Cross-national Research: What Can We Learn from Inter-country Comparisons?

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Recent years have seen an increase of interest in cross-national research, most noticeably in the area of social policy but also in the field of social work. The inclusion of a variety of new research methodologies under the banner of comparative research has meant that understanding and using findings are becoming more problematic for interested researchers, practitioners and students. In the light of these developments this article explores some key issues in contemporary cross-national research. It is divided into three parts: the first part examines the aims and purposes of different types of cross-national research. The second goes on to consider some of the common problems that researchers face in planning and carrying out comparative projects and in interpreting their findings. These difficulties range from conceptual issues, such as the inter-country comparability of policies, structures and professional roles and linguistic equivalence, to the practical problems researchers typically encounter when organising cross-national research. It is argued that increasing our awareness of possible obstacles enables us to clarify our aims, objectives and methods. The third section considers what we can learn from comparisons and identifies four main ways in which cross-national research can help us to develop our knowledge and understanding, not only of others, but also of ourselves.

Introduction

Until the last decade or so, being interested in (and finding out about) ‘what they do elsewhere’ was largely the domain of anthropology but the phenomena of globalisation and what might be called Europeanisation - the extension of the EU into the furthest reaches of the continent and into more aspects of our lives - have given a particular impetus to extending sociological, economic and policy analyses beyond national borders. These phenomena have also given new meanings to all those aspects of our collective lives with which we differentiate ourselves from others - our notions of geographical, political, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Understanding and defining who ‘they’ are and who ‘we’ are in relation to these shifting boundaries, and seeking ways of operating within, beyond and across them, have become imperatives that have found most obvious expression politically. But we can also detect these concerns in other forms, and the last decade has seen a rise in interest in cross-national research, particularly in the field of social policy and, as this journal demonstrates, in social work.

A notable feature of the development of cross-national research is the attention that is paid to methodological as well as theoretical issues. However, even a cursory survey of comparative texts in these fields reveals a wide range of different research approaches, methods and data, all claiming a place in this developing body of knowledge. Equally noticeable, is the general dearth of discussion of comparative methodologies in standard social research texts, apart from a few exceptions, such as May (1997). This means that for many of us - whether students, researchers, practitioners, or policy makers - making sense of these diverse (and sometimes competing) claims, and trying to find ways of learning from them and perhaps even utilising them, is becoming increasingly difficult.

With this situation in mind it seems time to take stock of ‘cross-national’ and ‘comparative’ research. My aim is to do this, not by reducing these terms to ‘definitions’ and ‘principles’, but to examine the aims and purposes of cross-national, comparative research; to explore the conceptual and practical obstacles that are involved in achieving these, and finally to consider what we can learn from comparisons.

Aims and purposes

Finding out ‘what happens’ or ‘what it is like’ in another country lies at the core of cross-national and comparative research. However, it could be argued that, rather than aiming simply to describe another system or set of practices, all cross-national research is implicitly comparative (and most explicitly, so) in that it seeks to identify
commonalities and differences between countries and infer from these. Whatever name we give to researching into another country’s way of doing things, the fundamental starting point, as with all research, is curiosity and interest. However, what interests us, how we investigate it and our purposes - what we want to do with the data we collect - give rise to different types of international research. In the field of social care and welfare, for example, in addition to developing our understanding of phenomena and gaining new perspectives, we might also want to use the knowledge gleaned from cross-national studies to contribute to social improvement by proposing changes to policy or practice.

There have been a number of attempts to make sense of the diversity of studies that fall under the heading of cross-national research by creating typologies. An accessible example of these is that of Kohn (1989), who proposes four main ways in which other countries can be researched. Though their purposes are distinguishable and their theoretical implications somewhat different, these four types of cross-national research are not sharply differentiated from one another but, he suggests, can be thought of as gradations, shading into one another. Firstly, countries can be the objects of study. Here the countries, or particular institutions in them, are the main focus of interest, so that for example, we might compare Italy and England through their psychiatric systems. In this type of research, the researcher wants to know more about those countries for their own sakes, rather than using them as vehicles for a more general understanding of psychiatry (though of course this may be a likely spin-off).

