

ORIENTATION AND RESEARCH METHODS
- A Book of Readings

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**6 THE USE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS
IN RESEARCH**

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INTRODUCTION

The use of qualitative methodology in the social sciences is informed by the demands of field work. A peculiar character of field work in the social sciences is that the scientist has to communicate with the objects studied and they with him. This is the important distinguishing point between the social and natural sciences.

Traditionally, the social scientist's image of himself was that of humanist as well as scientist and he saw no inherent contradiction between the two dispositions. The assessment made of the science of anthropology by Eric Wolf in matters of methodology can equally apply to the social sciences in general: It is a bond between subject matters ... in part history, part literature; in part natural science, part social science: it strives to study men from within and without ... the most scientific of the humanities, the most humanist of the sciences (Wolf, 1964:88).

Today, there appears a new wave of social scientists that are inclined to move away from this position. Many social scientists see themselves as bundles of contradiction between the humanistic and scientific approaches. They would rather agree with some of their colleagues' criticism of their humanistic tendency: the humanist element is rather disturbing ... because it has offered an easy method for neglecting scientific methodology while claiming scientific status (Ryan, 1957:33).

The change of approach in favour of quantitative methodology is largely shaped by the advances of the natural sciences. Their positivistic methods which have produced such remarkable results truly motivate many people. Yet, it is necessary to remember that the image of the natural scientist who, by some mechanical process, discovers facts, has been dismissed by Einstein

who spoke about the "underlying uncertainties of all knowledge and the function of intuition resting on a sympathetic understanding of experience" (in Powdermaker, P. 298). Another danger today associated with undue attachment to quantitative approach in the social sciences is that scientists will pick problems, not because of their relative significance, but because data can be programmed for computers. Social Scientists are to be careful not to under-rate the qualitative approach by reducing their work to that of technicians. The qualitative approach, despite its limitations is uniquely useful in comparative research. Accordingly, the paper outlines the use of qualitative methodology and examines some of the work carried out in this tradition which have yielded much fruit.

1. TYPES OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Comparative research is usually classified into two - Cross-cultural and Cross-temporal comparative research. Both can be done using the qualitative methodology.

A. Cross-Cultural Qualitative Research

Durkheim distinguished three applications of the comparative method:

- (1) The analysis of variations within one society at one point in time: this involves intra-societal comparisons, for example, between middle- and working-class delinquency or between types of complex organizations within one society;
- (2) The comparison of societies generally alike but differing in certain aspects at different periods; and
- (3) The comparison of societies generally dissimilar yet sharing some feature; or different periods in the life of one society showing radical changes. Strictly speaking, it is only types 2 and 3 above that fall under the realm of comparative sociology; i.e. the systematic and explicit comparison of data from two or more societies.

For example, Popenoe (1983) studied the Swedish social policy of decentralization of people from large cities to smaller towns. This study compares people at one point in time who are similar sociologically in many respects, but inhabit different residential settings. This study attempted to answer the research question: What differences in lifestyle of the inhabitants of each community

may reasonably be attributed to differences in the scale of the urban investigation? Furthermore, it attempted to point out important social issues, both for immediate purposes of public policy and for further sociological research of a more systematic nature.

An analytical description of life in each of three communities was developed using various combinations of four main sources of information:

- (1) respondent interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire;
- (2) informant interviews of leaders and decision-makers, plus interviews with outside experts in planning and the social sciences;
- (3) existing data, especially census data,
- (4) field observation; i.e., close, personal observation of the community over an extended period of time.

In this study, Popenoe found that in the movement of people from larger urban areas to smaller urban areas only the size of urban area changed; almost everything else including housing quality and job remained substantially the same.

(2) CROSS-TEMPORAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The second type of comparative qualitative research is cross-temporal research. Although similar to historical research, this type of qualitative sociological methodology is uniquely distinct. It is more concerned with understanding societal dynamics and transformations over time.

John Flint (1980) offers a number of suggestions for conducting cross-temporal research. First, a decision must be made regarding the use of propositions and comparisons. A study may be proportionally comparative, focusing on the differences between two distinct cultures, or non-comparative, an analytical survey of a particular culture on its own merit.

Second, a decision must be made regarding the study's ultimate objective. Is it to be theoretical or historical? Flint laments the fact that too many studies have been contented with mere historical explanations of events rather than explaining something about man in history. Third, dependent and independent variables must be selected. The relationships between these variables must be developed as the historical data as reviewed.

Cross-temporal research may be classified into three primary types (Skocpol & Somers, 1980). The relationship of these types of research are depicted in Figure 1.

