

Some basic issues in the comparative methodology of cross-national social research¹

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What is comparative social research?

For most social scientists the very nature of social research is considered comparative, and thinking in comparative terms is inherent in social research. All empirical observations must be related to some kind of theoretical construction, and no theoretical construction has any value unless it bears some relation to empirical observations. When scientists choose to observe only part of the surrounding social realities the choice always represents a comparison of the selected phenomenon under observation in relation to other social phenomena, whether this choice is made explicitly or implicitly. Normal behavior and norms can not be studied without acknowledging deviations from the normal. Actually, no social phenomenon can be isolated and studied without comparing it to other social phenomena. Social researchers engage actively in the process of comparative work whenever concepts are chosen, operationalized or fitted into theoretical structures. Trying to understand and explain variation is a process which can not be accomplished without previous reflections on similarities and dissimilarities underlying the variation.

Therefore, one of the main questions is whether comparisons across national boundaries represent a new or a different set of theoretical, methodological and epistemological challenges, or whether this kind of research can be treated just as another variant of the comparative problems already embedded in social research. Quite another kind of questions is whether doing comparative research involving two countries is any different from

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research involving three or more countries, and how different the countries to be compared can be allowed to be, before they are no longer comparable. Answers to the latter kind of questions are usually referred to the limited theoretical context within which the variables are selected, because only within such a framework do these questions seem meaningful. But the search for answers also reaches beyond theoretical fragments and joins the eternal search for basic patterns of human behavior which transcends all cultural influences.

Some social scientists stand firmly in the belief that doing comparative research across national boundaries is no different from any other kind of social research. Therefore they include no special discussion on problems encountered in cross-national studies, but refer to theoretical and methodological considerations involved in doing multi-level research. Other social scientists pursue their ideas and data across national boundaries without ever giving a thought to the possibility that such comparisons may add to the complexity in interpreting the results of the study.

Still other social scientists are only too well aware of the many problems of doing cross-national research in a world of complex interdependencies. They consciously ignore the many stumbling blocks of the non-equivalence of concepts, a multitude of unknown variables interacting in an unknown context and influencing the research in question in unknown ways. And they deliberately ignore the scientific requirements regarding the testing of hypotheses in settings which do not and can not meet the conditions for such testing. Instead they go ahead, opting for compromises and trying to make the tools of sociological analysis provide new insights (Øyen, 1986a; 1986b).

The "true" comparativists acknowledge the points of view above, but argue that in order to advance our knowledge about cross-national research it is necessary to raise questions about the distinctive characteristics of comparative studies. Ragin, for example, states that one of the differences between the comparativists and the non-comparativists is that the former by a conscious choice define the macro-social units as real, while the latter tend to treat these units as abstractions that need not be operationalized and made explicit. Another distinction of comparative social science is "its use of attributes of macrosocial units in explanatory statements" in order to reach "the twin goals of comparative social science – both to explain and to interpret macrosocial variation" (1987:ch.1).

Alapuro and his colleagues distinguish between endogenous and exogenous models for comparisons. In the endogenous model both the possible causes and the possible effects are seen as located within the country being compared. The "utilization of general concepts makes one object of study in a basic sense comparable to others" (1985:22). In the exogenous model the countries are viewed as a system of interdependent units, and the position of a country within this larger system is considered an external factor affecting the processes under study.

Kohn identifies four kinds of cross-national research on the basis of the different **intent** of the studies. Here countries can be:

- the **object** of the study, i.e. the investigator's interest lies primarily in the countries studied;
- the **context** of the study, i.e. the interest is primarily vested in testing the generality of research results concerning social phenomena in two or more countries;

- the **unit** of analyses, i.e. the interest is chiefly to investigate how social phenomena are systematically related to characteristics of the countries researched, and
- **trans-national**, i.e. studies that treat nations as components of a larger international system (1989a:20-24).