Alternatively, if psychiatry is our primary interest, then countries can provide the context of the study. Here we want to study a phenomenon across two or more countries to find out more about it. The third type of cross-national research is where the countries studied form the unit of analysis, to find out how social phenomena are systematically related to other characteristics of the countries concerned. We might, for example, seek to understand how education systems are related to employment patterns. Lastly, is trans-national research, where countries are treated as components of a larger international system; we are perhaps most familiar with this approach in economic and political analyses of capitalist expansion, global markets and so forth.

For those of us trying to come to grips with the field, a further potentially confusing layer of variation lies in the fact that these types of cross-national research not only involve differences of purpose and focus but also of scale and level of analysis. Thus a typical distinction is made between macro and micro level research; between large scale analyses which focus on the general, identifying broad similarities and differences, for example in patterns of welfare delivery, and the case study approach, where interest lies in the specific and contextualised nature of systems and the ways in which they operate. (For further discussion see Ragin 1989; Mabbett & Bolderson, 1999; Øyen, 1992). In these distinctions lie yet another dimension to be reckoned with in our attempts to make sense of it all: the unstable territory of explanation and causality. These writers detect a shift in comparative analyses which is in line with broader changes in the social sciences, away from the search for unitary explanations with the aim of grand theorising, towards more historically aware and culturally specific theorizing that focuses on the analysis of diversity and causal complexity. My reading suggests that this shift entails a methodological expansion, as well as a change in direction, such that a wider range of research approaches sit somewhat uneasily together under the heading of comparative, cross-national research. Despite the agreement voiced by these authors that cross-national comparative research would benefit from ‘bridge-building’ efforts to find new ways of bringing these approaches together, it nevertheless continues to be a contested area theoretically and methodologically.

Some common problems

One unifying factor, in spite of the kinds of diversity described above, is that cross-national comparative studies face some common obstacles, conceptually and practically. My aim in discussing these is not to discourage potential cross-national researchers but to highlight the need for a rigorous approach, if this type of research is to fulfil its promise. Being aware of possible difficulties is the first step.

The first and perhaps the most fundamental problem is that of equivalence. In order for things to be comparable they have to share certain features of equivalence, to have certain dimensions in common, even though they may differ within them. If they are completely different there are no
points of comparison. There are several aspects to this problem. One concerns establishing the equivalence of policies, structures, systems and professional roles within these. The other, which is intimately connected with this, is the linguistic and conceptual equivalence of, for example, terms like welfare state, social services, community care and so forth. If we wanted to compare the role of social workers in England, France and Germany, we would not only want to find out whether the ‘social worker’ occupies the same professional territory in those countries but also what the term connotes. In her discussion of French and English versions of ‘social worker’, Angela Spriggs (1995) highlights the importance of looking beyond the words to find out how that term is understood in the countries concerned. In our own research on child protection in different European countries, our first discovery was the historically and culturally specific meaning of this term in the UK. (see Cooper et al., 1995; Hetherington, 1998). Similarly, in discussing her comparative study of education, training and employment in Germany UK and France, Jobert (1996) describes not only the differences in meaning of the terms in those countries but also of the category ‘young people’ to which they are being applied. Comparing important features of UK ‘welfare delivery’, such as ‘community care’, with what happens elsewhere, therefore entails firstly finding out whether there are comparable concepts in France, Germany and so forth - and secondly questioning our own taken-for-granted meanings and asking, “how do we understand those terms?”. One way of doing this is to take an historical approach, to trace the ways in which contemporary meanings have emerged in relation to policy and politics in the countries under scrutiny. The terms we use and the ways in which we use them do not have an absolute meaning even in our own countries but change over time, relative to the changing contexts in which they occur.

An equally important difficulty in comparative, cross-national research concerns our attempts to represent the countries concerned. If the bases of our comparisons are data about particular countries, how do we know that the samples we are using are representative of those countries and not just local snapshots? Whether we adopt quantitative or qualitative methods, we have to be aware that there are problems in assuming national homogeneity and generalising within a country’s borders. One reason for this is that such uniformity rarely exists, even in countries with centralised systems like France. Local and regional differences within national boundaries are typical rather than rare. They can be related to political power, through the policies of regional or local governments or through their interpretation and implementation of national policy; to the organising principles of governance such as subsidiarity and to the different cultural and ethnic identities that may be historically associated with specific localities. In addition, it is necessary to distinguish between a policy, its implementation and its effects and to consider whether any one of these can be used to represent the others and the country concerned (see Spicker, 1996). If we do recognise and record these differences within national borders, we also have to consider how they should be interpreted and at what point intra-country variations make inter-country comparisons untenable.

