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International Comparative Research

Theory, Methods and Practice

Linda Hantrais



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Preface

For centuries, comparative approaches have been used to observe and analyse social phenomena and, more recently, to develop and test theory in the social sciences and humanities. Despite their long history, the debate continues about the fundamental questions raised by comparisons, more especially when they cross national, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Since the late 1980s, interest in international research projects and networking has grown exponentially, particularly within the European Union. Governments have called for researchers to be internationally active and to cooperate at international level. Within Europe, such cooperation is seen as essential in making the Union 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth...and social cohesion' (Lisbon European Council, Presidency Conclusions, 23–24 March 2000). Efforts to strengthen the European Research Area, combined with European enlargement to the East, and the rapid development of the data collection capacity of international organizations with worldwide reach have created a niche for a book designed to help equip new generations of students and researchers with the skills and knowledge required to make a meaningful contribution to the understanding of global research markets in the social sciences and humanities.

Within such a context, the present volume aims to fill gaps in a major body of hitherto largely disconnected and disparate literature by responding to the needs of researchers, funders and users of comparative research from a wide range of disciplines, different epistemologies, research cultures and national backgrounds. In recent decades, efforts have been made to prepare comparative researchers more adequately for their task. For example, the occasional series of *Cross-National Research Papers* (see www.xnat.org.uk), launched in 1985 and co-edited by the author of the present volume, set out to inform researchers engaged in, or contemplating embarking on, international comparative studies about the experience of others working in the field. Five years later, Else Øyen's (1990: viii) edited collection of papers sought 'to make visible some of the important choices' faced by researchers engaging in cross-national rather than single-nation studies, 'thereby displaying pitfalls to

be avoided and improving...awareness of available strategies and their limitations'. An edited collection published in 1996 by the present author and Steen Mangen aimed to provide an accessible resource book for cross-national comparative researchers in the social sciences. It remains, however, that researchers embarking on international comparative research across national, societal and cultural boundaries, as well as experienced researchers, funders and users of research findings wanting to enhance existing skills, often lack the knowledge, competencies and tools needed to conduct effective comparisons or evaluate outcomes.

The International Comparative Research Process

The task of contributing to a greater understanding of the research process is central to the present book. The objective is to provide researchers, practitioners, policy advisers and organizations commissioning international comparative research with a sound theoretical, methodological and practical resource covering the design, management and delivery of reliable comparisons. The book sets out to guide readers through the research process using illustrations from a variety of comparative studies, many of them with a strong focus on European societies, the knowledge base and the policy dimension. The chapters draw on real-life experience of managing and conducting international comparative research projects and studies, acquired over more than 20 years from personal involvement and from accounts provided by researchers at varying stages in their careers, to analyse and document the theory, methods and practice of international comparative research.

Mutual policy learning and transfer across national borders has become an important offshoot from comparative research at a time when international interest in policy evaluation and evidence-based policy is being developed far beyond the Anglo-American policy and research communities. Much of the work referred to in this volume is relevant to policy and concerns the contribution of comparative research to well-informed policy formulation, development and implementation.

The scope of the book is designed to be broad yet specific. It is broad both in its disciplinary coverage and in the approaches described. Examples are drawn from political science, economics, history, linguistics, anthropology, ethnology, psychology, sociology and public/social policy, ranging over quantitative and qualitative strategies. Reference is also made to innovative methodological approaches and the issues raised by combined methods. The book is specific in that it narrows the focus to questions relating to the theory, methods, management and

practice of international comparisons insofar as they add an extra dimension to comparative research and require additional skills when crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The volume adopts a topic-based approach, covering the definition and mapping of international comparative research, the selection of units of observation, disciplinary variants, concepts in relation to contexts, combined methods, the research–policy interface, evidence-based policy, policy evaluation, learning and transfer, and the issues raised by international project management. The chapters address the various stages in the research process and the impact of the international comparative dimension, from research design and data collection through to the analysis and interpretation of findings. The concluding chapter on research management devotes attention to the acquisition of team and networking skills, access to funding, the impact of funding bodies on the nature and conduct of research, and the contribution made by international comparative research to the development of theory, methods and practice in the social sciences and humanities.