The vocabulary for distinguishing between the different kinds of comparative research is redundant and not very precise. Concepts such as cross-country, cross-national, cross-societal, cross-cultural, cross-systemic, cross-institutional, as well as trans-national, trans-societal, trans-cultural, and comparisons on the macro-level, are used both as synonymous with comparative research in general and as denoting specific kinds of comparisons, although the specificity varies from one author to another. The confusion reflects the point that national boundaries are different from ethnic, cultural and social boundaries (Oommen, 1989). The implications of using nation versus country as units of analysis for comparative studies are different (Teune, 1990). A mere cleaning up of the ambiguities built into the different concepts only meets the problem halfway, as the complexity embedded in the social realities still remains to be accounted for.

Theoretical poverty and methodological compromises

The aim of cross-national research is to reduce unexplained variance and find patterns and relationships, but the variance reducing schemes presented in the studies do not often yield the relationships which are suitable as foundations for building theoretical explanations. Throughout the period we have been struggling with comparative research, one lesson learned is that whatever we do in the way of cross-national comparisons it must be theoretically justified - and cutting into countries theoretically is a complex process, the beginning of which we have only caught a glimpse (Teune, 1990).

If we accept that comparative research, whether it is carried out as cross-national studies or as comparisons on a lower level, has as its major aim the verification of social theories, after which attention is directed towards the present state of theory. Nowak argues that the development of sociological theory has been neglected for a long time, and that much of what today is called sociological theory is formulated in such a way that it makes empirical verifications of hypotheses or theorems "difficult or even impossible". Given that Nowak is right - then the major building block for conducting comparative studies is missing. More will be gained by developing sociological theory in general, also specifying the relationship between the different levels of analysis, be the studies cross-national or comparative on a lower level. Only through such a process, says Nowak, can we begin to close the gap between what comparativists pretend to do and what they actually are doing (1989). The term theory here refers to "possibly unambiguous sets or systems of laws, or to broad lawlike generalizations, integrated on the basis of a common unifying principle, with clearly stated topological and (or) historical conditions of their validity." (Ibid.:40).

It calls for a meticulous attempt to establish one of the basic building blocks that Nowak is demanding, namely that of translating a concept from one cultural context into another cultural context, without distorting the content and meaning of the concept, and without losing valuable and characteristic information through the translation. This is probably the area in which the social anthropologists have wrestled the longest, trying to interpret their

observations in "native" societies within the native system of explanation and without undue interference from their own Western culture. At the same time the observers face the challenge of communicating the original and interpreted observations back to a Western framework of understanding, and relating the observations in a meaningful way to observations in the Western countries. Only through such a process can concepts be developed and more general theories be formed so as to explain the behavior in the original observations as well as in the observations from the Western cultures (see for example Bohannan, 1963).

While the ultimate goal has always been that of building a common and unambiguous lexicon of concepts as an instrument for comparative research, part of the reorientation is to acknowledge that a concept can also be a variable among variables (Ferrari, 1990).

We have evidence of the failure of an entire theoretical tradition in sociology which was uncritically translated and exported from the "central" countries to the "peripheral" countries. Theories of development and modernization, in sociology as well as in political science and economics, zoomed in on the "undeveloped" countries in the 50's and 60's and paved the way for an analysis coined in the terms of the Western countries. In Latin America social scientists were instrumental in good faith in adapting ideas embedded in theories of development and modernization for political implementation. The analysis and the conceptual tools proved inadequate, theoretically as well as politically (Calderon and Piscitelli, 1990).

Requirements of a good theory are not only that the theory reflects the enormous complexity of the present social reality, the course of which is constantly being changed by its own actors. It should also enable the incorporation of the social realities of an unforeseen future, and include a meta-theory which reflects on the social and political consequences of the ideology underlying the theory (Galtung, 1990). The linkage to the fate of the theories of development and modernization in Latin America is evident here. No single theory can meet all these requirements, and Galtung therefore argues for working simultaneously with a multitude of theoretical approaches, none of which should ever be completely believed or disbelieved on their own merits. This is the classical ideal, forgotten in the empire-building of sociological schools.

