



Qualitative Comparative Practices: Dimensions, Cases and Strategies

Monika Palmberger and Andre Gingrich

Our reasoning is always guided by comparison, whether we intend it to be or not (Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Thus, scientific research is penetrated by comparison, even if in an implicit manner. Comparing is an elementary cognitive activity. It occurs in simple and routinized ways in everyday lives by comparing aspects between phenomena, and it regularly occurs in more complex ways as a set of standard practices focusing on the relations between phenomena (Schriewer, 1992).

MAIN DIMENSIONS

By its basic cognitive foundations as well as by its central academic dimensions, comparison always enables us to identify similarities and differences:

Depending on the theme or experience under scrutiny, one of comparison's main two component elements [similarities and differences] at times may become much more significant than the other. Yet essentially, comparison always entails at least some elements of both: it thus can

be defined as the mental activity of simultaneously identifying similarities as well as differences. (Gingrich, 2012)

This insight is important, since it helps us to keep in mind that comparison is always an essential component of (scientific) reasoning, not just in explicitly comparative studies (see Boeije, 2010).

Qualitative empirical research such as ethnographic fieldwork is guided by comparison in its own ways. In order to come to more general conclusions, ethnographic fieldworkers constantly compare throughout their empirical activities similar events, situations and contexts in everyday life, or rituals, with those they have observed in an earlier phase (Gingrich, 2012). Only by repeatedly participating in these practices, by observing them and by comparing one with the other will the researcher be able to distinguish what is particular or accidental from what is regular and standard.

Parallel to the above-mentioned forms of implicit comparison that are part of any



research, comparison is also an explicit research tool. Explicit comparison differs from implicit comparison in that it offers a higher level of abstraction. Lewis identifies five areas of contributions by a qualitative comparative approach:

- identifying the absence or presence of particular phenomena in the accounts of different groups
- exploring how the manifestations of phenomena vary between groups
- exploring how the reasons for, or explanations of, phenomena, or their different impacts and consequences, vary between groups
- exploring the interaction between phenomena in different settings
- exploring more broadly differences in the contexts in which phenomena arise or the research issue is experienced. (2003: 50)

The line between implicit and explicit comparison, however, is not always as clear as it may seem, and there are many different types of intermediate comparisons between the two ends. Moreover, there is no single method or theory of qualitative comparison but rather a plurality of approaches. Comparison has been an integral part of social sciences. Marx, Durkheim and Weber all tackled questions concerning differences between various countries and societies in history, although they did not necessarily declare their work to be comparative. Their comparisons were first and foremost concerned with macro-developments and historical change (Teune, 1990: 40).

This chapter first of all is concerned with explicit qualitative comparison and discusses a range of different approaches. Qualitative comparison is characterized by comparing whole cases with each other. While cases may be analysed in terms of variables (e.g. the presence or absence of a certain institution might be an important variable), cases are viewed as configurations – as combinations of characteristics. ‘Comparison in the qualitative tradition thus involves comparing configurations’ (Ragin, 1987: 3). Qualitative comparative methods are well equipped to tackle questions that require complex and

combinatorial explanations. Since the cases are compared in their complexity, the number of cases has to be kept low. And although it may be tempting to compare larger samples and include more variables, it would not necessarily lead to finer comparison: ‘It would be an error because with the multiplication of cases and the standardization of categories for comparison the theoretical return declines more rapidly than the empirical return rises’ (Tilly, 1984: 144). As Lewis rightly reminds us, the value of a qualitative comparative approach is in ‘understanding rather than measuring difference’ (2003: 50).

Comparison in qualitative analysis aims to achieve abstraction by doing justice to the context in which the different cases are embedded: ‘In keeping with their concern for context, they particularly dismiss the universalist methodologies that promised to find laws, regularities or states of development that would be applicable to all cultures or to humanity at large’ (Fox and Gingrich, 2002: 12). As Scheffer argues along a similar line of reasoning with his concept of ‘thick comparison’, the context should not be perceived as some type of container loosely connected to the compared items but ‘thick comparison approaches context as both, address and reason for differences’ (2010: 34). With this argument Scheffer substantiates the case for theorizing contexts.

Qualitative comparison seeks to draw attention to both, to the differences and similarities, to consider endogenous as well as exogenous factors, and to carve out diversity as well as similarity (May, 1997: 187). We cannot, however, speak in the singular of ‘the’ comparative method in qualitative analysis. The remainder of the chapter will demonstrate the basic plurality of qualitative comparative methods. Although qualitative comparative research may differ greatly between the disciplines and even within a discipline, the different approaches have in common that they all seek a middle ground between a universalistic and a particularistic research agenda – sometimes tending more to the

former, sometimes more to the latter. Although this chapter addresses a wide field of humanities and social sciences without restricting the

discussion to a single discipline, examples from anthropology prevail because of the authors' disciplinary background.

Box 7.1 The Constant Comparative Method

Even if, as has been suggested above, all scientific reasoning possesses an element of comparison, it may play a stronger or weaker role in the process of the analysis. Glaser and Strauss developed a method that is strongly built on comparison, the so-called 'constant comparative method', which represents an integral part of the 'grounded theory' approach (see Glaser, 1965). In the constant comparative method 'sections of the data are continually compared with each other to allow categories to emerge and for relationships between these categories to become apparent' (Harding, 2006: 131). The constant comparative method represents a tool for inductive theory building: 'The constant comparative method raises the probability of achieving a complex theory which corresponds closely to the data, since the constant comparisons force consideration of much diversity in the data' (Glaser, 1965: 444). The constant comparative method achieves abstraction of individual cases and is a valuable method for developing typologies (Flick, 2006).

