

Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

Comparative Research

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The major aim of comparative research is to identify similarities and differences between social entities.

Comparative research seeks to compare and contrast nations, cultures, societies, and institutions. Scholars differ on their use of the terminology: To some, comparative research is strictly limited to comparing two or more nations (also known as “cross-national research”), but other scholars prefer to widen the scope to include comparison of many different types of social and/or cultural entities. Yet other scholars use the term to encompass comparisons of subcultures or other social substrata either within or across nation-states or other cultural and social boundaries.

Although scholars are far from a consensus on a definition, the trend appears to be toward defining comparative research in the social sciences as research that compares systematically two or more societies, cultures, or nations. In actual implementation, comparisons of nations prevail as the dominant practice. The intent of comparative research is more universal: Comparative research aims to develop concepts and generalizations based on identified similarities and differences among the social entities being compared, especially in their characteristic ways of thinking and acting; in their characteristic attitudes, values, and ideologies; and in the intrinsic elements of their social structures. This then serves as a means of enhancing one's understanding and awareness of other social entities.

Historical Development

Sociology's founding fathers were all comparative researchers. Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Alexis de Tocqueville, to name just a few, all firmly committed themselves to the comparative method, whether they studied roles, institutions, societies, nations, cultures, groups, or organizations. Durkheim, for example, sought to find a general “law” that would explain national and occupational suicide rate variations. In the early 20th century, though, comparative research waned because its methodological resources were deemed insufficiently rigorous during a time when scholars were insisting that social research conform to greater and greater levels of methodological precision. However, since World War II, comparative research has

once again assumed its pivotal position in social science research, due in part to improved methodologies and methodological tools and in part to the international climate that emerged after World War II. That climate (the once polarized communist and noncommunist worlds, for example) and our ensuing internationalization have both contributed to the significant reemergence of comparative social science research.

Application

The purposes of comparative research are many, but one key task is to support and contribute to theory formation. Although theoretical frameworks drive the construction of comparative research endeavors, the results of such research often drive theory reformation. Another key task is to support policymaking, principally at the national level. Can Country B use the strategic policies of Country A in coping with a given social problem (drug abuse, for example)? Or are there unique differences between the two countries that render such a strategy impractical? Yet another purpose of comparative research is to ascertain whether the same dimension of a given concept (e.g., religious commitment) can be used as a common social indicator. Does a given concept generalize to all nations (or other social entities)?

Comparative research is all about perspective. Researchers in one nation need a means to adopt and understand the perspectives of their counterparts in other nations. As the world becomes ever more globalized, the need for such understanding should be clear: National policies need to consider and encompass the needs of the global partners in any way affected by policy implementation. Do policymakers have the necessary perspective to ensure such cooperation and compliance?

Comparative social science research is implemented under a variety of methodologies, ranging from strictly qualitative to rigorously quantitative. Case studies and similar kinds of analyses typify the descriptive qualitative approach, which can be conducted by researchers who are members of the social entities being studied or by researchers from outside the social entities being examined. The quantitative approaches to comparative research have assumed a more dominant position in recent years as the tools (especially computational, statistical, and mathematical) have become available to deal with the many methodological complexities of rigorous comparative research.

[p. 153 ↓] Empirical research surveys have become quite common, despite their often enormous complexity and expense. Complexities include the language barrier, which makes preparing comparable questionnaires difficult, and “cultural” barriers, which often make the preparation of comparable questionnaires virtually impossible: If you ask Americans, “Do you believe in God?” almost everyone says yes, whereas if you ask the same question in Japan, only about one third say yes, meaning that, beyond identifying these consistent response percentages for each country, asking the question in the two environments makes little comparative sense because no meaningful implication can be inferred. Similarly, asking about employment versus unemployment is irrelevant to a social group in which there is no such market-based distinction. In this instance, there is no “conceptual equivalence” between the two social groups in terms of the notion of “employment.”

Recently, advances in statistical methods have significantly improved the social science researcher's ability to analyze primary data and/or reanalyze secondary data. Methods such as COHORT ANALYSIS have been developed that can ease the need for rigorous sample selection, for instance, and greatly facilitate the detection and explication of similarities and differences among group data. Ofcourse, like all rigorous scientific research, comparative social science research is subject to the usual requirements for statistical validity and reliability, among others.

Examples of ongoing comparative research surveys include the Gallup Polls (since 1945), the General Social Survey (since 1972), the Eurobaromètre (since 1973), the European Community Household Study (since 1994), and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), which, since 1984, has conducted general social attitude surveys among more than 37 nations. The Japanese National Character Study has been carried out in Japan about every 5 years since 1953. Each of these surveys is conducted periodically over time and usually in multiple countries.

Why are nations different on some characteristic parameters but the same on others? The same question can be asked of other sets of sociocultural groupings, both across regional boundaries and within national or ethnic boundaries. Because national boundaries are not always the same as ethnic boundaries, comparative research is not always amenable to simple national boundaries. This phenomenon has been especially relevant to the emerging countries of Eastern Europe in recent years.

The ultimate intent of comparative research is to contribute to theory building or rebuilding by requiring yet more and more rigor on the part of theory, by insisting that research be replicable across different social groups, by facilitating the application of generalizations across different social groups, and by explaining unique patterns.

Future Directions

If, as globalization implies, there is eventually social and cultural convergence in the world, comparative research will once again wane as there will be few distinct social entities to compare. In the meantime, however, there remains much variation and variability in the world, and comparative research promises to further explain this to us and to further enhance our understanding and awareness of one another.

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