence or correlation. In other words, process-tracing can be limited to probing into and discriminating between alternative explanations that attribute the outcome to the condition (independent variable) but different causal mechanisms.

Once theories are selected, we can further focus on those links of the causal mechanism that are crucial for each theory and crucial for discriminating between rival theories. This matches Gerring’s advice to focus our attention “on those links in the causal chain that are (a) weakest [that is, most contested between theories, FS] and (b) most crucial for the overall argument” (2007: 184), and it is in line with Bayesian reasoning (Bennett 2008). If two theories agree that only states are relevant

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\(^1\) “Coleman’s bathtub” or “boat” refers to the way in which James Coleman’s scheme of macro-micro-macro linkages that is usually drawn.
actors, we can focus on states for the process-tracing analysis and do not need to probe into the potential role of other actors. If two theories agree that states are rational, we can skip examining evidence on their decision-making process and focus on the preferences or constraints on which the theories may differ. In other words, theory helps us target decisive – and, if possible, “doubly decisive” – test right from the start rather than investing time and other resources in tests that will give us less information.

By the same token, competitive theory testing gives us a clearer idea of the data requirements. It focuses our attention on those episodes that offer the possibility to discriminate between competing theories and to collect the data that is needed for this purpose. It helps us distinguish between irrelevant data and relevant data. Rather than wasting resources and space on a full, uninterrupted narrative from cause to outcome, we can focus on a small number of crucial steps in the process that are worth digging deep.

Which process links should we examine and which ones are dispensable? Process tracing starts from the assumption of a temporal and analytical sequence, in which later stages in the process are dependent on earlier stages. For this reason, we start with the first link in the causal process which is (a) a crucial or the crucial process element for at least one of the competing theories and (b) for which we have competing hypotheses and observable implications of the candidate theory and at least one alternative theory. In other words, there is no need to examine process links which are marginal or secondary for the theories involved or on which the competing theories agree. Under the same assumption of temporal and analytical sequence, any theory that is decisively disconfirmed in the empirical analysis of the first link is eliminated and does not need to be considered further at later stages. The process of selecting and testing additional links is reiterated until a single theory or explanation is left.

That means, if we only have two competing causal mechanisms and the first link provides for a doubly decisive test that confirms one theory and disconfirms the other, process tracing could stop in principle after the first iteration. There are, however, three considerations for pursuing process-tracing further. First, subsequent stages in the causal process may be at least partly independent from earlier processes. Transformational mechanisms are, for instance, often independent of preference formation mechanisms. This is a core insight of the theory of collective action and other social theories explaining unintended consequences. Second, the crucial process element for a theory may only come after it would have been eliminated on a less important link. Unless the later link was strongly causally dependent on the earlier link, it would thus be “fair” to keep the theory in the race until its most important process implications have been tested. Finally, the evidence may
not be sufficiently strong to discard one theory and confirm the other. In this case, further testing is necessary, too.

Table 1 “Good” and “efficient” process tracing compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good process tracing</th>
<th>Efficient process tracing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Cast the net widely for alternative explanations</td>
<td>Yes, but focus on those that are compatible with findings from analysis of congruence or correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Be equally tough on the alternative explanations</td>
<td>Yes, but eliminate them if their core causal-process expectations are disconfirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Take into account whether the case is most or least likely for alternative explanations</td>
<td>Yes, but also select representative or crucial cases in order to maximize external validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Make a justifiable decision on when to start</td>
<td>Yes, but let this decision be guided by the relevant theories and standard analytical templates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Be relentless in gathering diverse and relevant evidence ...</td>
<td>Yes, but limit yourself to the evidence that is needed to discriminate between competing theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Combine process tracing with case comparisons ...</td>
<td>Yes, but start with comparison to establish correlation and select the best case for process tracing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  Be open to inductive insights</td>
<td>Yes, if theoretically specified causal mechanisms fail to explain the case</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 illustrates how “efficient process tracing” builds on and further develops most standards of good process tracing discussed by Bennett and Checkel (2012). Efficient process tracing strongly concurs with the advice to specify testable process tracing expectations deductively (standard 9), and it agrees with the caveats that process tracers need to consider biases in the evidentiary sources (standard 3) and take into account that process tracing may be inconclusive in the end (standard 10). For the other standards, it puts the emphasis on efficiency-enhancing deduction, selection, and generalizability. Deduction helps us make a justifiable decision on when to start and how to specify causal mechanisms (standard 5); it helps us design more decisive and focused tests (standards 2 and 6); and it limits the relevance of inductive insights to instances of general theory failure (standard 8). Selection of theories based on prior evidence based on congruence or correlation limits the number of explanations to be considered (standards 1 and 7); and selection of cases based on representativeness increases external validity and generalizability (standard 4).