In a critical review of the progress of comparative research Sztompka proposes a paradigmatic shift for cross-national studies. He argues that the models of comparative work have been outdated by the rapid changes in the social realities. "Galton's problem" is more problematic than ever, and the dubious logic of quasi-experimentation is even less feasible in a world which has grown into an interdependent and interlinked global system. The emphasis used to be on comparisons seeking for uniformity and attempting to establish generality of findings across national borders, in "an attempt to imitate the logic of experiment". Now the time has come, Sztompka says, to search for uniqueness and comparisons that point to the peculiarities of a country, to single out a certain category of people by contrasting them with other people, and to search for attitudes and beliefs that are atypical. To reach this goal a reorientation towards history and the humanities is necessary (Sztompka, 1988). The implications of such a shift also points to a revival of theories of deviation, and will certainly provoke a discussion in epistemological terms.

The question of whether it is possible to distinguish a specific comparative methodology, is further clouded by the fact that cross-national research becomes part of a "built-in

transition from internationality to interdisciplinarity: it is simply difficult to establish acceptable comparisons between countries and cultures without bringing in broader ranges of variables than those of only one discipline" (Rokkan, 1978:5). This implies that participating in cross-national research may require knowledge and the use of methodological skills with which discipline oriented social scientists are not familiar, and they will, more or less, have to learn as they go along.

Although Nowak (1989) and Galtung (1990) disagree on the goals and the theoretical framework for cross-national research, they join hands in defending the premise that basic rules of scientific analysis must be applied. Classical skills such as those of carefully constructing concepts and typologies, and securing ties between data and theory, as well as making use of inference, remain indisputable virtues.

Teune argues that cross-sectional analysis, looking at countries at a single point in time, and cross-time analysis, give artificial results because of problems of aggregation and disaggregation. After having critically examined some of the major cross-national studies he concludes that any set of categories established will create biases in the observations (Teune, 1990). So while our sensitivity to the problems have increased, most of the problems still lie unsolved.

Organizing for comparative research

It can be assumed that much research, comparative or otherwise, is guided by the principles of least resistance or invitation by opportunity. One of the central research strategies, although not much discussed, seems to be the preference given to available data and methodological tools, and the leaning towards accessible networks and easy funding. Many comparative projects would never have surfaced had they not adopted such a strategy. Organizing for comparative research, involving two or preferably more countries, and taking into account as many of the theoretical and methodological considerations mentioned above as possible in order to carry through a high quality study, demands resources of such a magnitude in terms of money, time and personnel, that only a relatively few social scientists will ever have the opportunity to control funds of these dimensions.

Political barriers to certain research topics are not unknown, and within UNESCO for example, some countries exempt themselves from participation in certain kinds of comparative studies. Social science is not a globally recognized field of inquiry, and as noted earlier, comparative studies can also be used as political instruments.

So far most of the cross-national studies have been confined to Western Europe and North America. This is also where we find most of the social scientists, the social research institutions, the data banks, the agencies for funding basic and applied research, and the infrastructure for conducting social investigations. The climate for using social research in policy making is milder here than in most other places, and we find that a discussion of comparative methodology can also be tied to questions as to what methodologies yield the best understanding of how social policies can be improved (Higgins, 1986; Lawrence, 1986).

From their fortresses of strength social scientists from developed countries have reached into the developing countries with comparative studies. The time of the "native" social scientists feeding their "educated" counterpart undigested data to be processed and analyzed in a foreign context, has passed. Now there is a widespread understanding, legitimated

ethically as well as methodologically, that cross-national studies profit from being conducted in close cooperation with researchers based in the respective countries and collaborating during all phases of the project. Familiarity with the national history and culture is now considered a prerequisite, as it provides an interpretation of the results which can not be obtained by an outsider. Some will argue that close collaboration with a country-based social scientist is necessary merely in case-oriented comparisons where local knowledge helps tie together the intensive data in a meaningful way. Others will argue that results from variable-oriented comparisons, based for example on data derived from national archives, can be interpreted by an outsider, cf. the earlier discussion of equivalence and the renewed emphasis on cross-historical approaches.

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