In addition to encompassing synchronic difference in our data collection and analysis, a consideration of the data should also take into account diachronic factors. Countries and their policies and practices change over time and a research ‘snapshot’ at any one moment does not record these. Often changes occur through the political process in a relatively predictable way but, as the experience of the former eastern bloc countries demonstrates, change can be sudden and wholesale, not only affecting political economies but challenging fundamental notions of nationhood, nationality and sovereignty. Here the redrawing of national boundaries has highlighted the ways in which they may, or may not, connect with ethnic, cultural and social boundaries. It is not only radical political upheaval which can make it difficult to define ‘nations’ or ‘countries’ as fixed in time. For example, European political, economic and monetary union, however it proceeds, will inevitably bring into question the notion of national boundaries.

Ignoring these types of variation over time involves de-contextualising policies and practices which have not only become woven into the historical, political, cultural and economic fabric of a country but also have evolved in relation to it. In the field of social work research this has implications for how the findings from cross-national research can be used; it raises questions as to whether policies and practices can be translated into other contexts, without losing the meaning for which they were identified as examples of good practice and also whether they can be transplanted without the
system which enabled them to operate in this way.

If it is possible to overcome these difficulties and establish cross-national similarities and differences, further problems await us. The first of these involves explanations. It may be necessary, as a first step, to try to discover which of the many differences between two countries (in history, culture and political and economic systems) are pertinent to explaining the differences we have found (Kohn, 1989: p.79). However, if we find similarities between countries, should historical particularities be ignored? In addition, it is likely that this kind of explanatory analysis entails taking the same conceptual precautions as the original process of comparing countries did.

The second problem concerns interpretation - having found that countries differ from one another in respect to certain systems, social policies or practices, what sense do we make of the differences? One possibility is that inter-country differences provide the bases for inter-country evaluations. In some cases, this is the explicit aim of the research. Here ‘normative comparisons’ do not just describe similarities and differences between countries or systems but employ particular criteria to evaluate them. As Spicker (1996) points out, using terms like ‘residual’ and ‘institutional’ in relation to welfare systems, does more than simply describe them - it implies an attribution of intention and a judgement about commitment to welfare. Comparative social policy, according to Spicker, “... like any other social policy, is not based in a neutral, value-free science; it has important practical applications, and the kinds of analysis which are undertaken are directly framed in terms of moral perceptions of the people who make them,” (1996: p.66)

The temptation to evaluate can also occur when one country - usually one’s own - is used implicitly, as a yardstick against which others are measured. In these situations we adopt the position that used to characterise anthropology, in which other cultures’ ideas and practices were thought of as quaint, odd and exotic (and as such valid objects of anthropological curiosity) whilst our own was thought of as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ - and therefore not in need of this kind of scrutiny. This is a point to which we will later return.

Perhaps the most potentially discouraging obstacles in doing cross-national research are material and practical; cross-national research can be costly and difficult to do. Finding out about an other country is probably best done working in collaboration with researchers from that country, but international travelling makes this kind of research expensive. Obtaining funding for cross-national research can be difficult; national funding bodies typically do not pay for international travel and EU grants in this field are notoriously elusive. Getting information, whether primary or secondary, and finding out where to look for it and who the ‘right’ people to talk to may be, involve resources of time and money. Collaboration with researchers from another country entails making and developing contacts, setting-up international meetings and so forth. It also relies on effective communication and, preferably, knowing the other’s language or sharing a language in common. However, it is possible that one of our biggest problems lies in convincing others, especially funding bodies, of the value of cross-national comparative research. In our experience, practitioners and their managers across Europe do not need persuading: they are invariably keen to find out about other countries and to participate in projects. There appears though, to be less interest at grant-giving or policy-making levels, where there exists a narrower, national focus on learning from research and even a scepticism about what we might learn from cross-national comparisons. This is in part connected, in the UK at least, to a combination of limited research resources and the relentless drive for demonstrable effectiveness and evidence-based practice, which tends to concentrate on ‘outcomes’ for evaluation purposes, and which allows little room for exploratory projects and ones which aim to ask questions rather than provide answers.

What can we learn from comparisons?