3  Process tracing in studies of European integration

In the main part of the chapter, I will present and discuss examples from the literature on European integration. As already mentioned in the introduction, many if not most studies of European
integration use process tracing as their main method or as an important part of the analysis. I reconstruct how they design process tracing and how efficient the designs are in light of the above considerations. In contrast, I will not discuss how they actually conduct process-tracing, that is, what data they use, how they analyze them, and how they draw substantive conclusions from them.

I start with two contributions to the debate of the 1990s between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism (or neofunctionalism): Andrew Moravcsik’s “Choice for Europe” and Paul Pierson’s “Path to European Integration”. I then move on to the more recent debate between ideational (or constructivist) and rational-institutionalist approaches and present two studies that seek to demonstrate the relevance of ideas through process-tracing: Craig Parsons’ “Certain Idea of Europe” and my own book on “The EU, NATO, and the Integration of Europe”.

Andrew Moravcsik, “The Choice for Europe”

Andrew Moravcsik’s “Choice for Europe” (1998) starts from the major theories that claim to explain the history-making decisions in European integration: neofunctionalism, federalism, realism and his own liberal intergovernmentalism. He develops a parsimonious “rationalist framework” of the stages of negotiation in international cooperation. Moravcsik uses this framework to model the causal mechanisms proposed by the various theories in a commensurable way and to establish at which junctures in the causal process their propositions differ. In each case, these propositions are translated into different observable implications and confronted with historical evidence. Although Moravcsik does not use the term “process tracing”, his methodological principles match the method well: “In each case, a consistent set of competing hypotheses is derived from general theories; the decision is disaggregated to generate sufficient observations to test those hypotheses; and, wherever possible, potentially controversial attributes of motive or strategy are backed by ‘hard’ primary sources (direct evidence of decision-making) rather than ‘soft’ or secondary sources.” Moravcsik is also aware of the advantages and disadvantages of process tracing: “Adherence to these three methodological principles has disadvantages – it accounts for the length of the book, as well as its continuous alternation between narrative and analysis – but the aim is to facilitate more reliable causal inference” (Moravcsik 1998: 10).

In more detail, the rationalist framework of the stages of negotiation in international cooperation and integration is an actor-centered framework providing the micro foundations for integration outcomes at the macro level (Moravcsik 1998: 24; see Table 1). It is thus in line with the methodologically individualist recipes for constructing causal mechanisms in the social sciences. The first stage is about national preference formation (macro-micro) followed by interstate bargaining
and institutional choice (micro-macro) with bounded rationality providing the (unobserved and untested) micro-micro link. At the stage of national preference formation, Moravcsik distinguishes between economic and geopolitical interests. At the stage of interstate bargaining, agreements could be explained either on the basis of asymmetrical interdependence or supranational entrepreneurship. Finally, institutional choice may be the result of federalist ideology, centralized technocratic management, or the need for credible commitment. Economic interests, asymmetrical interdependence, and the search for credible commitments constitute the main elements of liberal-intergovernmentalist mechanism of integration.

Table 1 Process-tracing framework of “The Choice for Europe”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of negotiation</th>
<th>National preference formation</th>
<th>Interstate Bargaining</th>
<th>Institutional Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative independent variables</td>
<td>Economic vs. geopolitical interests</td>
<td>Asymmetrical interdependence vs. supranational entrepreneurship?</td>
<td>Federalist ideology vs. centralized technocratic management vs. credible commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed outcomes</td>
<td>Underlying national preferences →</td>
<td>Agreements on substance →</td>
<td>Choice to delegate or pool decision-making in international institutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Moravcsik disaggregates each of the three stages into further process-level indicators. For the preference formation stage, for instance, he checks whether variation in interests is across issues (evidence for liberal intergovernmentalism) or across countries (evidence for geopolitical ideas and interests), when shifts in preferences occurred, how consistent EC policy was with other policies, who the key actors and coalitions were, and which interests or concerns were prioritized in domestic deliberations. Some of the indicators are based on characteristic patterns of cross-case variation; others correspond more closely to the idea that causal factors (such as interests) leave “traces”, e.g. in the temporal sequence of events or discourses. But Moravcsik’s selection is typical for the eclectic use of different kinds of “noncomparable” (Gerring) pieces of evidence in process tracing.

In general, Moravcsik’s three-stage rationalist framework of the stages of negotiation is not a straightjacket for comparative theory-testing and does not do injustice to the competitors of liberal intergovernmentalism. All theories under scrutiny are actor-centered and rationalist theories. All of them make assumptions about preferences and negotiations. In addition, the omission of the micro-
micro-link of “rational choice” from process tracing is perfectly justified. If all theories share this assumption, there is no analytical leverage to be gained from examining it empirically.