COMPARISON AND ITS LEGACY IN ANTHROPOLOGY AND BEYOND

Social sciences and the humanities have their roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the emerging comparative sciences of humans. They compared languages, religions, political systems and other aspects of society in ways that were similar to the natural sciences. Indeed, the evolving new social sciences gained their legitimacy through this 'scientific' comparative method (Kaelble and Schriewer, 2003). Comparison remained crucial in the early days of many social science disciplines, often under the influence of evolutionist paradigms derived from biology. This also was the case for anthropology: 'The whole comparative endeavor was part of the anthropologists' emulation of what they understood to be the scientific method' (Holy, 1987: 3). Decades later, the gradual abandonment of evolutionism and the simultaneous rise of statistical methods led to a preference for quantitative comparison. In anthropology, particularly in the United States with Murdock's Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), a holo-cultural approach was pursued that strongly relied on quantitative comparison. The HRAF were

based on statistical sampling and aimed at worldwide comparison. With the HRAF, Murdock strove to reveal functional correlations between cultural traits. Together with neo-evolutionist and structuralist approaches, the holo-cultural approach dominated anthropology in the post-war period until the 1970s when the 'grand theories' and 'meta-narratives' of many fields in the humanities and the social sciences increasingly came under heavy criticism (Fox and Gingrich, 2002: 3–4).

One consequence of breaking with most grand theories was the fact that anthropologists for a while distanced themselves from comparison per se. This said, anthropologists continued to practise comparison, although often in a more implicit than explicit manner and mostly engaging in regional comparison (see Eggan, 1953). The main argument brought forward against comparison was that it could not do justice to analytical concepts that are bound to their native context (Niewöhner and Scheffer, 2010: 6). In its extreme form, cultural relativism indeed does not allow for any form of comparison whatsoever, because cultures are presented as unique (Yengoyan, 2006). In view of this particularist and empiricist impasse, anthropologists during the last couple

of decades thus have carefully re-entered the field of comparison (see Holy, 1987; Gingrich and Fox, 2002). Much of comparative research today aims at revealing the cultural logic and culturally specific meaning of phenomena (see Urban, 1999), thus transcending the dichotomy between particularism and universalism.

Comparative research for these reasons always is confronted with the problem of translation. Translation transforms insights from the empirical 'context of discovery' into the publicized 'context of academic communication', to paraphrase (and, in fact, to translate) Reichenbach's well-known concepts for our purposes. In the end, this also includes an indispensable element of comparison since researchers have to compare the results of their translational activity, in order to ensure and maintain an essential and adequate correspondence between both ends. Although translation is always a crucial part of any empirical research – when concrete empirical observations are translated into abstract qualitative data, and in a second step are translated into a text for the respective readership – cross-cultural and cross-national comparison is confronted with an additional level of translation. It faces the task of translating different meanings that specific phenomena assume in different socio-cultural settings (see Ember et al., 2009).

As this chapter will show, comparison in qualitative research may assume very different forms. While anthropological comparison often is dominated by an interpretative and culturally sensitive approach, a more 'variable-oriented' approach is pursued in other disciplines such as political science (see Box 7.4). Sceptical voices concerning comparison, however, have maintained a presence in various disciplines. The main argument brought forward concerns the risk of decontextualization, the risk of losing the complexity and uniqueness of the cases under investigation (see Bryman, 2012). Meanwhile, many qualitative comparative studies have proven that if comparison is handled carefully and if the number of cases is kept low, decontextualization can be prevented or at least minimized. Qualitative case-oriented studies tend to restrict the number of cases to numbers between two and four. Thereby the case-oriented approach allows the researcher comprehensively to examine the context of each case. At this point it has to be said that the criterion of how many cases are enough and still manageable varies between disciplines and also depends on the choice of method. When, for example, ethnographic fieldwork is conducted, the number of cases has to be kept particularly low (especially in a one-person research design).

Box 7.2 Key Points

- All scientific research is in some way comparative. Still, we can distinguish between implicit and explicit comparison.
- Explicit comparison enables us to go beyond the particularities of an individual case and to reach higher levels of identifying similarities, commonalities and differences through careful abstraction.
- Qualitative comparison aims to understand certain aspects of society in its socio-cultural specific context. In order to do so, qualitative comparison concentrates on a comparably small number of cases.
- Qualitative comparison is based on purposefully selected cases. This means that generalizations in qualitative comparison are of a theoretical rather than a numerical kind.
- Comparative research designs may differ greatly in respect to the research question, the research aim and the units of analysis.
- Comparison in qualitative research most often means 'small-*n*'/controlled comparison. But the quality of the cases compared differs greatly. Cases may be closely related (e.g. in regional comparison) but they may also show great variety.

NEW INTEREST IN COMPARISON IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

The gradual re-emergence of qualitative comparative methods before and since the turn of the century in the humanities and social sciences has had its internal academic reasons, as briefly described above: if many 'grand theories' obviously have failed, and if the description and interpretation of particular case examples rarely are sufficient for creating enduring academic substance, then that alone creates very fertile intellectual environments for all methodological procedures that move beyond the particular without necessarily reaching out for universals. By definition, comparative procedures precisely met these challenges. A second set of conditions favouring the re-emergence of comparative methodological inventories was more closely connected to changes in the real world, and to their recognition inside academia. This concerns the end of the Cold War in Europe, and the ensuing phases of current globalization.

