
UNIT 6 COMPARATIVE METHOD*

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- comparative method used by Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown;
- Weber's Comparative Analysis; and
- Various debates on the Comparative Method.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Comparative sociology may be defined as that field which is concerned with the systematic and explicit comparison of social phenomena in two or more societies. No social phenomenon can be isolated and studied without comparing it to other social phenomena. Comparison is a fundamental tool for analysis. It shapes our power of description, and plays a central role in concept-formation by bringing into focus similarities and contrasts among cases. Comparison is routinely used in testing hypotheses, and it can contribute to the inductive discovery of new hypotheses and to theory-building. Comparative method refers to the study of different types of groups and societies in order to determine analytically the factors that lead to similarities and differences.

For most sociologists the very nature of sociological research is considered comparative, and thinking in comparative terms is inherent in sociology. All empirical observations must be related to some kind of theoretical construction, and no theoretical construction has any value unless it bears some relation to empirical observations. When sociologists choose to observe only part of the surrounding social realities the choice always represents a comparison of the selected phenomenon under observation in relation to other social phenomena, whether this choice is made explicitly or implicitly. All sociological method is intrinsically comparative in the sense that it either involves explicit and direct comparison of time and/or space differentials or involves concepts that were developed through such comparisons. Therefore, sociology is implicitly comparative. It is no wonder that Emile Durkheim wrote 'comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts' (*Durkheim*, 1958). Weber,

* Dr. Reema Bhatia, Miranda House, Delhi University, Delhi

on the other hand, thought that comparison did not consist in drawing parallels and analogies but in exploring the trajectories of social institutions in their irreducible differences and singularities.

Comparative analysis is central to sociology because it provides solutions to one of the constitutive problems—the competing claims of complexity and generality in sociological analysis (*Ragin and Zaret, 1983*). Weber's epistemological analysis resolve complexity and generality by showing that they serve complementary purpose in ideal types. Durkheim on the other hand reconciles in an ontological argument about social species that far surpasses simple assertions about the uniformity and diversity of social organisations.

6.2 DURKHEIM AND COMPARATIVE METHOD

Durkheim was the first to seriously use the comparative method correctly in scientific sense" (*Collins, 1975; 529*) and it is central to Durkheim's vision of sociology. According to Durkheim, to demonstrate that a given phenomenon is the cause of another, we have to compare the cases and employ the comparative method. Sociological explanations require the establishment of cause-effect relationship. Since social phenomenon can escape the control of the experimenter, comparative method is best suited for sociology. Durkheim in his endeavour to establish comparative method as method par excellence proposed a basis for comparison— 'a given effect has always a single corresponding cause.' For example suicide can be caused by multiple factors but each factor produces only a particular type of suicide. Over integration with the society causes altruistic suicide, less integration causes egoistic suicide.

He was of the opinion that not all forms of comparative method was applicable to the study of social facts. This led him to be critical of Mill and his method of residues, and the use of the method of both agreement and difference. He disagreed with the method of residue as he thought that the social phenomena are too complex for the effect of all causes except one to be removed in a given case. The method of agreement and difference according to him are difficult for the same reason. They suppose that the causes compared either agree or differ by one single point. In reality the chances of observing all phenomena is less than the chances of allowing a phenomenon to escape, as a result such method can only produce conjectures which are devoid of all scientific values. Though Durkheim was not in favour of these methods advocated by Mill's but he was positively inclined towards the method of concomitant variation. Mill dismissed the importance of concomitant variation for social sciences, and argued that social reality provides many examples of plural and convergent causation. Because such phenomena present no necessary link between variation in cause and effect, the method of concomitant variation could not be used. In response to Mill, Durkheim rejects the idea that an effect could have more than one cause as unscientific. He believed that for this method to be reliable it would be sufficient that a correlation between two phenomena was established in a numerous and varied cases. Its validity would be due to the fact that the concomitant variations display the casual relationship intrinsically and not by coincidence. It reflects that the two phenomena to mutually influence each other and in a continuous manner. The establishment of a constant concomitance then becomes a law. The cause effect relationship between the two phenomena is established. This relationship should not be doubted even in the absence of one. This may occur

due to the action of some contrary cause or that it is present in a different form than previously observed. If two or more phenomena appeared to vary together then it is likely that a causal relationship existed. This however needs to be checked as it is possible for the two phenomena to vary together because of the action of a third factor.