Liberal intergovernmentalism does not compete with each theory at each stage of the process: for instance, neofunctionalism also assumes economic interests; hard intergovernmental bargaining and asymmetrical interdependence are in line with realism. To overcome theoretical indeterminacy and to demonstrate that the liberal-intergovernmentalist explanation is better than the alternatives, it would therefore not have been sufficient to just focus on a single stage of the process. In other words, national preference formation and interstate bargaining each provide a “smoking gun” test for liberal intergovernmentalism. Taken together, they qualify as a “doubly decisive test” because they not only demonstrate sufficiency but also “shrink the hoop” until none of the competitors fits through it (Bennett and Checkel, this volume, xx; Mahoney 2012).

Does that mean that, from the point of view of efficient process-tracing, the final stage – institutional choice – would have been dispensable? This depends on the two considerations explicated in the previous section. First, is institutional choice the crucial process element for any of the theories involved? Institutional choice as such is an important but secondary concern for liberal intergovernmentalism: the emphasis is clearly on preference formation and interstate bargaining. It is certainly not crucial for realism (which does not even feature as one of the alternative explanations here). As I will argue in a moment, it is also not the defining process feature for neofunctionalism. One may, however, argue that institutional choice is the key feature of federalism. In general, federalist theory (in European integration) is poorly specified as a social science theory. Yet it has always put a clear emphasis on the “form” of integration. Whereas functionalism argued that “form follows function”, federalism stipulated that “function follows form”. In this perspective, examining the choice of institutional form is crucial for eliminating federalism as a competitor and should be part of an efficient process-tracing analysis.

Second, however, is institutional choice an independent stage of the causal process? In Moravcsik’s process-tracing framework, the first stage is national preference formation. Since the analysis shows that national preferences are indeed predominantly economic and only to a minor extent motivated by geopolitical concerns or federalist ideology, realism and federalism are “out”. If, as rationalist institutionalism assumes, institutional choice is functional and depends on the interests of the participating actors, it is hard to see how institutional choice should have been motivated by federalist or anti-federalist ideology or how it should have led to federal (state-like, democratic) European institutions as a result of economic preferences and intergovernmental bargaining. In this perspective, the study of institutional choice would indeed have been dispensable for efficiency reasons. If federalism is disconfirmed by an analysis of preference formation and if institutional
choice is largely dependent on preferences, federalism could hardly have been supported by an analysis of institutional choice.

There is, however, one omission in the framework that stacks the deck unfairly in favor of liberal intergovernmentalism and to the disadvantage of neofunctionalism: the feedback link between integration outcomes and preferences. This is not just one additional part of the causal process on which liberal intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism disagree. The feedback loop is central to a fully specified causal mechanism in the social sciences; and it is the essential element of the neofunctionalist causal mechanism of integration.

Neofunctionalism is a historical-institutionalist and dynamic theory. It does not dispute that the initial steps of integration match liberal intergovernmentalist assumption about the centrality of exogenous state preferences and intergovernmental bargaining power. It stipulates, however, that once supranational organizations and rules are in place, integration produces unanticipated, unintended and often undesired consequences and escapes the control of the states. For instance, integration may create additional transnational interactions that create demand for more integration in turn. Supranational organizations use the regime rules and the competences they have been given by the states not only to stabilize cooperation but also to further develop the rules and expand their own powers. The externalities of integration in one policy create demand for integration in functionally adjacent policy areas. As a result, the integration outcome modifies the material and institutional constraints under which the states operate and likely also affects societal and governmental interests. Moravcsik’s framework, however, does not include the feedback process and thus does not allow us to study whether or not national preferences become endogenous.

Finally, Moravcsik achieves external validity not by carefully selecting typical, diverse, or hard cases of integration but by doing a series of process-tracing analyses for all major treaty revisions in European integration up to the time writing. The result is a book of 500 pages. This is hardly efficient but justifiable given the problems of heterogeneity, time dependence, and small n for a comparative analysis of integration decisions from the 1950s to the early 1990s. It would also have been difficult to find an uncontroversial hard case for confirming liberal intergovernmentalism vis-à-vis all competing explanations. In sum, Moravcsik’s “Choice for Europe” is an excellent example of efficient process-tracing – with the exception of being “too efficient” regarding the omission of the feedback link from the causal process.
Paul Pierson, “The Path to European Integration”

Paul Pierson focuses exactly on the gap in Moravcsik’s process-tracing framework. He criticizes the “snapshot” view of European integration that omits the consequences of integration decisions for member state control. Whereas he concedes that “at any given point in time, the key propositions of intergovernmentalist theory are likely to hold” (1996: 126; italics in original text), the theory seriously underestimates “the lags between decisions and long-term consequences, as well as the constraints that emerge from societal adaptations and shifts in policy preferences that occur during the interim” (1996: 126).

Based on historical-institutionalist assumptions that elaborate and partly contradict those of Moravcsik’s functional theory of institutions, Pierson develops a causal mechanism for the “missing link” in Moravcsik’s framework. In a first step, he argues that member states are likely to lose control of the institutions they created due to the partial autonomy of EC institutions, the restricted time horizons of political decision-makers, unanticipated consequences such as overload and spillover resulting from high issue density, and unexpected shifts in government preferences. In a second step, he claims that member states are not able to reassert control either because of supranational actors’ resistance, institutional barriers to reform (such as veto powers or high voting thresholds), and sunk costs that raise the price of exit to the point that exit threats by member states lose credibility.

