PROFESSION SYMPOSIUM

Am I a Methodologist? (Asking for a Friend)

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

A DEFINITION OF THE ROLE

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

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

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

Evaluating whether you might enjoy teaching methods, however, is more challenging, not least because the amount of methods teaching a methodologist might do depends heavily on a given department's demand for and supply of methods courses. The diversity of teaching configurations across institutions limits the amount of general clarity that can be brought to discussions of this aspect of a methodologist's career. At a minimum, however, most methods teaching inevitably entails a cluster of research design and basic applied-statistics courses supplemented with other teaching. Whether that is enjoyable can be difficult to evaluate before embarking on such a career path—in part because the largely auto-didactic experience of gaining methodological expertise hardly resembles the teaching and learning experience for the modal student (who might have limited background and interest in methods coursework). Practicing as a graduate teaching assistant is an excellent opportunity to try out the role.[1] In time, it will become obvious whether this aspect of a methodology career is for you.

A DIVERSITY OF TYPES

If it is not yet clear, the generality of this role definition—only teaching methods and researching methods—means that it is considerably more diverse than it might seem at first glance. The group of self-identified methodologists is not comprised

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of only those who teach the quantitative graduate methods sequence at PhD-granting institutions; instead, it is a more heterogeneous population. To understand this, it may be possible to broadly (and therefore inadequately) imagine four prototypes of methodologist: quantitative, qualitative, specialist, and pluralist, as follows:

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

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

Stated another way: If you only want to understand *methods, you are maybe not a methodologist; if you want to* evaluate *and* create *methods, you may be a methodologist. Of course, it is challenging to know this when beginning a career, so I address these two key functions in turn.*

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

Strictly speaking, however, the opposite is true: "pure" methodology jobs are rare. In the 2015–16 political science hiring cycle, only 4% of advertisements on APSA eJobs were for methodologists (APSA 2016a). Similarly, only about 1% of job-market candidates are (primarily) methodologists (APSA 2016b), likely trained at a narrow set of academic institutions, and employed by a similarly narrow set of academic institutions. APSA's 2015–16 data suggest that methodologists do well on the market (i.e., an estimated 0% were unplaced); however, methodologists took postdocs and non-academic positions at a higher rate than those in other subfields despite nearly all candidates in the field having their PhD in hand. Considering the low number of individuals that market themselves as such, it therefore is debatable whether self-identification as a methodologist is career-valuable per se relative to identification with other disciplinary labels.

The decision to research and teach methods should reflect your own interests, not only perceived (and possibly inaccurate) ideas about the academic job market. Likewise, the decision to market your methodological interests in the academic hiring process should entail reflection on which of the various types of methodologist a given department might be looking for and which of those types you might enjoy pursuing as a career. "Can you teach methods?" is an inevitable interview question for candidates marketing themselves as methodologically inclined. However, answering "yes" is not the same as being or identifying as a methodologist. More than simply researching and teaching methods, outward identification as a methodologist sets up an expectation of outside recognition as a member of the group and professional evaluation

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according to the collective standards established by other (typically more senior) group members.

AN ACT OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Someone who meets the minimalist definition of methodologist—that is, methods teaching and methods research—still can decide whether to identify as a methodologist. Doing so may be valuable per se or may be useful for achieving a higher-order professional or personal goal (Kruglanski et al. 2002). It also may be costly in terms of marketability for jobs and defining the set of reviewers of your work and career performance. Perhaps most obvious, labeling yourself a methodologist is a likely prerequisite for outside recognition from others that you are a member of the set of methodologists and, therefore, a means to access the professional networks, academic employment, and career advancement in the subfield that such recognition allows. Identification, therefore, is a decision of some import.