Chapter Outline

The first two chapters provide a state-of-the-art review for readers who are less familiar with international comparative research across a range of disciplines. The introductory chapter sets out to define what is meant by international comparative research. It does so by seeking answers to two key questions: What are the defining characteristics of international comparative research across nations, societies and cultures, and what are the benefits to be gained from undertaking comparative studies in international settings? The chapter goes on to track the development of comparative research, particularly since the 1980s at European and national level, in response to the call for a coherent international engagement strategy in research and development to underpin a Europe of knowledge and the European Research Area.

Individual disciplines have developed their own distinct theoretical traditions, which are reflected in the research design and data collection methods they adopt in comparative work. These differences are often presented in terms of a dichotomy. At the one extreme are large-scale quantitative approaches such as those used by political scientists, for example to compare voting patterns or electoral systems, with the aim of identifying universalistic trends from which generalizations can be made. At the other are the fine-grained detailed qualitative studies undertaken by ethnographers interested in understanding how different

cultures have evolved. Drawing on a wide variety of examples, the second chapter examines how the whole spectrum of comparative approaches has developed and is applied within and across disciplines.

Chapters 3–5 will be of particular interest to those seeking to gain a fuller understanding of the international comparative research process. The aim in the third chapter is to explore the many components of research design in international comparative research projects, and to show how choices made at the outset can influence the research process and outcomes, and how the many pitfalls can be avoided or countered. The likely outcome of any international comparative project is largely determined at a very early stage in a research project. The selection of the object of inquiry, units and levels of analysis, the formulation of research questions, the theoretical and methodological approaches adopted, and the analysis and interpretation of findings are closely interrelated factors that need to be taken fully into account in project design. The rationale for selecting particular topics, comparators or units of analysis can often be explained by non-scientific factors. Yet the scientific rationale is critical in determining not only the inputs in terms of the methods and materials but also the outputs in terms of findings and dissemination strategies. The difficulties involved in reaching consensus over the epistemology of comparisons, the selection of comparators and the variables used within different disciplines and research cultures justify an analysis of the effects that these choices can have on research findings and, ultimately, on those who use them.

The lack of a common understanding of central concepts and the societal contexts within which phenomena are located and where national policies are formulated and implemented can undermine international comparisons. The purpose of the fourth chapter is, therefore, to examine how some of the key concepts in the social sciences and humanities are understood and interpreted in different national settings, and to look at issues of equivalence of concepts, procedures and interpretation. The chapter provides researchers involved in international comparative projects with a rationale and practical guidance for analysing socioeconomic and political phenomena in relation to their institutional and sociocultural settings. It tracks the shift in international comparisons in the social sciences and humanities away from universalistic culture-free approaches to culture-boundedness, and offers guidance on the selection of contexts, in recognition of the centrality of contextualization for the theory and practice of comparative studies.

The fifth chapter explores the advantages, but also the problems, of combining and integrating different research strategies within and across paradigms in comparative research. It reviews the reasons for the supposed incompatibility between epistemological approaches and the

methods that have come to be associated with them. It then examines the various ways in which methodological pluralism or multi-strategy research can be exploited to extend the scope of comparative studies, test and reinforce their validity, develop new insights and offer concordant or discordant explanations for observed similarities and differences. The concluding section acknowledges the limitations of multi-strategy comparative research while also reiterating its advantages.

The sixth chapter will be of particular interest to researchers, policy advisers and practitioners involved in policy-oriented research, since it examines how international comparative research in the social sciences and humanities can assist policy development. It asks what can be gained from studying the research-policy interface, what policy actors can learn from international comparative research into social phenomena, and how such research can inform policy. In seeking to answer these questions, the chapter begins by analysing the relationship between research and policy with reference to a number of theories about the utilization of social science and humanities research by policy makers and practitioners. It explores the differing nature of research and policy making, the limitations of social science knowledge, the capacity of research governance to integrate research and policy, and the attempts made to bridge the communications gap. The growing interest in evidence-based policy, policy evaluation, learning and transfer at national level, particularly in Anglo-American research communities, has further extended the scope of international comparisons. The success of policy-oriented studies depends on an in-depth understanding of the policy process in different environments. Such work raises a number of important methodological issues about the conditions that need to be met if lesson drawing and the transportability of policies across national boundaries are to be effective. In conclusion, the chapter reviews mechanisms for enhancing the synergy between research and policy.

