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Comparative Research Methods

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Introduction

Whether it be buying a car or shopping for groceries, people consistently make comparisons to help them make decisions. Comparisons are also used in research to acquire new knowledge and improve the quality of old theories. Comparative research is a methodology that has been used for decades by social scientists and has been useful in the area of public administration in helping researchers determine the effectiveness of past or future policies and reforms. Comparative research has made huge contributions in the area of new public management and continues to help researchers accumulate information to give to policy makers.

Characteristics of the Methodology

Defining the Methodology

Comparative methodology is used for comparing a limited number of cases with the intention of finding and describing similarities or differences between the cases being studied (Warwick and Osherson, 1973). In public administration, comparative researchers compare cases from the macro realm of the private and public sector such as countries, institutions, districts or regions to determine what factors influence individuals. Researchers look for casual relationships between the cases and explanations for their occurrence (Thyer, 2001). In public administration specifically, comparative research is the "study of institutions, processes and behaviours [that are affected by] external influences and conditions such as societal values, norms and religion" (Jersiat, 2002, p.12). The combination of these external influences produce change in the institutions or areas being compared (Collier, 1993). This method accumulates data from other methodologies such as surveys, case studies, interviews and experimental design to make generalizations about what they are comparing.

Purpose of the Methodology

Comparative research is a descriptive analysis of two or more cases that tries to provide a better understanding of what influences the inner workings of what is being studied (Jersiat, 2002; Thyer, 2001). As Jersiat (2002) stated, the method compares a small number of issues and questions that allows researchers to improve "descriptions of conditions, define variables and focus more closely on the subject" (Jersiat, 2002, p.4).

The purpose of comparative research is not to provide a detailed description of an event, but to provide a general explanation of what is happening or to discover specific characteristics that are similar or different between cases. Lijphart (1971) advises, "Comparative analysis should be used as the first stage of research, in which hypotheses are carefully formulated" (Lijphart, 1971, p.685). It broadens the questions researchers ask, discovers different institutional features or effects of variables and improves upon our ability to explain issues and changes (Manheim et al., 2008). As stated in Yang and Miller (2008), the main goal of comparative research is to develop or improve upon theories that try to explain a phenomena in the cases they are comparing (Yang and Miller, 2008). By identifying patterns in cases, researchers can understand the conditions and actions that promote or demote good policies and demonstrate how they can be transferable from one case to another (Jersiat, 2002). The goal of comparative research is to challenge or expand upon the theory in question and to understand the impact of what is being studied (E.A.Lindquist, personal communication, September 18, 2008).

To understand the impact of what is being studied, comparative research makes generalizations about existing relationships between cases and predicts that this same relationship will form in cases similar to those in the sample. Generalizations are developed from aggregate facts accumulated by researchers across cases and are used to observe variations in how cases function (Jersiat, 2002; Warwick and Osherson, 1973). These generalizations are important because they allow researchers to expand upon the knowledge they would not normally acquire if they had restricted their research to their own country (Manheim et al., 2008).

Approaches to the Methodology

When deciding what data to use to make generalizations with, the researcher must consider what it is they are looking for and why they want to find it. Researchers must then determine what methodology provides data that would best explain their hypothesis and is fit for comparison. (E.A.Lindquist, personal communication, September 18, 2008). Comparative research uses both qualitative and quantitative information in order to get a range of sample variation (E.A.Lindquist, personal communication, September 18, 2008). Quantitative methods, like experimental design and surveys, tend to be more comparable in public administration because they provide the researcher with a variety of variables to look for relationships in. Qualitative methods such as interviews and case studies are also helpful because they identify variable traits over a period of time or across countries (Landman, 2003; E.A.Lindquist, personal communication, September 18, 2008). Quantitative data, such as aggregate data from governments, is more frequently used because it quickly provides the researcher with a large amount of information (Landman, 2003).

Types of Comparative Methodologies

According to Peters (1998), there are three types of comparative methodologies: process and institution studies, regional statistical analysis, and global statistical studies. Process and institution studies use examples of processes or institutions that appear to be similar or comparable. The processes or institutions are compared against each other and are then used to clarify and illustrate the “nature of the process or institution” (Peters, 1998. p. 14). An advantage to using this type of study is that it informs the researcher about different processes or institutions within the countries. Process and institution studies also allow for comparisons “across time and political systems” (Peters, 1998, p. 14).

