

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.

Livingstone, S. & Bovill, M. (2001). *Children and their changing media environment: A European comparative study*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Livingstone, S. (2003). On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research. *European Journal of Communication*, 18(4), 477–500.