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

Indeed, a stereotype exists that methodologists are a small group of individuals with similar personal characteristics who work in a narrow set of academic institutions on a niche set of research and teaching endeavors, and with an unending love for LaTeX. However, there is no secret cadre of completely homogeneous academic elites that have absolute control of the definition of that identity label. (Of course, there are institutions—for example, journals, the POLMETH conference, and conference divisions—that might resemble such a cadre. These individuals hold particular sway over the careers of those who aim to identify solely or primarily as a methodologist in that decisions about publication, promotion, and so forth will drift to subfield expert, as in any subfield.) Although there are certainly some (occasionally strong) norms about what methodologists do—conferences showcase these norms well—they are not as narrow or strict as they might seem. The plurality of methodologist types discussed previously and the APSA statistics on the methodological job market both highlight that it is the third and fourth types—those with particular methodological interests but also non-methodological research and teaching concerns—who fill the methodological niche at most departments and who constitute the majority who might be referred to or self-identify as "methodologists."

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In addition to comparison to the research- and teaching-related features of a prototypical methodologist, a self-identification process might entail comparisons along unrelated dimensions. The heuristic device of measuring "we" and "us" versus "they" and "them" tends to sort those who more closely resemble the extant group's members into the category and exclude those that diverge in some way. If "methodologist" feels more like a "we" than a "they" (and you are not saying "we" because you think you must or only because you think doing so might have an ill-defined career advantage), then there is a good chance you are a methodologist. However, the opposite is not strictly true.

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

Stereotyping along lines of personal characteristics is problematic. Self-categorization on the grounds of teaching and research interests is useful to avoid slippage: contrasting your sole research interest (e.g., in a particular case context) against the methodological research activities of methodologists restricts the label to those doing research in the subfield. That is useful, but comparison to group members along characteristics orthogonal to research and teaching activities risks inducing inappropriate exclusion from the group. In deciding whether to identify and recognize others' identification as methodologists, a focus on research- and teaching-related functions is far more important than the psychologically unavoidable tendency to rely on stereotypes defined by other features of the group's extant membership.

A PATH TO "I, METHODOLOGIST"

In summary, methodologists are those who teach and research about methods. We come in many forms. Pursuing a

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methodologically focused career thus entails deciding what type of methodologist you want to be (in terms of research and teaching), seeking guidance from those in that sub-subfield, and professionalizing yourself accordingly. There is no archetypical methodologist—only variations on some overlapping categories. It is particularly helpful to remember that no one is born a methodologist. Obtaining methodological expertise is facilitated by personal choices about coursework; autodidactic activities (e.g., reading books and papers, attending Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research or European Consortium for Political Research summer schools); conference attendance (e.g., attending POLMETH, the various APSA methods-sections panels, regional conferences such as East and West Coast experiments conference, and the UK Causal Inference Meeting); formal group membership (e.g., joining an APSA section); social interaction (e.g., talking to other methodologists and attending Visions in Methodology); research programs (e.g., writing papers about research methods); and publication decisions (e.g., submitting papers to *Political Analysis*). Being seen as and feeling like a methodologist can follow logically from engaging in these activities, which constitute membership in the set of methodologists. No one activity is individually necessary for such membership, but together they satisfy some of the various sufficient paths to becoming a methodologist *and identifying as one.*

Ultimately, "methodologist" is a role and also an identity. Fitting the role follows from practices of formal and informal learning and concludes with the production of methodologically focused research and the teaching of (some) methodological courses. It is nothing more than that. Fitting the identity—and obtaining the benefits (e.g., recognition, coauthorship, and employment) and costs that accompany it—requires a process of self-categorization that may not be easy and may not even be desirable. Like any social identity, this self-identification can fluctuate over time and is complicated by the unavoidable politics and stereotyping that accompanies attachment to a social label. However, if an aspiring methodologist realizes that being a methodologist requires, at a minimum, only a passion for research and teaching methods, then you can rest assured that with those boxes checked, you are already on the path to being—and possibly identifying as—a methodologist.

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NOTE

1. Given fairly broad aversion to taking on those teaching assistant roles, willingness to try teaching methods can produce favorable short-run advantages for willing graduate students.

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