Time-space compression has been identified as a key property of these current phases. The ensuing media-communicated simultaneity is resulting in an increasing local awareness of what is going on elsewhere, and

about elsewhere being present inside the local (Beck, 1999; Harvey, 2006; Kreff et al., 2011). In addition to all existing continuities between current and earlier phases of globalization, this self-reflexive awareness about 'ourselves' being part of, and interacting with, wider worlds has led to an additional boost for comparative investigations about the intellectual and practical sides resulting from that explicitly growing awareness. If more and more groups of people are interacting with transnational and global conditions in ways that are similar and different, then it becomes increasingly important to compare how they do this, and to which ends. In addition, if in a post-colonial world more and more people find that this also applies to people in various parts of, say, Asia and Africa, then local researchers in, for instance, South Africa, India and Singapore will feel encouraged also to compare their research insights with each other, and not only with those in the UK, the United States and Australia (Chen, 2010). In addition to intra-academic developments in the social sciences and humanities, changing global conditions thus are providing excellent encouragement for the re-emergence of comparative procedures in all fields of global academia.

Box 7.3 Case Study: Migration and New Diversities in Global Cities

A question researchers have to face in an increasingly transnational and globalized world is whether nations are still legitimate units of analysis. In the field of comparative research this raises the issue of whether we should continue with the tradition of comparing nations or whether it is more fruitful to search for other units of analysis (e.g. regions, cities) in order to do justice to transnational processes and the increasing diversity we face today. The recently launched *Globaldivercities* research project led by Steven Vertovec at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity faces these challenges when asking 'How can people with ever more diverse characteristics live together in the world's rapidly changing cities?' (Vertovec, 2011: 5). Of particular interest are conditions of diversification that are shaped when new diversity meets old diversity.

Within this comparative research project, several distinct methods are applied, which concentrate on conceiving, observing and visualizing diversity in public space and social encounters. The aim of the project is twofold: first, to gain theoretical insights in the fields of migration, diversity and urban change; and, second, to gain knowledge applicable to

urban policies, for example to identify common patterns of social adjustment and ways to foster them. This is achieved through comparison.

Comparison in this project can be described as controlled, strategic comparison of key cases. The units of analysis are not nations but three cities. Comparison is conducted across New York, Johannesburg and Singapore, whereby ethnographic fieldwork is conducted in selected neighbourhoods of each city. The main focus is on public space and its social and spatial patterns that arise under conditions of diversification when new forms of diversity meet pre-existing forms of diversity. Through comparison, typologies and models are developed. The models, however, are not presented as the 'Asian', 'African' or 'North American' model and not even as the 'New York', 'Singapore' or 'Johannesburg' model, 'but rather a variety of differences and commonalities of conditions and processes that cross-cut each case' (Vertovec, 2011: 27). This means that comparison achieves generalization but in a more moderate, middle-range way. As will be argued later in the chapter, a complex comparative project is better suited for a group of researchers than a single researcher. Moreover, it requires sufficient time and financial resources. In the case of the *Globaldivercities* project these prerequisites are met.

METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

A legitimate question to be raised is whether comparative research requires different practices than other forms of research (see May, 1997; Øyen, 1990). Although different viewpoints exist on this subject, most researchers agree that it does not require other forms of research and that comparison and comparative inquiry does not present a relatively independent method per se (Yengoyan, 2006: 4; see Box 7.3). As is the case for any research, methodological choices depend on the primary research question and on its conceptual and theoretical formulation (see Flick, 2007; Gingrich, 2012). Since comparison in qualitative analysis is not restricted to a specific methodological approach, Parts III (Analytical Strategies) and IV (Types of Data and Their Analysis) of this handbook will be of particular interest to readers seeking practical advice for data analysis. What we can offer in the remainder of this chapter, however, is a discussion of the particular challenges one is likely to face when choosing and applying a comparative research design and how best to meet these challenges. For a better understanding, we shall provide examples to illustrate how comparative research can be designed.

When we think of comparison in qualitative analysis we first and foremost think of

comparison between nations, or between diverse forms of cultural settings. The majority of qualitative comparisons indeed are of the cross-national or cross-cultural kind, as Teune states:

Social science disciplines compare countries: sociologists, for example, compare the relationship between societies and political systems; social psychologists, for instance, patterns of national values and political behavior; anthropologists, culture (especially when it appears coterminous with national boundaries) and institutional change; psychologists, perceptions and language; and economists, national economies (market and non-market ones). (1990: 38)

Political sciences even include the specialized subfield of 'comparative politics' devoted to cross-national comparison. The 'comparative method' in political science is understood as a method in which specific phenomena among a small number of nations are investigated by comparison. Some scholars, however, have characterized the comparative method as inferior to statistical comparison. In their view 'small-*n*' comparison at best represents a tool for formulating hypotheses, which then should be tested by a large statistical sample (Lijphart, 1971). Regardless of these critical voices, 'the' comparative method in this subfield has become well established, convincing by its

ability to grasp cases in their complexity in ways that are impossible if confronted with a high-number sample (see Bowen et al., 1999; Collier, 1993).

