

FAQ 7: In comparative research, how do I choose which countries to compare?

What's the issue?

Little formal attention is paid to the question of country selection, these decisions often being somewhat ad hoc, convenient, or serendipitous, not necessarily best meeting the research aims but depending instead on practicalities of contacts and funding. Yet, depending on the countries compared, findings will centre more on similarities or on differences.

Hence, a research project which spans continents, comparing vastly different countries, may have difficulty identifying the fine-grain differences which research on similar countries will reveal. Conversely, comparing similar countries, perhaps from the same geographic region, may miss the bigger picture of transnational differences. The lens you choose to apply depends on the research question being asked.

Common practice

If you are treating each nation as the object of study, comparing fairly similar countries may prove most useful, particularly to inform regionally-based (e.g. European Commission) policy.

If you are studying the generality of a finding across nations (the country as the context of the study), selecting countries so as to maximize diversity along the dimension in question should allow you to explore the scope or universality of a phenomenon.

For the third model, you would select countries to capture diversity within a common framework: since the use of multiple dimensions invites a conception of the relations among them, this tends to support theory building through the development of a common framework based on a pan-national conception of the dimensions themselves.

Lastly, projects that conceptualize the nations to be compared as components of a transnational system will select countries by seeking to maximize range and diversity globally.

Questions to consider

While policy development, especially at a European level, provides a significant impetus towards comparison based on standardization, with substantial funding being used to generate multinational quantitative datasets, the academic trend is increasingly "away from universalistic culture-free approaches to culture-boundedness, which has placed the theory and practice of contextualization at the nexus of cross-national comparative studies" (Hantrais, 1999: 93).

This is, arguably, a particular problem for qualitative research. As Mangen (1999: 110) observes, "the strengths of qualitative approaches lie in attempts to reconcile complexity, detail and context" – all dimensions that are particularly difficult to convey when translating across languages and research cultures, and when undertaking the exercises in standardization or data reduction that making comparisons seems to demand. Yet such concerns also apply to quantitative research, where the ease of producing neat tables of statistics may beguile the researcher into neglecting crucial differences in the meaning of terms or the contexts within which they apply.

Pitfalls to avoid

Many comparative researchers address the challenge of comparison by standardizing their methodology and research tools, devoting considerable attention to strict equivalence in measurement procedures through such techniques as the back-translation of survey instruments, as well as ensuring transparency by including questionnaires and coding schedules in the final publications. The difficulties of comparative research, on this view, stem from the challenging task of ensuring equivalence of terms, comparability of measures, and in applying standardized forms of analysis. It must be acknowledged, however, that many (perhaps all) key concepts change their meaning on translation.

In practice, quantitative research usually makes an effort to keep the exact wording in different national surveys (although variation can still be introduced in the process of translation and in terms of whether a concept means the same thing in different countries/cultures). In qualitative interviews, the difficulties are compounded by the fact that researchers can agree on a general interview schedule, but then in “conversations” with the participants the exact wording often varies, depending on the particular interview context, on a researcher’s disciplinary training, and on the cultural or national research context.

An example of a cross-national project: Mediappro

The Mediappro project illustrates the first approach, as it sought to identify the specific cultural contexts within which children in different countries use the internet and, in consequence, use it differently. While findings from one country were used to stimulate questions for another, with findings from each country reported side by side, few direct comparisons were drawn, possibly because these seemed to violate the cultural integrity of each nation.

About 9,000 young people aged 12–18 (7,400 in Europe and 1,350 in Québec) participated in the Mediappro project. For practical reasons, each national team selected the participants from their schools with the consent of school principals and parents. In order to construct a relevant sample at the international level, schools were selected according to their geographical location and their social, economic, and cultural setting. Three school grades, representing three age groups, were defined: 12–14 (beginning of secondary school), 15–16 (middle of secondary school), and 17–18 (end of secondary school). Using this method researchers were able to obtain a varied sample representing the diversity of young people’s life contexts, reflecting national differences that exist across Europe. Data were collected through two means. The project team designed a common questionnaire including 63 items and distributed it to the whole sample during school time, from September to October 2005. Based on the results of this quantitative phase, 240 young people (24 in each country) were selected according to their different levels of internet usage, age, and gender, for individual interviews. [...] Aside from the statistical analysis of the questionnaires, Mediappro teams conducted each phase of the survey themselves in order to guarantee a coherent process and high quality analysis.

An example of a cross-national project: EU Kids Online II

The EU Kids Online survey of 2010, in its first main report (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011), illustrates the second approach, as it examines how differences in age, gender, socio-economic status, etc. are fairly constant across European countries, as regards children’s use of the internet and their contact with its risks. In other words, each country was treated as a distinct context precisely in order to test whether the same finding (such as parents underestimate risks online compared with children) in those different contexts; only if the similarity holds is the finding considered robust.

An example of a cross-national project: Children and their Changing Media Environment

The Children and their Changing Media Environment project (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001) exemplifies this third approach, as it sought to understand how systematic differences in education, wealth, parenting, etc. were associated with differences across countries in children’s media use, including adoption of new media. Thus it examined the correlations between national wealth (e.g. GDP), or degree of ICT diffusion, and the dependent variables of children’s media use; this model expects to find neither similarities nor differences, simply, but rather to find a model that applies across all nations that explains the differences observed among them, as explained to us by the authors of Chapter 1 regarding the choice of research contexts for comparison.

References and further resources

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