Table 2: The causal mechanism in “The Path to European Integration”

Source: Reproduction from Pierson (1996: 149)
Pierson then combines these elements of the causal mechanism in an arrow diagram (1996: 149; see Table 2) that illustrates the feedback link between “institutional and policy outcomes” at $T_0$ (as explained by liberal intergovernmentalism) and the member state preferences, bargaining power, and power of other actors that shape institutional and policy outcomes at $T_2$. At $T_1$ “micro-level adaptations (‘sunk costs’), “accumulated policy constraints”, “heavily discounted or unintended effects” as well as “shifts in domestic conditions” modify member state preferences, constrain or rebalance member state bargaining power, and/or increase the power of other actors thereby producing outcomes that would not have occurred in the absence of the institutional effects that liberal intergovernmentalism does not include. In a final step, Pierson briefly analyzes three cases in the area of social policy to illustrate these institutional effects (for a more extensive analysis of EC social policy, see Leibfried and Pierson 1995).

Pierson’s article is again an excellent example of an efficient process tracing design. First, it demonstrates how theories can and need to be elaborated for the process tracing of causal mechanisms (see also Bennett and Checkel, this volume, chapter 1; and Jacobs, this volume). Pierson explicates process-level arguments that are merely implicit and underdeveloped in the original formulation of neofunctionalism. In addition, he provides micro foundations for the various spillover effects theorized by neofunctionalism. Finally, he combines the elements of the causal mechanism in a process model that is represented as an arrow diagram.

Second, Pierson picks a hard case for neofunctionalism to build external validity for his analysis. According to Pierson, “Social policy is widely considered to be an area where member-state control remains unchallenged.” (Pierson 1996: 148) He goes on to argue that the “need for action at the European level has not been self-evident” (ibid.), presumably because issue-specific international interdependence was low. In addition, “member states have been quite sensitive to intrusions on a core area of national sovereignty” (ibid.), and earlier attempts by the Commission to strengthen the social dimension of European integration have not been met with success. In a typical justification for a hard-case design, he concludes that “even in this area – where an intergovernmentalist account seems highly plausible – a historical institutionalist perspective casts the development of European policy in quite a different light” (Pierson 1996: 150). By extension, we can infer that if the mechanism proposed by historical institutionalism works effectively under these unfavorable circumstances, they are likely to be even more powerful in “easier” policy fields.

This is not to say that the process-tracing design could not be improved. Although it is clear that the process-tracing case study is placed in a competitive setting between historical institutionalism and intergovernmentalism, the alternative expectations of liberal intergovernmentalism for the feedback link are not explicitly formulated. For one, it is sometimes not sufficiently clear how compatible and
incompatible elements of the historical-institutionalist mechanism are with liberal intergovernmentalism. For instance, shifts in domestic conditions, one element in Pierson’s account, would fit a liberal intergovernmentalist account as well and thus do not help to discriminate between the two theories. The question is rather whether such shifts could have been anticipated at the time of the negotiations but were discarded in favor of short-term gains and at the price of long-term losses. This is, indeed, Pierson’s argument in the case of British Prime Minister Major’s refusal to sign a Social Protocol at Maastricht (1996: 155).

In addition, the crucial element in the feedback mechanism for the theory competition is not that institutions develop in ways that governments did not fully foresee at the time of their making – remember that Moravcsik starts from the assumption of bounded rationality, and elaborating incomplete contracts and dealing with uncertainty is the major reason for creating supranational organizations. The core issue is whether governments are able to correct institutional developments that run counter to their own preferences. Efficient process-tracing would thus focus less on the link between T₀ and T₁ and more on the link between T₁ and T₂. It would need to show that member state preferences at T₂ were not based on exogenous domestic or international situations (such as changes in the domestic power of interest groups or changes in international interdependence) but on endogenous institutional effects of European integration. In case member state preferences did not differ from T₀, the analysis would have to show that even powerful governments tried in vain to rein in supranational organizations or change European rules because of resistance, institutional barriers, or weak credibly of exit threats.

The case studies in Pierson’s article do either not engage in such focused process-level competitive tests (as in the case of workplace health and safety) or provide less than conclusive results (as in the case of gender policy). Finally, the Social Protocol was still too recent at the time of writing to observe longer-term institutional effects. However, Pierson correctly predicted that the next Labor government would sign the protocol and thus constrain British social policy more than if Major had negotiated and signed a watered down version in Maastricht.