'The' comparative method in political sciences uses two modes of inductive enquiry based on John Stuart Mill: the method of agreement and the indirect method of difference (see Mill and Robson, 1996; Etzioni and DuBow, 1969). Since countries cannot be similar in all respect but one, the investigator selects countries that are similar in the relevant respects. The shortcomings of this method are that it cannot compare every possible characteristic and that it seeks for only one cause and dismisses the possibility of multiple or alternative causes (Vauss, 2008: 253). Moreover, the classification of countries into similar or different samples has

a great impact on the conclusions drawn. This is problematic if we consider that agreement and difference in real life resemble a continuum or a sliding scale, rather than a dichotomy. Moreover, when using the method of similarity and difference it is crucial to consider the meaning of concepts within their socio-cultural context. Religiousness, for example, may have very different meanings in different countries (Vauss, 2008). From a wider epistemological perspective, it could thus be argued that approaches based on Mills' reasoning may be too tightly caught up in binary (and Aristotelian) reasoning: a Wittgenstein-inspired approach to 'family resemblances' (Needham, 1975) or alternative forms of philosophical reasoning might be more helpful in this regard, particularly so in a globalizing world.

Box 7.4 Case Study: National Revivals and Violence

The following case is an example of controlled comparison or of a 'small-*n*' approach, which investigates two sets of contrasting pairs, Catalonia and the Basque Country, and the Ukraine and Georgia. In his study, Laitin (1999) provides an explanatory model to show why in some cases of national revival violence breaks out, while in other cases it does not.

Laitin's comparative study is grounded in a phenomenon that can be observed in different places around the world. The question of why in some cases violence breaks out while in other cases it does not is the puzzle Laitin tries to solve with the help of comparison. First, he analyses the two Spanish cases and asks why the nationalist revival movement in Catalonia has been relatively peaceful while the nationalist revival movement in the Basque Country has been bloody. In order to answer this question, Laitin identifies the crucial differences and isolates conditions (variables) that led to violence. He is aware that in qualitative social sciences the identification of 'controlled' variables may be problematic. Still, he encourages researchers to do their best to isolate variables they see as important (Laitin, 1999: 57).

Since macro-factors have not been suited to explain sufficiently why some national revival movements are more violent than others, Laitin draws our attention to what he refers to as 'micro factors', such as social networks and language histories. Laitin argues that the tipping point in how national revivals develop is whether enough followers can be recruited or not. If the latter is the case, violence such as terrorist activities may be seen as a possibility to facilitate recruitment.

In order to test this hypothesis, Laitin in a second step then applies the variables identified in the Spanish cases to two cases of post-Soviet nationalism. The four cases he examines allow him to do justice to the social reality of each case and still to reach some degree of generality that goes beyond the individual case. Moreover, the historical dimension that Laitin integrates in his analysis ensures that none of the societies studied are presented as inherently violent or peaceful.

Although, as we have learned, the majority of comparative research projects are cross-national or cross-cultural in character, we should acknowledge that qualitative comparison is, by far, a much larger field. The units of analysis may be regions, sections of society identified by gender, ethnicity, religion, age, by socio-economic criteria, urban–rural background, as well as by family status or other elements of social differentiation. We may, for example, compare piousness and religiousness among men and women or among one ethnic group with another. We may also compare the medical choices people make in rural areas compared with urban settings or the medical

choices of migrants and non-migrants. Comparison may also be of an explicit historical character as discussed in Box 7.5 in the case of ‘dethroned’ ethnic majorities in the collapse process of two empires. Historical comparison can again have many different faces (see Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003). The subject of comparison may be a certain practice (e.g. warfare, distribution of social benefits or multi-ethnic co-existence) and its past and present manifestation. For this endeavour we may compare the chosen subject in only one place (past and present) or compare several places, which again will depend on the research question.

Box 7.5 Case Study: Distant Comparison

Perhaps binary comparison and regional comparison represent the most popular and best established among the more conventional forms of qualitative comparative procedures in the humanities and social sciences at large. Binary comparison would contrast one set of cases against another, as in comparative literature (‘the trope of a hero in novels X and Y’) or in comparative legal studies (‘indigenous rights in late twentieth-century Australia and Canada’). Regional comparison, on the other hand, would compare a whole set of corresponding cases from one area within similar time horizons, as in archaeology (‘Palaeolithic cave drawings in Saharan Africa’) or art studies (‘Temple sculptures in thirteenth-century Southeast Asia’). Both orientations have their advantages, but they also entail the possibility of ignoring an inherent bias. Binary comparison might tempt the researcher to pay too much attention to differences (up to the point of producing or re-producing stereotypes), while regional comparison might lead to the invention of closed ‘cultural circles’, ‘style provinces’ and similar constructs that may turn out to be more misleading than helpful. In some cases, such a bias might be minimized through the introduction, as an additional or as an independent device, of ‘distant comparison’, also called ‘self-reflexive controlled macro-comparison’ (Gingrich, 2002).

The comparative examples assessed and analysed by Gingrich for the elaboration of this method were historical, and focused on the emergence of mass violence in the disintegration processes of multi-ethnic state configurations. In a first step, sequences and key events of anti-Christian massacres during and after the First World War in the decaying Ottoman Empire were scrutinized. This was contrasted against the anti-Jewish mob violence in Nazi-ruled Vienna during November 1938, interpreted also as a protracted aftermath to the fall of the Habsburg Empire, in 1918. The comparison revealed dominant contrasts and differences, and minor parallels. These subordinate parallels were then compiled into a flow diagram, leading from the loss of legitimacy for previous rulers to a sense of humiliation for the ‘dethroned’ ethnic majority, ensuing pan-nationalism, the identification of minority groups as the enemy’s ‘fifth column’, and a rapid transition from hate speech to the creation of ‘virile militancy’, mob violence and persecution.