Regional statistical analysis analyzes one region and uses its analysis to make generalizations about another region. Although the theories are derived from one region, once analyzed and generalized, the theories themselves become important and not the geographic region from which they were derived from. The disadvantage of this analysis is that it can encourage “conceptual stretching.” Conceptual stretching is when concepts are generalized and transposed to a different region. Caution must be exerted, as each region or country interprets the theory or terminology with a unique, culture specific perspective. Misleading research can occur because cultural context plays a large role in interpreting the theories. In brief, this form of analysis “trades complexity for an attempt to generalize” (Peters, 1998, p. 19).

Global statistical analysis works in a broader context by measuring political and socio-economic variables globally. Relationships are tested and identified between these variables. This method allows for an understanding of concepts and systems through empirical methods. Otherwise, normative methods are used as a basis for analysis, but now through experimentation and data analysis, they can be measured scientifically. Concept stretching is also a risk in global statistical analysis. Using the measure of ‘democracy’ as an example, the concept will be interpreted through different cultures and political and social histories therefore cannot be easily understood through the same lens. Statistics are not always comparable across countries because each statistic could have a different meaning in different countries (Peters, 1998).

Key Features of Comparative Research

After deciding what comparative typology to use, the researcher should confirm that the unique features of the comparative methodology will assist them in achieving their research goals. The key features of comparative research are as follows:

- Researchers can analyze the benefits and disadvantages of certain arrangements and examine a variety of internal and external factors that affect change and development in their cases. In relation to public administration, the comparative method "permits us to look at other societies in order to see a wide range of administrative actions beyond the horizon of our own experiences and as a result, elevate our knowledge of a variety of administrative issues and problems" (Jersiat, 2002, p. 2).
- Allows researchers to discover new methods or processes that may be more effective than current methods.
- Allows researchers to combine the strengths of a variety of research methods allowing them to make generalizations and to benefit from experiences elsewhere (E.A.Lindquist, personal communication, September 18, 2008; Warwick et al., 1973).
- Provides researchers with the flexibility to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to acquire data and to discover patterns across time and space, allowing researchers to look at a large number of variables at once.
- Gives researchers the opportunity to discover a combination of factors that contribute to change (Collier, 1993).

Research Design

Design Set-up

The comparative method is used when there are a small number of cases and many variables. When there are more than a few cases, a combination of comparative and statistical methods can be used. In these situations, the first step of research is the comparative analysis where the hypothesis is formulated and the second step is the statistical analysis where the hypothesis is tested with a larger sample (Lijphart, 1971). When designing the research, the researcher should not pick cases to intentionally match the hypothesis. Instead, research should be focused on “probabilistic, not universal, generalizations” (Lijphart, 1971, p. 687). This will occur when cases are selected in a way that encompasses the entire system.

The analysis should also focus on comparable cases. Comparable can be defined as being “similar in a large number of important [variables] which one wants to treat as constants, but dissimilar as far as those [variables] are concerned which one wants to relate to each other” (Lijphart, 1971, p. 687). When there are many variables, the comparative analysis should focus on key variables and exclude those of little importance.

Steps Involved in Using the Methodology

1. Ask a question that “applies from one culture to another” (Manheim et al., 2008, p 215). Due to biases present in each case, a thesis question should address a concept that can circumvent all bias to ensure a properly represented answer.
2. Find equivalent measures in each case. Equivalent measures can be defined as using the same variable in all countries or by using variables that are specific to individual countries. It is important that the variables “tap the same underlying concept” (Manheim et al., 2008, p 215), as interpretation through different cultures may vary.

3. Find case studies and sample selections. As there are limitations in finding good data, researchers are forced to work within a limited number of countries or regions to study. Importance is placed on the reduction of as many biases as possible, which can be done through selecting case studies or studying countries that have similarities based on shared characteristics. Another method is selecting countries that are different in a variety of ways to ensure a common characteristic among all countries is used as a basis for comparison. Independence among the different observations is also important. If the data is not independent, then the comparison will be skewed because variables will share influential characteristics.

Smart Practices

Smart practices in comparative research suggest practical recommendations for carrying out the steps of comparative research. Smart practices are the product of accumulated knowledge and experience in comparative research. If implemented, the practices outlined below contribute to a more effective use of resources and a stronger research design that produces meaningful and valid results.

Comparative researchers save time and resources by using existing research as their main source of data. Because of the expense and time associated with gathering primary data, using existing research as a data source is common practice. By using previously collected data, the comparative researcher spends less time working with unfamiliar collection methods and focuses more on applying the comparative methodology and interpreting results. Using existing research allows the researcher to conserve resources while concentrating on their areas of expertise.