“We shall first investigate, by the aid of deduction, how one of the two terms has produced the other; then we shall try to verify the result of this deduction with the aid of experiments, i.e., new comparisons. If the deduction is possible and if the verification succeeds, we can regard the proof as completed. If, on the contrary, we are aware of no direct bond between these facts, especially if the hypothesis of such a bond contradicts laws already demonstrated, we shall begin to look for a third phenomenon on which the other two depend equally or which have served as an intermediate between them.

For, example we can establish in the most certain way that the tendency to suicide varies directly with education. But it is impossible to understand how education can lead to suicide; such an explanation is in contradiction to the laws of psychology. Education, especially the elementary branched of knowledge, reaches only the more superficial regions of consciousness; the instinct of self preservation is, on the contrary one of our fundamental tendencies. It could not, then, be appreciably affected by a phenomenon as far removed and of so feeble an influence. Thus we come to ask if both facts are not the consequence of an identical condition. This common cause is the weakening of religious traditionalism, which reinforces both the need for knowledge and the tendency toward suicide” (*Durkheim*, 1958;132).

However, comparison must be made systematic and applied with precision to produce best results. It would not do simply to illustrate the hypothesis with a few scattered cases of covariance.

“To illustrate the idea is not to demonstrate it. It is necessary to compare not isolated variations but a series of systematically arranged variations of wide range in which individual items tie up with one another in as continuous a gradation as possible. For the variations of a phenomenon permit inductive generalisations only if they reveal clearly the manner in which they develop under given circumstances” (*Durkheim*, 1958; 135).

The way in which the series was formed depends on whether the comparison were within society, between societies of the same social type or between different types of societies. Making comparisons within a society “may suffice, if absolutely necessary when it is a matter of facts that are widely distributed and on which we have statistical information that is rather extensive and varied” (*Durkheim*, 1958;136). It is possible to establish concomitant variation within a society with regard to a particular social current, example, a suicidogenic current or a legal or moral regulation that is in question, then it would be necessary to compare different societies or the same society at different times.

Comparisons of several societies of the same species applies only to the phenomena which originates during the same time. Society does not create its organisations entirely, it receives some of it from the preceding societies. These organisations undergo changes over time. “Therefore, the changes and innovations which occur cannot be understood if one does not first study these more

fundamental phenomena which are their roots; and they can only be studied by the aid of much extended comparisons. To be able to explain the present state of family, marriage, property etc it would be necessary to know their origin and the elements of which these institutions are composed” (Durkheim, 1958; 138).

The most complex social phenomena can only be explained after most extensive historical and cross cultural comparisons is carried out. We need to at first establish the most elementary form of the phenomena, in order to examine the gradual progress into a complex phenomena step by step. This would give us both the analysis and synthesis of the phenomena. “*Consequently, one cannot explain a social fact of any complexity except by following its complete development through all social species.*” (Durkheim, 1958; 139).

In doing comparison an error is made which leads to misleading results. People have compared societies at different stages of their evolution. The weakening of the religious beliefs is a transitory phenomenon in the life of people as it appears in the last phase of the evolution of a society and soon ceases as a new stage begins. But with this method one is tempted to take as the regular and necessary march of progress that which was simply the effect of an entirely different cause. In fact any certain stage of a young society is not simply the prolongation of the stage of the preceding declining society. Therefore to arrive at a just comparison, *it will suffice to consider the societies compared at the same period of their development.* (Durkheim, 1958; 140).

Prior to writing *The Rules of Sociological Methods* Durkheim had sowed the seeds of comparative method in his work *The Division of Labour*. He used the comparative method to study the change from mechanical to organic solidarity in societies. He compared the legal systems of various societies and showed that they differed according to how many laws were based on the principle of repression and restitution. He took the relation between these laws as an index of the type of solidarity of a society.

In his work *Suicide* which was written after *The Rules of Sociological Methods*, he tried to demonstrate the procedure of doing research. He wanted to demonstrate and establish sociology’s scientific status by providing a sociological explanation to suicide. He defined suicide as a social fact that required explanation in terms of other social facts. It was suicide rates that constituted the social fact to be explained as an effect of an imbalance of social structural force. Comparative statistics for countries and categories of people within each country showed that suicide rates were relatively constant, therefore it must be a social fact that a collective tendency towards suicide existed. These collective tendencies could be related to sets of causes to produce a classification of types of suicide. The sets of causes was theoretically postulated on the basis of integration.