In all fairness, it needs to be mentioned as well that Pierson’s 1996 article was mainly meant to set the agenda for and design a competitive process-tracing analysis rather than conducting it at the necessary level of detail (Pierson 1996: 158). He admits to “daunting” challenges “for those wishing to advance a historical institutionalist account” (Pierson 1996: 157) such as “to trace the motivations of political actors in order to separate the intended from the unintended” or “determining the impact of sunk costs on current decision-making” (Pierson 1996: 158). Pierson is also keenly aware of the fundamental trade-off involved in process-tracing: “The evidentiary requirements encourage a focus on detailed analyses of particular cases, rendering investigations vulnerable to the critique that
the cases examined are unrepresentative.” (ibid.) This statement again points to the need to design process-tracing analyses efficiently in terms of both internal and external validity. By choosing hard cases from the area of social policy, Pierson did much to strengthen the potential generalizability of his results. In contrast, the specification of competitive observable implications for the crucial process elements was still underdeveloped in the 1996 article.

Craig Parsons, “A Certain Idea of Europe”

Craig Parsons shares the interest of all integration theories in explaining the EU as “the major exception in the thinly institutionalized world of international politics” (Parsons 2003: 1). In contrast to liberal intergovernmentalism, however, he claims that a “set of ideas” rather than structural economic incentives was responsible for this development; and while he agrees with historical institutionalists about the centrality of path-dependent institutionalization, he puts the emphasis on the “institutionalization of ideas”, “effectively defining the interests even of actors who long advocated other ideas” (Parsons 2003: 2) rather than on institutional constraints on governments material interests and cost-benefit calculations.

Parsons’ book is a study of French policy-making on European integration from 1947 to 1997. He subdivides this period into five steps of integration from the ECSC to Maastricht but also analyzes two instances of failure, the European Defense Community of the early 1950s and the “empty chair crisis” of 1965 and 1966. The temporal scope of the book is thus similar to Moravcsik’s “Choice of Europe” except that he focuses on France (rather than France, Germany, and the UK, as Moravcsik does).

According to Parsons, the selection of France is justified because France was the pivotal country for supranational integration in Europe: “The victory of the community project was not determined solely in France, but the key battle of European ideas occurred here”. In addition, he classifies France as a hard case for his ideational account and an easy case for its competitors. Parsons claims to tell “the story of how the state that invented the state, famous for its jealous defense of autonomy, with a deep bias toward dirigiste economic policies, delegated unprecedented amounts of sovereignty to a neoliberal and monetarist framework.” (2003: 33). From the point of view of efficient process-tracing, France is thus a good choice.

More than Moravcsik or Pierson, Parsons refers directly to process tracing – probably because the term had become more familiar to integration scholars in the meantime. For instance, he laments that other work has claimed the causal impact of ideas “without tracing the process by which certain
ideas become embedded as constitutive norms or identities“ and vows “to focus on this link” (Parsons 2003: 6).

Parsons does not develop the same kind of semi-formalized and graphically illustrated process model as Moravcsik and Pierson but a causal mechanism starting with preferences, moving on to collective interaction, and ending with feedback can be reconstructed easily from the theoretical chapter of his book. In addition, the ideational argument is contrasted with and tested against structuralist alternatives (comprising realism, liberalism, and functional institutionalism) and institutionalism (represented by neofunctionalism).

The first stage is preferences. Parsons argues that initial preferences on integration are ideational rather than structural. Conflict takes place between traditionalists, confederalists, and advocates of supranational community rather than between parties, bureaucracies or economic groups. Correspondingly, the first step of process-tracing is to determine whether or not preferences on integration are crosscutting groups based on structural interests and positions. In addition, Parsons looks for persisting debate along ideational lines. “As long as current patterns of mobilization do not trace to current objective conditions (and do trace to differences in rhetoric), we have evidence that ideational factors are currently influencing action” (Parsons 2003: 14).

The second, transformational stage analyzes how individual preferences of policymakers are transformed into French governmental policy. After all, “variation in individuals’ ideas does not mean ideas matter in government strategies” (Parsons 2003: 14). Parsons’ argument in this part of the causal process is not “inherently ideational”. Rather, leaders that have been (s)elected on the basis of other cleavages use the discretionary space they have on the integration issue to pursue their supranational ideas. It is therefore historically contingent and not part of an ideational, structural, or institutional mechanism whether leaders with supranational ideas or leaders with traditionalist or confederal ideas come to power. Parsons makes an interesting and non-trivial point which completes the narrative sequence from individual preferences to government policy. Yet the function of analyzing this stage of the process is unclear: because it does not directly test ideational effects against its alternatives, efficient process-tracing could have done without the analysis of this stage.