After data sources are obtained for each case, the researcher must examine the data for equivalence. If researchers find non-equivalent case data, the second smart practice suggests that optional methods for presenting the existing data be investigated. This practice is carried out prior to discarding either the data or the project. Investigating optional methods for presenting data involves reconfiguring, combining, or redefining the ways in which cases and variables are presented to improve data equivalency (E.A.Lindquist, personal communication, September 18, 2008).

With equivalent data sources in place, the researcher may proceed with the comparison. On occasion, it may appear that neither the data nor the results will fully support the hypothesis. If this is detected, some researchers will choose to discontinue the study; however, this is contrary to the smart practices recommended by Lijphart (1973). The third smart practice suggests that comparative researchers should not abstain from undertaking studies that may not demonstrate a clear, causal relationship among variables.

Although the fundamental goal of comparative analysis is to demonstrate causal relationships, a secondary goal is the "parallel demonstration of theory" (Finifter, 1983, p. 106). Parallel demonstration of theory does not intend to prove causal relationships. Instead, its goal is to determine a model's general usefulness and to reveal potential relationships among cases. This method of comparative research permits researchers to submit useful models to the comparative research community that may later prove helpful in demonstrating causality between other variables.

Additional considerations

The smart practices associated with the comparative method concern the data collection and research design stages. During the analysis and interpretation stages, the researcher should adhere to cautionary guidelines. These guidelines involve the interpretation of negative results and the consideration of Galton's problem.

Obtaining a small number of negative results is a normal occurrence in comparative research. A hypothesis should not be rejected even though it is not entirely supported by the results. Although this may weaken a hypothesis, it does not necessarily refute it (Lijphart, 1971). Unsupportive results only “invalidate [the hypothesis] if they turn up in sufficient numbers to make the hypothesized relationship disappear altogether” (Lijphart, 1971, p. 686). Negative results may even provide value for future researchers. Negative results provide new insights into system traits and become a basis for future research questions.

The second guideline addresses the occurrence of non-independent positive results. When comparing nations, an issue referred to as Galton’s problem must be taken into consideration. Although a causal relationship may appear to exist between two variables for some nations, the relationship may not be independent. This occurs when the persuasive power of another nation is so influential that their influence affects policy decisions made by less-powerful nations. This relationship reduces the ability of the less-powerful nations to act independently. Galton’s problem requires the careful examination of apparent causal relationships for outside influence. Without variable independence, observed causal relationships become invalid (Manheim et al., 2008).

Validity is difficult to achieve when doing analysis across regions and countries (Miller and Yang, 2008). When comparative research is carried to different regions, the cultural context within that region or country may interpret the data differently, or provide different inputs. It is therefore important that when defining the variables, that the underlying concept be the same (Manheim et al., 2008).

Strengths and Limitations

To this point, mainly descriptive aspects of the comparative methodology have been presented. The methodology has been defined, its purpose has been explained, and its varieties have been described. Methods, practices, and considerations in setting up the comparative methodology have also been discussed. In the following section, the overall usefulness of the comparative method will be presented. The strengths and limitations of the comparative method will be explained so that potential users of the methodology may better evaluate its suitability to their needs.

Strengths

The strengths of the comparative method are encapsulated in its potential to facilitate researchers in carrying out the following tasks (discussed in greater detail below):

1. Analyzing and interpreting a small number of cases with a large number of variables without the use of statistical methods.
2. Furthering their understanding of system-wide traits.
3. Keeping within budgetary constraints.

The comparative method allows researchers to investigate topics with only a limited number of cases available for study. Examining a small number of cases with a statistical method would produce invalid results. The comparative method provides an alternative to the statistical methods for studying a small number of cases. It allows researchers to handle a few cases at a time and engage in a “systematic comparison that, if appropriately utilized, can contribute to adjudicating among rival explanations” (Finifter, 1983, p.105) without the use of statistical methods.

The comparative methodology also allows researchers to gain a greater understanding of an entire system. In comparing two or more units, the researcher begins to unveil system-level traits (Manheim et al., 2008). Patterns and correlations can begin to emerge and system traits become apparent. Comparisons may also indicate that the current understanding of the system requires revision.

Finally, the comparative methodology can be implemented for a relatively low cost. Financial and human resources needed to conduct studies using a statistical approach far exceed those involved with comparative studies. Since comparative researchers often obtain data from existing research, the costs associated with data collection are lower than other methods. The comparative method is ideal for researchers with limited time and financial resources (Finifter, 1983).