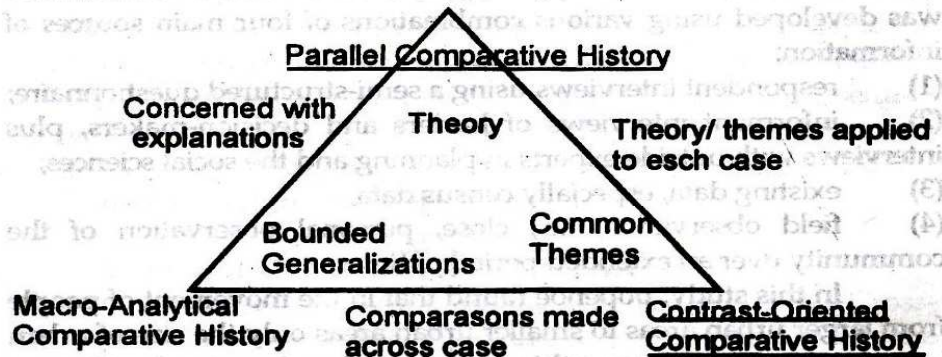


Figure 1. Triangle of comparative history research

Parallel Comparative History studies emphasise theory development. Case histories are juxtaposed to demonstrate and illustrate, NOT TEST, the theory. Case histories are selected on the basis of how well they illustrate the points being made in the description of the theory. This is the opposite of "grounded theory".

Contrast-Oriented Comparative History studies are skeptical of generalized theories. Nevertheless, theory does creep into their accounts by means of "common themes".

By developing unbroken accounts of the unique histories of different societies, these studies are able to show how the different aspects in a particular society interrelate. They show the continuity in a cultural system over time. Although the dependent and independent variables are never explicitly distinguished in these studies, they do provide a full, holistic, rich, chronological account of a society.

Macro-Analytical Comparative History studies suggest "bounded generalizations" and attempt to validate hypotheses. These studies recognize their limitation in control. Controlled

comparisons are never fully possible. Societies cannot be broken into analytically manipulable variables.

Each of these types of cross-temporal studies impacts the other by eliciting each other's emphases. Contrast-Oriented studies set limits on the overly general theories of parallel studies. The Macro-Analytical approach is able to draw testable hypotheses based on the Contrast-Oriented work. Finally, the hypotheses suggested and tested by the Macro-Analytical studies are developed into general theory by the parallel approach. See Figure 2.

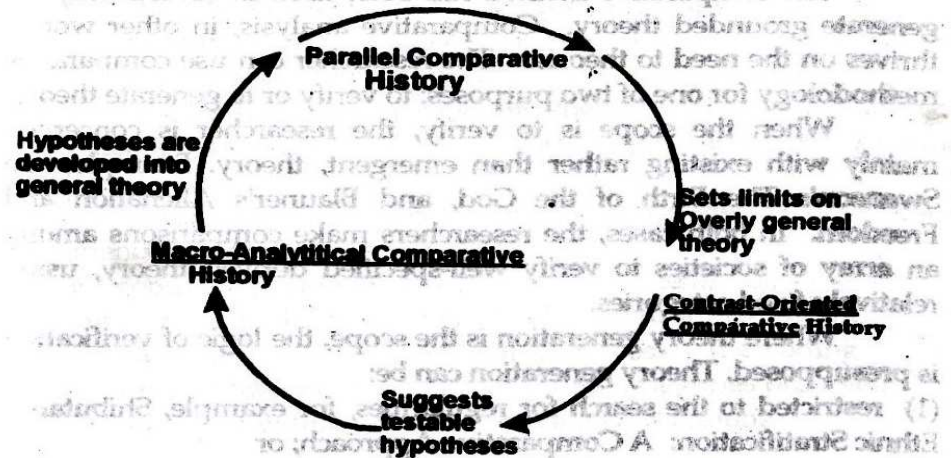


Figure 2. Cycle of transitions in comparative history research

For example, in a cross-temporal, qualitative study, Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966) traced the relationship between revolutions and democratic social structures. Moore noted the changes in power of the elite class and in the peasant class as well as the rise of the middle class. The structural changes resulted in, or were the result of revolution. Using historical documentations, Moore analyzed social change in England, France, the United States, China, Japan, and India. He concluded that there were three routes to the modern world:

- (1) the capitalist, parliamentary, democracy route (US, GB, Fr),

- (2) the capitalist, fascist route (Ger, Jap); and
 (3) the communist route (USSR, China).
 India represents a potential fourth route. Moore includes and appendix entitled "A Note on Statistics and Conservative Historiography" which described his research methods.

II. THE ROLE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS IN COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

A. The Development of Grounded Theory

The comparative method has been used in several ways to generate grounded theory. Comparative analysis, in other words, thrives on the need to theorise. The researcher can use comparative methodology for one of two purposes: to verify or to generate theory.

When the scope is to verify, the researcher is concerned mainly with existing rather than emergent, theory. Examples are Swanson's *The Birth of the God*, and Blauner's *Alienation and Freedom*. In both cases, the researchers make comparisons among an array of societies to verify well-specified derived theory, using relatively fixed categories.