The resulting flow diagram was then carefully applied to key sequences of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, featuring surprising parallels. This led to a

number of conceptual conclusions and to the formulation of a theoretical hypothesis about the dangerous aftermath to the dethronement of ethnic majorities.

This procedure implies a scope of comparison that is kept 'controlled' through a small choice of three samples connected by a conceptual constellation of 'disintegrating multi-ethnic societies' as a main selection criterion. In addition, the range of comparison is 'macro-' and 'distant' in time and space: processual developments inside the three units of comparison are related to each other merely in indirect ways if at all.

The groups to be compared may already be manifested in the research design but they may as well be identified in a later stage and may emerge from the collected data only during the analyzing process (Lewis, 2003: 50, 51). The latter was, for example, the case in Palmberger's research project on Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Palmberger, 2010; Palmberger, 2013). In this research, which investigates narratives of the local past after the 1992–5 war, discursive patterns of different generations are compared. The units of analysis, the three generations, were first inductively drawn from ethnographic fieldwork. This means that each case (narrative) was first analysed and only at a later stage were the different cases compared with each other and the generational distinctions identified. The research design was comparative in nature but the units to be compared were not determined up front.

The research aims differ as much as the units of analysis differ. While one comparative project may aim for deep theorization, another project may be of a more applied character while aiming at solving a socio-political problem. Comparative education, for example, often is of an applied character, particularly when it assists in the development of educational institutions (see Steiner-Khamsi, 2009; Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2007). In a similar way, comparisons of public policies are conducted mainly to learn lessons rather than to develop theory (Teune, 1990: 58). Common to all comparative research, however, is the fact that it requires more time and resources

and most likely a bigger budget than a non-comparative project. This is particularly true if the project relies on primary rather than on secondary data (see Box 7.3). As is the case with any qualitative research, we are likely to collect great amounts of data of very different kinds (oral, visual, written) but in comparative research we collect these kinds of data for even more than one place/group of people. This means that the researcher at some point (better sooner than later) has to identify key themes, concepts and categories. We have to choose a few cases as well as comparative dimensions based on the research question or a theory-inspired problem:

Comparison can deal with either questions of larger processes or particular patterns that can be elicited from limited historical processes, but neither ever exhausts what might be possible, nor can we ever account for the full spectrum of cases. (Yengoyan, 2006: 11)

The number of comparative dimensions needs to be kept low in view of ensuring that the amount of data remains manageable. In this selection process it is also important to decide which of the demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender, town or country etc.) needs to be considered and which one does not. (Flick, 2009: 150)

Due to the above-mentioned particularities of comparative qualitative analysis, studies with a particular emphasis on comparison will usually also require more structure, since it is necessary to cover broadly the same issues with each of the cases compared. This is even more important when working

in a team. In this case a structured approach is needed to ensure some consistency (Arthur and Nazroo, 2003: 111). In the last few decades computer-assisted qualitative analysis programs have become popular among some scholars. Although no computer program by itself is able to do qualitative analysis, it may be helpful to sort the data and to draw the researcher's attention to some patterns and correlations in an extensive data set. Since there are various computer programs available for qualitative analysis and they are constantly changing, this is not the place to discuss the pros and cons of various types and items of software (but see Gibbs, Chapter 19, this volume). Consulting the existing literature on this topic, however, is appropriate.

So far we have only dealt with a priori comparative research design, which means research that was designed comparatively from its very beginning. There is, however, also the possibility to bring in a comparative perspective a posteriori, once the research has been completed. Since, as we have stated above, comparative research is generally more time consuming and budget intensive, it is often better suited for larger individual or group projects than for smaller ones. This is particularly true if empirical research is required, such as in-depth interviews and/or participant observation. When resources are scarce, one can still consider an a posteriori comparison to highlight the wider relevance of a given analysis, to address a wider readership, or both. Often enough, such an a posteriori comparison merely concerns particular phenomena discussed within a wider research range. Units of comparison may then be drawn from different regions and sources (Gingrich, 2012).

UNITS AND PROCEDURES OF ANALYSIS

It has been argued that comparison is no independent methodological procedure: its creative employment presupposes that data

already have been yielded previously through other procedures (a posteriori), or that it is applied together with other, independent methodological strategies (a priori). In both cases, comparative strategies seek to generate additional constellations of data that may then provide *additional* insights. Comparative research procedures thus may be characterized as *dependent* methodologies, because they usually depend on the primary procurement of data through other methods.

As in other methodological procedures of qualitative research, comparison at first is informed by the key research question and by the given empirical evidence to pursue it, or by the likelihood of such empirical evidence to emerge in the course of the research process. These issues become even more important when the choice of units to be compared has to be made.

These units, as we have said, usually are in one way or another configurations, which should suggest a relative likelihood of providing sufficient results by way of analysis – without, however, giving way to self-fulfilling prophecies. It depends on the research question whether the choice of these units does or does not make sense: if I am interested in their respective contents of water, sugar and vitamins, then I may very well compare 'apples and oranges', quite to the contrary of what folk wisdom believes to be self-evident.