The final chapter revisits the issues raised throughout the book to provide guidance for the effective management of projects that cross national, societal and cultural boundaries. It examines how the composition and coordination of research teams across disciplines and countries impact on research design and implementation. In addressing issues of funding for international comparative research, the chapter explores the implications of disciplinary classifications for access to funding, project management and cooperation. The conclusion offers a tentative assessment of the contribution that international comparative social sciences and humanities research can make to scientific inquiry, international understanding and the global socioeconomic knowledge base.

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1

Defining and Mapping International Comparative Research

Not all international research is comparative, and not all comparative research is international or cross-national. The social science and humanities literature has engaged in a long-running debate about terminology and substance. If agreement is relatively widespread regarding the meaning of 'comparative research', the same cannot be said of 'international', 'cross-national' or the other terms used to describe research that crosses national, cultural or societal boundaries.

In this chapter, an attempt is made, firstly, to reach a working definition of international comparative research, the preferred term in this volume, by addressing the 'what' and 'why' questions. The chapter goes on to map the development of international comparative research from its origins to the present day, with particular reference to the changes over the past century associated with globalization. The growing interest in international comparisons can also be seen as a response, at international and national level, to the call for a more coherent regional engagement strategy to support research and development, epitomized in Europe by the launch of the European Research Area in 2000.

Defining International Comparative Research

Attempts to define international comparative research raise two clusters of key questions that are the focus of the first section in this introductory chapter. The first cluster concerns our understanding of the term 'international comparative research'. What is international comparative

research? What, if any, distinction can be made between comparisons across nations, societies and cultures and within-country, within-society or within-culture comparative studies? Is it justifiable, accordingly, to talk about a distinct method and/or methodology in comparative studies that cross national, societal or cultural boundaries? The second cluster of questions involves discussion of the benefits to be gained from undertaking international comparisons. Why should, and do, researchers devote time and effort to the immensely complex task of designing, managing and conducting systematic comparative research projects? The 'when' and 'how' to compare questions are addressed in subsequent chapters.

WHAT IS INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE RESEARCH?

In the social sciences and humanities, 'comparative research' is the term widely employed to describe studies of societies, countries, cultures, systems, institutions, social structures and change over time and space, when they are carried out with the intention of using the same research tools to compare systematically the manifestations of phenomena in more than one temporal or spatial sociocultural setting.

Social scientists in general agree that international comparative studies require individuals or teams to compare specific issues or phenomena in two or more countries, societies or cultures, without expressly excluding the possibility of comparison over time. More specifically, in their definitions of comparative studies, political scientists tend to adhere to what has become conventional usage in their discipline, namely that comparison should be between countries or cross-national, thereby largely discounting intra-country comparisons and the temporal dimension as defining properties (Mackie and Marsh, 1995: 173).

Consensus is less widespread across other disciplines about the appropriateness of both the prefix 'cross-' and the adjective 'national' to describe the process, which is why the term is deliberately avoided in its generic sense in this volume. The prefix has been criticized for its functionalist connotations: 'cross', it is argued, implies that the phenomena under study in different settings are assumed to be functionally equivalent (Maurice, 1989: 178–9; Dupré et al., 2003: 10). In addition, the value and interest of 'cross-national' research is said to be limited because such research does not go beyond juxtaposition of data. Although this assessment may have been justified with reference to the macrolevel research carried out in the 1950s and 1960s, it is manifestly not necessarily the case in many of the cross-national comparative studies undertaken in later years. In further mitigation, it can be countered that this shortcoming is not inherent within the term 'cross-

national'; the same criticism could clearly be levelled against any purportedly comparative study that is not conducted using a rigorous comparative approach, as exemplified by much of the benchmarking activity, however designated, of the 1990s (Barbier, 2005b: 49).

In the absence of a direct translation for 'cross', researchers in continental Europe tend to prefer the prefix 'inter', as in 'international' or 'intercultural research', since it introduces the notion of context, now widely recognized as being crucial in comparative research, especially in studies that cross national or cultural boundaries (Schultheis, 1991: 8; Hantrais, 2007a). In this case, it can be argued that the prefix 'inter' conveys a similar meaning to the English 'cross', while 'international' is frequently used by Anglophones with another meaning, as noted below.