Moreover, a second part of the transformational mechanism is missing in Parsons’ argument: the micro-macro link from individual state preferences to European integration outcomes, which features prominently in Moravcsik’s account of intergovernmental bargaining, is dealt with only in passing. Parsons claims that “without the community ideas of French leaders, today’s Europe would look much like the rest of modern international politics” (Parsons 2003: 27): whereas all other governments would have been willing to settle for less ambitious institutional solutions, “French
insistence on the community model repeatedly decided the outcome” (Parsons 2003: 2). Yet this is not a mechanism-based argument. It is not clear how France has been able to impose its community ideas on its partners. Was it bargaining power, as structuralists would claim, or was it persuasion or social influence as an ideational account would have to show? If institutional feedback is the missing link in liberal intergovernmentalism, intergovernmental negotiations are the missing link in Parsons’ “certain idea of Europe”.

In contrast, Parsons returns to the competitive testing of causal mechanisms at the final stage: the institutional feedback. From an efficiency point of view, we can ask again whether the analysis of this link is necessary. First, is this link the crucial link for any of the competing theories? Second, is it conceivable that structuralism or institutionalism explain the feedback stage if the study shows that the French debate on European integration does not follow structural lines (and that government leaders pursue European policy independent of structural cleavages)? Both questions can be answered in the affirmative. First, as I have argued in my criticism of Moravcsik, the institutional feedback is central for neofunctionalism. Second, Parsons argues that even if structural factors were indeterminate at the beginning, structural signals may “have clarified over time” and shape preferences at subsequent stages of the integration process (2003: 15).

“Were it correct, we would expect that the earlier dissidents’ adjustments traced to identifiable structural shifts (economic, geopolitical, or electoral); that French groups or parties displayed greater internal agreement before deciding on later institutional steps (the imperatives forward now being clear); and that dissidents pointed to exogenous pressures to justify their alignment” (Parsons 2003: 16)

This is a clear process-tracing agenda. Against structuralism, Parsons claims that “broader elite agreement on European strategies arose in discrete steps that followed institutional initiatives by pro-community leaders, not clear structural shifts. Only after advocates of that agenda successfully asserted it in a new European deal did proponents of other views reluctantly adjust their strategies to a revised institutional status quo. In so doing, they consistently referred to pressures from the new institutions themselves. In a short period of time after each deal, they changed their strategies and rhetoric to present the institutional steps they had opposed as ‘in French interests’” (Parsons 2003: 16).

At the theoretical level, Parsons also distinguishes ideational and rational-institutionalist mechanisms of institutional feedback in terms of conversion vs. constraint logics. In the end, however, he does not really engage in competitive process-tracing for the reason that both logics would be hard to distinguish empirically (Parsons 2003: 18). That means, however, that Parsons’ criticism of
neofunctionalism ultimately rests on the rejection of interest-based integration preferences rather than on the core claim of Pierson and others that integrated institutions affect policy-makers’ preferences and behavior through rational adaptation and constraints.

As a final consideration, could Parsons have worked with fewer cases to make his point? First, the argument about the institutional construction of interests requires a longitudinal analysis. Second, it is most effective if it includes a period in which anti-supranationalist leaders made French policy. Thus, an analysis spanning the time period from the 1950s via the “Gaullist” 1960s to the relaunch of supranationalism in the internal market program was necessary. Only the analysis of monetary policy in addition to single market policies may have been redundant.

In sum, Craig Parsons’ study is highly efficiently designed to demonstrate the ideational formation of integration preferences against materialist, structuralist accounts of “objective” preferences. By contrast, the transformation and feedback stages contribute less to confirming an ideational explanation of integration and defending it against alternative explanations. For these stages of the process, the process-tracing design would have benefited from an additional process link to be studied (transformation of French preferences to European outcomes) and from the specification of observable implications discriminating between conversion and constraints as institutional feedback mechanisms.

Frank Schimmelfennig, “The EU, NATO, and the Integration of Europe”

My book on “rules and rhetoric” in the enlargement of the EU and NATO (Schimmelfennig 2003) deals with an aspect of integration that had long been neglected by the literature. Whereas integration theory has almost exclusively been concerned with “vertical integration”, the transfer of powers from the nation-state to an international organization, integration also has a “horizontal” dimension, the expansion of integrated rules and institutions to additional states and territories. Concerning this horizontal dimension, integration theory asks why and under which conditions nonmember countries seek to join an international organization and member countries agree to admit a new member state.

In terms of theory, the book is similar to Parsons (2003) in that it put forwards an ideational explanation of integration. In particular, it claims that rationalist institutionalism can only partly explain the Eastern enlargement of the EU (and NATO). The book starts with a congruence analysis of Eastern enlargement, which shows that rationalist institutionalism accounts for the interest of Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) to join the EU but not for the interest of the member
states to admit them. The CEECs were highly dependent on trade with and investments from the EU and poorer than the member states. They therefore stood to gain from full access to the internal market, subsidies from the EU budget, and decision-making power in the integrated institutions. The member states, however, had few incentives to admit the CEECs. First, the CEECs’ economic and trade relevance for most member states was low. Second, the prospect of their accession raised concerns about trade and budget competition. Third, massive enlargement dilutes the old members’ voting power. Finally, the CEECs depended much more on the EU than the other way around and did not have the bargaining power to put pressure on the EU to admit them.