Early on during the comparative process, it is important at least to try out what kind of *limits* might best be chosen for the potential units of comparison. This definitional question is not a matter of methodological principle: in some instances, it is highly appropriate to be as precise as possible in defining those limits. By contrast, there are many other cases where the opposite is more appropriate – that is, to define those limits in as fluid, loose and processual a manner as possible. During the actual comparative procedures, it may then become necessary to readjust and redefine those limits several times for reasons of inner consistency, or for

reasons of more rewarding results. These major changes should be made accessible and transparent to the research communities among readers.

Defining the units of comparison and their limits is the first precondition for the decisive step in developing a comparative strategy of analysis. This decisive step is the identification of the *criteria of comparison* and, eventually, of their *empirical features* among the respective units of comparison. The criteria of comparison have to be formulated on a somewhat more abstract level, in the form of markers that basically raise the same set of questions to the empirical contexts that are being compared. The criteria of comparison thus have to convey and communicate the main research question towards the empirical issues under scrutiny. This implies that the criteria of comparison at the same time are developed in a dialogical relationship with the empirical evidence at hand. In this sense, the criteria of comparison correspond to what Aristotelian traditions have called the *tertium comparationis*. The empirical features to be compared, finally, are analogous to what quantitative procedures would refer to as their ‘variables’ – yet in qualitative comparative analyses, these features explicitly are subjected to transparent phases of reinterpretation, contextualization and translation.

For instance, if one’s units of comparison are Southwest Arabian star calendars, as once was the case with one of us (Gingrich, 1994), then it becomes important to clarify by which cross-cutting criteria they can be compared among each other. Some of these criteria may then address the question of socio-economic contexts, such as fields of practical application and social carriers of stellar knowledge. Other cross-cutting criteria will refer to the contents of those calendars of oral traditions, such as linguistic contents and contents of observation. At the latest, during the actual process of comparative analysis, it then becomes important to examine which actual empirical features correspond in each unit of comparison to

the cross-cutting criterion of comparison, and how to qualify the outcome. For instance, applying the criterion of linguistic contents then led to the possibility of qualifying the outcome according to a qualitative tripartite scale for the star terminology’s linguistic background. The tripartite scale differentiated between ‘standard Arabic terminology’, ‘predominantly South Arabian terminology’ and ‘mixed terminology’. In other forms of comparison, it might be useful for data analysis to work not with qualifiers, but with (loosely defined) indeterminate quantifiers, such as ‘intense’, ‘average’ and ‘low’.

Comparative data analysis therefore requires a simultaneous affinity to empirical results as well as to possible avenues of interpretation and theorizing. For these reasons, the appropriate choice of cross-cutting criteria of comparison and of their empirical features in individual examples is the most decisive step in comparative data analysis. A transnational comparison of neo-nationalist movements and parties in Western Europe (and beyond) during the early years after the turn of the century (Gingrich and Banks, 2006) illustrates this point (see Box 7.6). Five main criteria of comparison could then be applied to detailed case studies from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, India, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK, since these case studies did provide the empirical features to actually answer the questions raised through the criteria of comparison: this in fact is the crucial point – the criterion of comparison has to be designed in ways that raise a few relevant questions, and the results of empirical research have to be rich enough to answer these questions in a meaningful way that at the same time can be simplified to some extent. Whether these empirically derived simplified answers are then formalized by means of indeterminate quantifiers and/or qualifiers, or whether they are better formulated in a non-formal, narrative manner as in Box 7.6 is a pragmatic and communicative choice rather than a matter of principle.

Box 7.6 Case Study: Qualitative Comparison in Data Analysis on Neo-nationalism

Contributors to the Brussels Conference on Neo-nationalism in Europe and Beyond had elaborated their case examples on the basis of a set of common propositions and hypotheses regarding the development and manifestations of 'neo-nationalism', that is the parliamentary and basically legal versions of extreme right-wing populism during the 1990s and early 2000s in what was then the European Union and the European Economic Area. On the basis of the conference presentations and their discussion, as well as of the contributions to the resulting edited book (Gingrich and Banks, 2006), the editors elaborated a number of cross-cutting criteria of comparison:

- (a) *Historical backgrounds and origins of neo-nationalist parties and movements in Western Europe*: This first criterion led to useful distinctions between those groups (or their respective predecessors) that had emerged during the first two decades after 1945, with somewhat stronger and more explicit continuities to post-fascist or post-Nazi groups of supporters during their formative periods (Italy, Austria, Flemish parts of Belgium), and most other neo-nationalist groups and parties (in Western Europe and elsewhere) that had been founded somewhat more recently, often emerging at least in part out of breakaway movements from established mainstream parties.
- (b) *Relation to existing state and its territorial and regional/ethnic dimensions*: This second criterion led to the important differentiation between those movements/parties that were primarily oriented towards an enhancement of ethnic or regional self-determination (northern Italy, Flemish parts of Belgium, to a lesser extent also (then) the German-speaking parts of Switzerland) and most other neo-nationalist parties in Western Europe. The first group displayed interesting transitional forms to some among the more conventional forms of breakaway nationalism or regional secessionism elsewhere in Europe (e.g. UK/Scottish nationalism; Spain/Catalonia, the Basque region; France/Corsica).
- (c) *Instances of neo-nationalism's most striking advances up to 2005*: For the main criterion for 'most striking advances' defined by national election results of 10% or more for distinctly neo-nationalist parties, it turned out that, until 2005, in Western Europe these were mostly cases of small affluent countries (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland). With the exception of Italy, none of the EU's then four other big countries (i.e. France, Germany, Spain, UK) had allowed for similar advances by neo-nationalists into their national parliaments. Since then, the situation has changed to some extent (e.g. British votes for the EU Parliament, or French votes during the first course of the 2012 presidential elections), and also through the ascension of Poland (with the different legacy of post-communism) as a sixth big EU country – while also displaying some continuities (e.g. through subsequent Swedish and Finnish national election results).
- (d) *Common ideological features among most successful neo-nationalist parties*: Despite their obvious diversity, over-communicated by their own propaganda's emphasis on 'authenticity' and national specificity, this fourth cross-cutting criterion of comparison yielded several important results. Key among them was the finding that a basic tripartite ideological and programmatic hierarchy was common to most of these movements. In essence, this ideological and cognitive hierarchy featured – and continues to feature – at its lower level other ethnic and/or regional groups, potential or resident immigrant groups, and (among EU member countries) certain non-EU member countries (e.g. Turkey, as the most important case in point). The same hierarchy's uppermost level presents 'Brussels' and its respective local/national allies and mysterious supporters, as well as to some extent 'Washington'. Sandwiched between these two dangerous and powerful levels are 'us', that is the redefined nation, with neo-nationalism as its best and faithful representative.

(Continued)

(Continued)

- (e) *Main tools of mass mobilization:* Unsurprisingly, the 'politics of emotionalizing' turned out to be a main result of applying this fifth criterion of comparison, aiming at reinforcing state security while promoting economic deregulation and downsizing the welfare state at the same time. A second main result was permanent campaigning by addressing (or creating) scandals that served as the mediatized environment in which neo-nationalist leaders could be presented as quasi-pop-culture icons, bringing justice and redistributing wealth to those who deserve it.

Identifying and defining one's units of comparison and their size, and, even more importantly, one's cross-cutting criteria of comparison and their corresponding empirical features, and then adjusting and readjusting them throughout the comparative project until it actually is consistent, plausible, transparent and insightful, are the central elements of qualitative comparison. Compared with these central elements, it is a rather pragmatic and flexible process to choose between the different available options of comparative *ranges*. In its simpler versions, the range of comparison can be binary, regional or distant (see Box 7.5). Systematic historical (or 'temporal') comparison usually works along a central timeline, while keeping the regional or spatial dimensions fairly stable. More complex

versions of comparative ranges are 'fluid' forms of comparison, which follow phenomena through time and space that consequently change together with the comparative analysis that follows them. This applies when we explore, for instance, a new instrument and method of electronic communication emanating from a few centres, and then compare the similarities and differences of how it is used in different communities across the globe. 'Fluid' forms of comparison thus are especially useful for the comparative analysis of border-crossing phenomena and processes. In the contexts of today's phases of globalization, fluid and distant forms of comparison thus may represent a growth sector of qualitative comparison in today's and tomorrow's humanities and social sciences.

Box 7.7 Key Points

- Comparative research does not present an independent method per se. Methodological choices depend on the primary research problem.
- Comparison in qualitative research may be designed a priori or a posteriori.
- A priori comparative research is generally more time consuming and budget intensive. Particularly group projects (and the great amounts of data that come with them) require a structured approach, for example the comparative criteria markers need to be defined carefully.
- The definition of the units of analysis and their limits is a decisive step in the early stage of any comparative research. In a second step, the criteria of comparison need to be identified as well as their corresponding empirical features.
- Our exposure to and interaction with increasing transnational and global conditions opens up the possibility for comparative research that investigates how different people in different parts of the world position and adapt themselves to these conditions.

FURTHER READING

- Bowen, John Richard, Petersen, Roger Dale and ebrary Inc. (1999) *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gingrich, Andre and Fox, Richard Gabriel (eds) (2002) *Anthropology, by Comparison*. London: Routledge.
- Øyen, Else (1990) *Comparative Methodology: Theory and Practice in International Social Research*, Sage Studies in International Sociology. London: Sage.