Limitations

In some instances, the elements of the comparative methodology that constitute its strengths also contribute to its limitations. The following tasks encapsulate the limitations of the comparative method and challenge comparative researchers (discussed in greater detail below):

1. Locating equivalent data sets across cases.
2. Determining an appropriate number of cases during the design stage.
3. Using the method in tandem with other methods.

In order to compare data, it must be equivalent. Although data sets may have identical labels, the content and meaning of the data may differ. Inconsistent data can result from different measuring techniques and different interpretations of vague terminology (Manheim et al., 2008). Researchers who use the comparative method face two major challenges as a result of the need for equivalent data. First, incompatible sets of data limit the overall selection of variables that are available to researchers for study. Second, incompatible data sets make the comparison of some very different cases nearly impossible. Although incorporating smart practices into research attempt to minimize this problem, non-equivalency continues to limit comparative researchers.

The challenges of finding equivalent data explain why the methodology is only suitable for comparing a small number of cases. The comparative method is limited in its ability to compare a large number of cases. As the number of cases for comparison increases, the challenge of locating equivalent data sets for all cases becomes more difficult. Comparing a large number of cases ultimately means that the variables available for comparison will be more superficial and less meaningful (Mills, 2006).

The comparative method is further limited in that it cannot be used as a stand-alone methodology. As discussed previously, data for comparative studies comes from research prepared using other methodologies. Comparative researchers should be reasonably familiar with other methodologies, such as content analysis, case studies, or surveys, which provide the source data for comparisons (E.A.Lindquist, personal communication, September 18, 2008).

Prior to conducting comparative research, the methodology's strengths and limitations should be examined and assessed for suitability to a specific experiment. The researcher is advised to consult well-recognized texts and journal articles available on the comparative method prior to beginning research design. To assist the researcher with this process, the following section, *Additional Resources*, recommends fundamental literature in the field of comparative research and provides exemplars for additional reference.

Additional Resources

Fundamental Readings in Comparative Research

Arend Lijphart's article, *Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method* (1971), is cited in most comparative research texts. The article explains how the comparative method stems from the scientific method. The article also outlines when the methodology should be used and how to the variables and cases can be prepared for comparative research. The author also defines the various methods of case study and examines how case studies are used in comparative research.

Manheim, Rick, Willnat, and Brians briefly discuss the comparative method in their text *Empirical Political Analysis: Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods, 7th edition,* (2008). The text presents the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges associated with the most common sub-types of the comparative methodology. The authors use simple and modern examples to demonstrate the theoretical concepts of comparative research.

David Collier contributes a chapter on the comparative methodology in A. W. Finifter's text *Political Science: The State of Discipline II* (1993). Collier begins by defining the purpose of comparative research. Purposes and goals of comparative research are then compared with the purposes and goals of other approaches: case, experimental, and statistical. Collier also discusses the recent blending of the comparative and case study methods.

In their article, *Debating the Direction of Comparative Politics* (2007), Munck and Snyder offer a modern view of the scope and objective of comparative political research. The authors tabulate and analyze statistical data on the current practices among comparative researchers.

In his book *Comparative Politics: Theory and Methods* (1998), Guy Roberts provides researchers with a comprehensive guide on the comparative method. The text discusses topics of key importance including sub-types, strengths and weaknesses, research design, and types of measurement bias associated with the comparative method.

Exemplars in the Field of Comparative Research

A simple example of the comparative research method can be found in the article, *Evaluating the Reform of Social Services in Italy: A Comparative Analysis* (2008) by Turrini and Montanelli. The authors conducted an inductive, qualitative study which compared the implementation of social service reform in two different regions of Italy. Data was gathered for the comparison by means of content analysis. The authors compared social service reform implementation and determined that a unique social services model in Italy does not exist.

The article, *A Comparison of the Values and Commitment of Private Sector, Public Sector, and Parapublic Sector Employees* (2006), by Duxbury, Higgins, and Lyons provides an example of inductive and quantitative comparative research. In the study, the researchers obtained data for comparison from a self-prepared survey. The authors compared the survey results from three sectors to determine the similarities and differences in employee values and commitment. The comparison process involved a review of the statistical data followed by a brief analytical interpretation.

Conclusion

Comparative research should be used when the researcher wants to include a large number of variables in their comparison of a small number of cases. The goal of comparative research is to discover or expand upon existing theories and to form generalizations about the institutions, region or countries under comparison. The method uses the strengths of different research methodologies to discover patterns of similarities, differences, and variables that influence cases. There are a number of strengths and limitations the researcher must consider when deciding what data and design to use. It is beneficial for the researcher to educate themselves on relevant smart practices and past research.

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