In contrast, a second congruence analysis based on sociological or constructivist institutionalism shows a strong fit of explanatory conditions and outcome. Starting from the assumption that the EU is a community of liberal European states, the sociological or constructivist hypothesis posits that all liberal European states are entitled to membership in the EU if they so desire. This holds even if their admission produces net costs for the organization or individual old member states. In cases of conflict between material (economic) interests and liberal community norms, the norm of liberal membership overrides the economic interests and the superior bargaining power of member states. The analysis shows that the EU invited those ex-communist countries to accession negotiations that had consolidated liberal democracy; in addition, those that had become consolidated democracies earlier, were in general also invited to membership talks earlier. In a next step, the book reports a large-n event-history analysis of enlargement decisions in three major Western European international organizations: the EU, NATO, and the Council of Europe. This analysis confirms democracy in European non-member countries as the most relevant factor of enlargement. In sum, the study establishes a robust correlation between liberal democracy and EU enlargement which serves as a starting point for the exploration of the causal mechanism linking community norms with enlargement decisions.

The need for process tracing arises from the fact that various modes of action are theoretically compatible with the co-variation between community norms and enlargement decisions: habitual, normative, communicative, and rhetorical action. I suggest that the causal mechanism of social action can be conceived as a sequence of four stages or links (Schimmelfennig 2003: 157-159). The first is cognitions, that is, the set of beliefs or ideas actors hold about the world and the actors’ ways of thinking and making decisions. The second level is the goals actors set for themselves and seek to attain through their actions. The third is the individual behavior actors choose in light of their goals and cognitions. Finally, two or more individual behaviors form an interaction that brings about a collective outcome. Social norms can become influential at each of these stages or levels. The earlier in the process they do, the deeper the institutional impact on social action. Each of the four modes of
action is based on the assumption that rules have an impact on decision-making at different stages in the process of social action (Table 3).

Table 3: Modes of Action in “The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logic of Action</th>
<th>Cognitions</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Habitual</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td></td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Slightly modified reproduction from Schimmelfennig (2003: 158)

The stages of rule impact match the major links in the “bathtub” template of analytical social science. The habitual mode of action is the most structuralist one and leaves the least room for individual agency. According to this mode, rules have the deepest possible impact because they already shape social action at the level of cognitions. Normative action leaves more room for agency. It conceives the goals of the actors as norm-based. But they are a result of reflective and purposive choice, not of habit. Communicative action does not postulate norm-based goals and preferences but norm-based behavior. It assumes that actors with conflicting preferences enter into a discourse about legitimate political ends and means in which they argue according to normative standards of true reasoning and rational argument. Unlike communicative action, rhetorical action starts from the assumption that both the preferences and the behavior of the actors are determined by individual and instrumental choices. According to this mode of action, social norms will, however, affect the process of interaction and, as a consequence, the collective outcome. Rational action is the null hypothesis. It excludes the impact of norms at any stage of the causal mechanism. It was already disconfirmed by the congruence analysis and therefore did not need to be included in the process-tracing. Note that whereas Moravcsik’s process-tracing analysis does not deal with the modes of action because all theories in his set of competitors are rationalist theories, the micro-micro link is of key interest here.

While it is difficult to test the dispositional features and cognitive mechanisms assumed by the modes of action directly, they leave characteristic traces in verbal and non-verbal behaviors. To facilitate comparison and competitive evaluation, the observable implications that I specify for each process hypothesis refer to a common set of phenomena: (1) the CEECs’ enlargement preferences, (2) the member states’ enlargement preferences, (3) the initial reaction of the organizations to the CEECs’ bid for membership, (4) the decision-making process within the organizations, and (5) the
effects of enlargement on later enlargement rounds. I further referred to several features of efficient process-tracing:

Finally, note that, even though process analysis results in a more narrative form of presentation than the correlational outcome analysis of NATO and EU enlargement, I do not provide a full chronological account of the enlargement decision-making processes that one would expect in a historiographical perspective. Rather, I present ‘analytical episodes’ focused on examining the empirical implications of the process hypotheses under scrutiny. These episodes sometimes violate the chronological order and regularly neglect those aspects of the enlargement process that are not relevant for hypothesis-testing (Schimmelfennig 2003: 159).

I then formulate five expectations (relating to the five types of observable implications) for each mode of action. The empirical analysis starts with the candidates’ and the member states’ enlargement preferences and the initial decision-making process. Because the observations do not match with the expectations based on the habitual and normative modes of action, these modes are excluded from further analysis. In contrast, the egoistic state preferences and the strategic initial reaction of the member states were compatible with the communicative and rhetorical modes of action. In the next step, I therefore focus on the further negotiating and decision-making process of the EU and NATO as well as on subsequent enlargement rounds in order to discriminate between the two remaining modes. In the end, the observational implications of “rhetorical action” are shown to be more consistent with the actual process than those of “communicative action”. Rhetorical action thus demonstrates how egoistic preferences and strategic action can still result in norm-conforming outcomes.