Commenting on the situation in the 1980s, Peter Grootings (1986: 285–7) drew a clear distinction between what he termed 'cross-national research' (CNR) and 'international comparative research' (ICR). He advocated ICR as the most effective approach on the grounds that it systematically analyses the relationship between the social phenomenon under study and relevant characteristics of the country. He contended that, in CNR, by contrast, contextual details appear only as descriptive background information in the final analysis, if at all. It could be argued that the key term in Grootings' labelling is not 'cross' or 'inter' but 'comparative'. Its omission from the first label is assumed to imply that the approach is not intended to be comparative and, as he explains in the same chapter, it is not sufficient for more than one country to be involved in a study for it to be comparative (Grootings, 1986: 285–6).

Another possible prefix, 'trans', is less often found in the comparative literature. The term is applied in 'studies that treat nations as components of larger international systems', involve 'transnational analysis' (Kohn, 1989: 23 and part VI), or describe 'tendencies in social policy which operate to transcend and/or bypass the nation state' (Jones Finer, 1999: 1). Melvin Kohn (1989: 99) goes so far as to append 'trans' to 'historical', arguing that interpretations must be historically informed and that sociological interpretations of cross-national differences are 'quintessentially transhistorical'. 'Trans' is also found as an alternative to 'global' in the context of 'transnational governance', suggesting 'interdependence', 'entanglement and blurred boundaries' to a degree that 'global' cannot. Organizations, activities and individuals, it is suggested, constantly span multiple levels, thereby 'rendering obsolete older lines of demarcation' and 'fostering the need for systematic comparisons and benchmarks' (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006: 4).

When the term 'cross-national' is chosen to qualify comparative research, it raises the issue of whether 'nation' is an identifiable and appropriate unit of observation and analysis, or can be considered 'as

context' (Kohn, 1989, parts III and IV). The same can be said of 'cross-cultural', which is, in addition, considered by its critics to be too particularistic (see Chapter 5 in this volume).

Another option is 'cross-societal', used in the 1960s and 1970s by Robert M. Marsh (1967) in the title of a book that attempts to codify societies as units of sociological comparison, and appearing elsewhere as an alternative to 'cross-cultural' (Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 4; Warwick and Osherson, 1973: 5–6; Ragin, 1987: 4, 6–7). Since the 1980s, organizational studies have used 'societal' without the prefix (for example Maurice, 1989). 'Cross-country' is rarely employed to describe comparative studies; notable exceptions are Edmond Lisle (1985: 20), Else Øyen (1990: 7) and Henry Teune (1990). Writing about comparative research after the Second World War, Teune (1990: 38–40) expressed his preference for 'country' as the unit of analysis on the grounds that it provides an appropriate point of departure for comparative studies.

In an analysis of the variables used in comparative studies of nations in the early 1980s, Johan Galtung (1982: 17) retained two of the three possible meanings that he attributed to 'nation': as a 'country' or 'state', defined as an autonomous political entity in territorial space; and as a sociocultural entity in non-territorial space, characterized by a shared culture. He rejected the use of 'nation' meaning 'nation-state', qualified as a country 'populated (almost) only by members of the same "nation" (ethnic group)'. When used in this volume, 'nation' is defined essentially as a geopolitical and sociocultural entity. As in the European context, from which many of the illustrative examples are drawn, the term 'cross-national comparative research' is, thus, understood to mean comparisons across legally delimited and administratively implemented national boundaries, recognizing that different countries, societies or cultures are contained within increasingly fluid borders (see also Chapter 3).

Again in the European context, 'international comparative research' has come to be used more loosely to refer to comparative research projects carried out by international teams. For Øyen (2004: 287), with particular reference to poverty studies, 'international' implies that large numbers of countries are being examined, opening up 'pathways to an internationalization of research'. As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, not all international projects are comparative, as would be implied if the descriptor 'comparative' was removed from Grootings' (1986) ICR label. Many international projects result in the production of series of parallel studies that may, or may not, have applied the same methods, and that may, or may not, have been conducted using a comparative research design. Throughout this volume, 'international comparative research' is used as a catch-all term to indicate comparisons across national, societal and cultural boundaries conducted within