Where theory generation is the scope, the logic of verification is presupposed. Theory generation can be:

- (1) restricted to the search for regularities, for example, Shibutani's *Ethnic Stratification: A Comparative Approach*; or
- (2) generation grounded in internal comparisons, for example, Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*; or
- (3) insightful generation with minimal integration, for example, Park and Simmel's *Race and Culture*, and the *Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Theory generation is the development of a new theory from one that is already verified; and, theory grounding is the application, empirically, of an already existing grand theory that was not empirically based, e.g. Umoh's dissertation on Berger and Neuhaus's *Mediating Institutions* (1985).

B. Coding Comparative Qualitative Data

Although qualitative data may be converted to codes for the purpose of testing hypotheses, the usual use of coded qualitative

data is to re-design and reintegrate one's theoretical notions. Glaser & Strauss (1967) refer to the later use as the Constant Comparative Method. They described two steps in the coding stage of the Constant Comparative Method.

First, categories of analysis must be devised into which each incident may be placed. To do this, each incident must be compared with all other incidents to note similarities and differences.

Having established the different categories, a label (whether a name, number, letter, etc.) must be placed on each one. Each incident is then labeled using the label names derived for each category.

Becker & Geer (1960) recommend three cautions to be observed in the coding process:

- (1) Codes should be inclusive.
- (2) Codes should be by incidents; they should be either complete verbal expressions of an attitude or complete act by an individual or group.
- (3) Codes should be settlements in which the residents dwell (Popenoe, 1983:406).

After completing the job of coding each incident, Glaser & Strauss recommend that the researcher should record a memo on the ideas which were generated by the coding process. The coding process may generate theoretical properties for the categories observed. This is a time for individual reflection and team discussion.

C. The Comparative Method As Qualitative Research

Although Popenoe (1977:21) argues that "Comparative analysis is not a special technique in itself but a particular use of existing research techniques", Ragin (1981) states his case for a specific methodology of comparative research. He feels that because the comparative method is a logical method, it is a non-statistical (qualitative) method. For him, the comparative method is used to ascertain the different configurations of conditions that are responsible for particular social phenomena. According to him, this means:

- (1) "the comparative method does not work with samples of populations but with all relevant instances of the phenomenon of interest; and

(2) the explanations that result from applications of the comparative method are not probabilistic explanations; rather, they are determinate explanations because every instance of a particular phenomenon is taken into account" (Ragin, 1981:111).

He argues that the comparative method is superior to the statistical method in several important respects:

- (1) in the statistical method, each relevant condition is examined in an additive manner (i.e. the statistical method is variable based); therefore, it is difficult to use for a study of the consequences of different configurations of conditions (i.e. case based studies);
- (2) applications of the comparative method produce explanations that account for every instance of a particular phenomenon; therefore, the comparative method is well-suited for use in building new theories and in synthesizing existing theories;
- (3) the comparative method does not require a random sample; so the boundaries of a comparative examination are set by the investigator to familiarize himself with the cases relevant to this analysis.

Ragin (1981:113) summed up his argument for qualitative comparative sociological methods by saying; "In short, the comparative method is not a bastard cousin of the statistical method. It is qualitatively different from the statistical method, and it is uniquely suited to the kinds of questions comparativists ask".

III. LIMITATIONS OF COMPARATIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Comparative methodology has a number of limitations, including:

- (1) cultural conditioning: given the enormous variation in social phenomena, it is futile to seek a common pattern of relationship underlying this variation;
- (2) the impossibility of a general theory: because the initial conditions vary from society to society;
- (3) inability to move from culturally specific propositions to universal propositions; and
- (4) the scientific search for trans-cultural or culturally invariant social laws is in its infancy.

In regard to cross-cultural qualitative research, especially, one major difficulty is the problem of linguistic comparability.

Questions asked in one language may not translate easily into another language. The real limitation of this method results when an item simply cannot be translated into the local language because the meaning of the question or item is not present in the local language.

It is important therefore to remember that the variability in meaning from language to language of similar words can cloud the meaning of observational interview data and make cross-cultural comparison difficult or even invalid.

In terms of cross-temporal comparative qualitative research, each of the three major types has its own unique strengths and limitations. The parallel approach is able to generate, but not validate, theory. Since the juxtaposition of numerous case histories cannot strengthen the validation of theories, parallel researchers run the risk of being overly repetitive without any real gain.

Researchers using the Content-Oriented approach are very sceptical of the validity of scientific theories as applied to cross-temporal data. They are also sceptical about the prospects for developing any macro-level explanatory generalizations. Nevertheless, those applying this approach often infuse implicit theoretical explanations into their case accounts. This happens by posing common themes or questions to provide the framework for the case accounts.

Macro-Analytic studies attempt to validate causal hypotheses about cross-temporal cases. The problem is that controlled comparisons are nearly impossible since societies cannot be divided into component variables. Furthermore, history rarely provides exactly the cases needed for controlled comparisons.

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