REFERENCES

- Arthur, Sue and Nazroo, James (2003) 'Designing field-work strategies and materials', in Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: Sage. pp. 109–37.
- Beck, Ulrich (1999) *What Is Globalization?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boeije, Hennie (2010) *Analysis in Qualitative Research*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Bowen, John Richard, Petersen, Roger Dale and ebrary Inc. (1999) *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bryman, Alan (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chen, Kuang-Hsing (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Collier, David (1993) 'The comparative method', in Ada W. Finifter (ed.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
- Eggan, Fred (1953) 'Social anthropology and the method of controlled comparison', *American Anthropologist*, 56 (5): 743–63.
- Ember, Carol R., Ember, Melvin and ebrary Inc. (2009) *Cross-Cultural Research Methods*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Etzioni, Amitai and DuBow, Fred (1969) *Comparative Perspectives: Theories and Methods*. Boston, MA: Little.
- Flick, Uwe (2006) 'Constant comparative method', in Victor Jupp (ed.), *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage. pp. 37–8.
- Flick, Uwe (2007) *Designing Qualitative Research*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Flick, Uwe (2009) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition. London: Sage.
- Fox, Richard G. and Gingrich, Andre (2002) 'Introduction', in Andre Gingrich and Richard G. Fox, (eds), *Anthropology, by Comparison*, London: Routledge. pp. 1–24.
- Gingrich, Andre (1994) *Südwestarabische Sternkalender: Eine ethnologische Studie zu Struktur, Kontext und regionalem Vergleich des tribalen Agrarkalenders der Munebbih im Jemen*. Wiener Beiträge zur Ethnologie und Anthropologie vol. 7, Vienna: WUV.
- Gingrich, Andre (2002) 'When ethnic majorities are "dethroned": Towards a methodology of self-reflexive, controlled macrocomparison', in Andre Gingrich and Richard G. Fox (eds), *Anthropology, by Comparison*. London: Routledge. pp. 225–48.
- Gingrich, Andre (2012) 'Comparative methods in socio-cultural anthropology today', in Richard Fardon et al. (eds), *Handbook of Social Anthropology*, vol. 2. London: Sage. pp. 211–22.
- Gingrich, Andre and Banks, Marcus (eds) (2006) *Neoliberalism in Western Europe and Beyond: Perspectives from Social Anthropology*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Gingrich, Andre and Fox, Richard G. (eds) (2002) *Anthropology, by Comparison*. London: Routledge.
- Glaser, Barney (1965) 'The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis', *Social Problems*, 12 (4): 436–45.
- Harding, Jamie (2006) 'Grounded theory', in Victor Jupp (ed.), *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage. pp. 131–2.
- Harvey, David (2006) *A Critical Reader*, ed. Noel Castree and Derek Gregory. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Holy, Ladislav (1987) *Comparative Anthropology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kaelble, Hartmut and Schriewer, Jürgen (2003) *Vergleich und Transfer: Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus.
- Kreff, Fernand, Knoll, Eva-Maria and Gingrich, Andre (eds) (2011) *Lexikon der Globalisierung*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Laitin, David D. (ed.) (1999) *National Revivals and Violence*, ed. John Richard Bowen et al., *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Laitin, David D. (2007) *Nations, States, and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, Jane (2003) 'Design issues', in Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: Sage. pp. 47–76.
- Lijphart, Arend (1971) 'Comparative politics and the comparative method', *American Political Science Review*, 65 (3): 682–93.

- Mahoney, James and Rueschemeyer, Dietrich (2003) *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- May, Tim (1997) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 2nd edition. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Mill, John Stuart and Robson, J. M. (1996) *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill. London: Routledge.
- Needham, Rodney (1975) 'Polythetic classification: convergence and consequences', *Man*, 10: 347–69.
- Niewöhner, Jörg and Scheffer, Thomas (2010) 'Introduction. Thickening comparison: On the multiple facets of comparability', in Thomas Scheffer and Jörg Niewöhner (eds), *Thick Comparison: Reviving the Ethnographic Aspiration*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 1–16.
- Øyen, Else (1990) *Comparative Methodology: Theory and Practice in International Social Research*, Sage Studies in International Sociology. London: Sage.
- Palmberger, Monika (2010) 'Distancing personal experiences from the collective – Discursive tactics among youth in post-War Mostar', *L'Europe en formation*, 357: 107–24.
- Palmberger, Monika (2013) 'Ruptured pasts and captured futures: Life narratives in post-War Mostar', *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 66: 14–24.
- Phillips, David and Schweisfurth, Michele (2007) *Comparative and International Education: An Introduction to Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Continuum.
- Ragin, Charles C. (1987) *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Rihoux, Benoît and Ragin, Charles C. (2009) *Configurational Comparative Methods: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (Qca) and Related Techniques*, Applied Social Research Methods Series. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Scheffer, Thomas (2010) 'Comparability on shifting grounds: How legal ethnography differs from comparative law', in Thomas Scheffer and Jörg Niewöhner (eds), *Thick Comparison: Reviving the Ethnographic Aspiration*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 17–42.
- Schriewer, Jürgen (1992) 'The method of comparison and the need for externalization: methodological criteria and sociological concepts', in Jürgen Schriewer and Brian Holmes (eds), *Theories and Methods in Comparative Education*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang. pp. 25–83.
- Steiner-Khamsi, Gita (2009) 'Transferring education, displacing reforms', in Jürgen Schriewer (ed.), *Discourse Formation in Comparative Education*. Frankfurt/Main: Lang. pp. 155–88.
- Strauss, Claudia and Quinn, Naomi (1997) *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Teune, Henry (1990) 'Comparing countries: Lessons learned', in Else Øyen (ed.), *Comparative Methodology: Theory and Practice in International Social Research*. London: Sage. pp. 38–62.
- Tilly, Charles and Russell Sage Foundation (1984) *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, Russell Sage Foundation 75th Anniversary Series. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Urban, Greg (1999) 'The role of comparison in the light of the theory of culture', in John R. Bowen and Roger Petersen (eds), *Critical Comparison in Politics and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 90–109.
- Vauss, David de (2008) 'Comparative and cross-national designs', in Pertti Alasuutari et al. (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods*. Los Angeles: Sage. pp. 249–64.
- Vertovec, Steven (2011) 'Migration and new diversities in global cities: comparatively conceiving, observing and visualizing diversification in urban public spaces', Working Paper, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. pp. 1–32.
- Yengoyan, Aram A. (ed.) (2006) *Modes of Comparison: Theory and Practice*, The Comparative Studies in Society and History Book Series. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.