Does this process-tracing design meet the criteria of efficiency set up in Section 2? First, the process tracing is clearly complementary to a set of congruence and comparative analyses that put into question rationalist-institutionalist theories such as liberal intergovernmentalism and establish a correlation between community norms and enlargement decisions. It is used to resolve a problem of equifinality: multiple mechanisms through which norms may bring about norm-conforming behaviour. Second, I contrasted several causal mechanisms and their observational consequences resulting from different assumptions about the actors’ modes of action.

But was it necessary to study all five links in order to determine the causal mechanism linking community norms and enlargement decisions? In hindsight, two of them appear redundant. First, since what really matters is the decision-making of the international organization, the preferences of the applicants do not seem to be relevant. The four modes of social action under study could have
been causally effective regardless of the motivations and goals of the CEECs. (And, indeed, the analysis of their preferences proved inconclusive.) Second, the brief analysis of subsequent enlargement rounds was not necessary either. Even though this analysis provides further evidence for the rhetorical action hypothesis, the effect of the first round of Eastern enlargement in the EU or NATO was not crucial for any of the competing hypotheses nor needed to discriminate between any of them. From the point of view of efficiency, it would have been enough to study the member states’ enlargement preferences and initial reactions as well as the subsequent negotiating behaviour resulting in the decision to admit the democratically consolidated CEECs.

Finally, I do not explicitly discuss the generalizability of the findings of the process-tracing analysis. I chose the case of Eastern enlargement out of interest in the issue and based on the perception that Eastern enlargement was a highly relevant event in the history of European integration. Whereas it is plausible to assume that Eastern enlargement constitutes a hard case for rationalist institutionalism, it may well constitute an easy case for sociological institutionalism. The external validity of my 2003 findings is thus uncertain (see also Checkel, this volume).

**Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have made the case for “efficient” process tracing. Efficient process-tracing builds on the concept and the standards of good process tracing proposed by Bennett and Checkel in the introductory chapter but pushes these standards a bit further in order to cope with four core challenges of process tracing that hamper its effectiveness and efficiency as an inferential method: the high amount of resources needed for process tracing, the absence of formal, quantifiable measures of fit, the temptation of storytelling, and the limits to generalization.

As a partial remedy to these problems, I proposed making process-tracing complementary to analyses of congruence and correlation; selecting representative or crucial cases; specifying causal mechanisms and their observable implications ex ante and according to basic templates of analytical social science; and design process tracing as competitive theory testing with a focus on analyzing the crucial process links on which the theories differ and that allow us to eliminate causal mechanism hypotheses from the competition. Following these recommendations, I suggest, helps us design harder tests, impede storytelling, reduce the required time and resources for conducting process-tracing analyses, and improve generalizability. It thus makes process-tracing both more rigorous and more efficient.

There are several prerequisites of efficient process tracing. It requires studies establishing congruence or correlation in our area of interest; theories with a well-specified causal mechanism;
and clear and observable implications of this causal mechanism. These prerequisites for engaging in efficient process-tracing may not be fulfilled. This does not mean, however, that the researcher should delve inductively into the case. Often time and resources are better spent by doing a comparative analysis that helps us pick a suitable case for process tracing and by elaborating and operationalizing the causal mechanism. In principle, social scientists have a big toolbox full of the “nuts and bolts” or “cogs and wheels” (Elster 1989) to construct theoretically plausible and consistent causal mechanisms deductively.

Efficient process tracing will also be undermined if either the implications of the theories or the available evidence do not lend themselves to rigorous tests that allow the researcher to accept and reject theories “beyond reasonable doubt”. But this applies to research in general. Importantly, because of its deductive design, efficient process tracing is more likely to alert us to problems of indeterminacy than the inductive search for causal processes.

In addition, however, efficient process tracing does come at a price in that it passes over several features that researchers may value particularly in process tracing. First, it replaces the full narrative from cause to outcome with a few process snapshots. Second, we may rashly accept an explanation if one theory quickly outperforms alternative explanations at an early stage of process-tracing analysis. It may well be that this explanation would not have performed well at later stages of the causal process or with regard to process links that were not tested because they were uncontroversial. Third, by privileging hypothesis-testing over hypothesis generation or the open exploration of explanations, efficient process tracing discourages or even prevents researchers from discovering new causal mechanisms or process features. Fourth, efficient process-tracing is mainly designed to bring about scientific development. It is certainly not the best approach to make process-tracing relevant for policy.

As a final thought, we need to bear in mind that efficiency is about designing process-tracing studies rather than actually conducting the analysis. In the end, the quality of the data, their analysis and interpretation are decisive for how good the conclusions are that we draw on the basis of process tracing. But that is true for all sorts of process tracing.
References