The discussion in the last section deliberately focused on those aspects of cross-national research that are generally considered to be problematic. As I stated in my introduction, the intention in doing this is to sound a note of caution; to propose that we start from a position that holds that the most important condition for being able to learn from comparative research is to be aware of the kinds of problems that we face, both in doing it and in drawing conclusions from it. Taking this caution into account, there are several, interconnected ways in which we can learn from comparisons:
learning about others;
learning from others;
learning about ourselves;
learning with others.

Learning about others - finding out about how life is lived and organised in another country, can increase our knowledge concerning that country and broaden our horizons by exposing us to different ideas and ways of doing things. This can occur formally, at the levels of policy or professional practice, and informally in terms of social attitudes and cultural practices. Importantly this exposure can act as a stimulus: by presenting us with difference it can help to extend our ideas as to what is possible and prompt us to think more creatively.

Comparative research can also enable us to learn from others more specifically, through identifying examples of good practice which it may be possible to borrow or transfer. With the caveat that practices are closely tied in with social, historical, political and economic contexts and therefore cannot be easily imported in isolation from these, it is possible to identify principles and approaches that can be drawn on in the development of future strategies and perhaps even elements that may be transferable with relatively modest changes in context. (See for example the findings of the Icarus Project as discussed in Hetherington et al., 2000:ch.7).

In the process of learning about others we can not only learn from their ways of doing things; we can also learn about ourselves. This can happen in a number of ways. Firstly, the process of comparison involves both gaining an understanding of another country’s system and also ‘de-constructing’ one’s own. Secondly, encouraging others’ scrutiny of our policies, practices and ideas allows us to use it as feedback and an alternative yardstick or gauge of their worth. Thirdly, by submitting ourselves to the scrutiny of others we can become more reflexive, using their observations to prompt us to identify our own assumptions, to question the taken-for-granted in our policies and practices. Using others’ perceptions to think critically about one’s own system does not just involve being critical of existing policies and practices, or searching for novel solutions to problems we have already defined; it also enables us to problematise our ways of thinking about social phenomena. Thus, for example, in the field of child protection in the UK, our attitudes and practices towards placing children, especially regarding the use of adoption and residential care, could benefit from a more thorough comparative understanding of the different ways in which the child’s need for a family can be conceptualised. (See for example Cooper et al., 1995; Hetherington et al., 1997). Similarly, comparative studies of the ways in which parents experience child protection interventions suggest that differences are not only connected to resource availability but also to fundamental differences in the way that the ‘problem’ of relations between parents, child-raising and the state is defined and thought about. (See Baistow & Hetherington 1998; Baistow & Wilford, 2000).

Cross-national comparative research can be done without ever setting foot in the other country or having contact with its people. However, in our experience and in that of many other comparative researchers (see for example Hantrais & Mangen, 1996: p.2) one of the most exciting and stimulating aspects of this kind of research is the opportunities it can provide to work with researchers and practitioners from other countries. Cross-national collaboration is not always straightforward. As Rainbird (1996) demonstrates in her discussion of negotiating a comparative research agenda, reconciling different researcher perceptions and accounts can be a fruitful, but sometimes conflictual process, which requires unconventional solutions. Nevertheless, the value of international research networks probably lies as much in the experience of contact and communication as in the knowledge we gain. In other words, networks serve an important instrumental purpose as very useful means of gathering information, exposing us to fresh ideas, confronting us with challenges to our own ways of thinking and stimulating new ones, but they also serve to bring people together. Perhaps the greatest value of the interchange and exchange that this involves, whether formally in meetings or informally over a meal, lies in the human contact on which real understanding and co-operation are built.

Conclusion

In exploring some of the conceptual and practical obstacles that researchers face in the field of comparative cross-national research, this paper started from the premise that these issues need continued examination if the field is to bear fruit. A problem in doing this is the wide array of research
work that is, or can be, subsumed under the term: various disciplines, methodologies and purposes are represented by the same banner. One solution might involve establishing a set of methodological principles which more clearly define cross-national comparative research. It is also possible that devising inclusion and exclusion criteria, in terms of content or methods, might make the field more clearly delineated and research within it more amenable to categorisation. However, both of these strategies would also lead to its impoverishment. As with the objects of our research, it is in its diversity that the richness of the field lies. Whilst commonalities can and should be identified, perhaps our aim as researchers, like that of cross-national comparative research itself, should be to continue searching for ways of encompassing and learning from difference.

References