One of the types of suicides was egoistic suicide. Here the level of integration was low as a result the individual lost the advantages of group membership such as support and revitalization and consequently found little meaning in group life. Thus suicide rates were higher for Protestants than Catholics both in comparisons between predominantly Protestant countries and Catholic countries and between Protestants and Catholics in the same society. It was not the case that one religious belief condemned suicide and the other did not, as suicide was severely condemned by both Protestants and Catholics. The difference was that Protestantism encouraged individual free inquiry unlike Catholicism, it did not

offer priestly and sacramental support. Whereas Protestant church did offer more of those supports, as in the Church of England which had kept some of Catholic emphasis on priesthood and sacraments, the suicerate was mid way between that of the Catholic and protestant countries.

Table 6.1 : John Stuart Mill's Methods

The Method of Agreement

Mill's rule of agreement says that if in all cases where an effect occurs, there is a single prior factor C that is common to all those cases, then C is the cause of the effect.

Example: A family goes out to eat and everyone falls ill. They had eaten many types of food but one food that all of them had eaten was rajma rice. So applying the rule of agreement we infer that eating rajma rice is the cause of the illnesses.

The Method of Difference

This rule says that where you have one situation that leads to an effect, and another which does not, and the only difference is the presence of a single factor in the first situation, we can infer this factor as the cause of the effect.

Example: A family goes out to eat and everyone except the son fall ill. They had eaten many types of food but the son had not eaten rajma rice. So applying the rule of difference we infer that eating rajma rice is the cause of the illnesses.

The Joint Method

The joint method is a matter of applying *both* the method of agreement and the method of difference. So application of the joint method should tell us that it is the beef which is the cause this time.

Example: A family goes out to eat and everyone except the son fall ill. They had eaten many types of food but the son had not eaten rajma rice and salad. Even his brother did not eat salad but he did have rajma rice. Salad cannot be the reason for all falling sick as the second son who did not have salad also is sick. So applying the rule of joint method we infer that eating rajma rice is the cause of the illnesses.

The Method of Concomitant Variation

The method of concomitant variation says that if across a range of situations that lead to a certain effect, we find a certain property of the effect varying with variation in a factor common to those situations, then we can infer that factor as the cause.

Example: Thus using the same kind of example, we might find that you felt somewhat sick having eaten one samosa, whereas your sister felt rather not well having eaten a few, and your father became critically ill having eaten ten in a row. Since the variation in the number of samosa corresponds to variation in the severity of the illness, it would be rational to infer that the illnesses were caused by the samosa.

The Method of Residues

According to the method of residues, if we have a range of factors believed to be the causes of a range of effects, and we have reason to believe that all the factors, except one factor C, are causes for all the effects, except one, then we should infer that C is the cause of the remaining effect.

Source: <https://philosophy.hku.hk/think/sci/mill.php>

6.3 RADCLIFFE-BROWN AND COMPARATIVE METHOD

The aim of comparative anthropology or sociology according to Radcliffe-Brown is to explore the varieties of social life as a basis for the theoretical study of human social phenomena (*Radcliffe-Brown*, 1958). One of the important tasks of comparative method is to look for parallels similar social features appearing in different societies in the present or in the past.

According to Radcliffe-Brown the Australian Tribal societies are divided into oppositions based on totems. Birds and animals are used to categorise the moieties, like the Eaglehawk and Crow, and this is found in many other societies as well. We may ask the question why these social divisions are identified with reference to two species of birds. Radcliffe-Brown had collected many stories about Eaglehawk and Crow in different parts of Australia and in all of them the two are represented as opponents in some sort of conflict. He gives an example from Western Australia. He says “Eaglehawk was the mother’s brother of Crow. In these tribes a man marries the daughter of a mother’s brother so that Eaglehawk was the possible father in law of Crow, to whom therefore he owed obligations such as that of providing him with food. Eaglehawk told his nephew to go and hunt wallaby. Crow, having killed a wallaby, ate it himself, an extremely reprehensible action in terms of native morality. On his return to the camp his uncle asked him what he had brought, and Crow, being a liar, said that he had succeeded in getting nothing. Eaglehawk then said “But what is in your belly, since your hunger-belt is no longer tight?” Crow replied that to stay the pangs of hunger he had filled his belly with the gum from the acacia. The uncle replied that he did not believe him and would tickle him until he vomited. This incident is given in the legend in the form of a song. The crow vomited the wallaby that he had eaten. Thereupon Eaglehawk seized him and rolled him in the fire; his eyes became red with the fire, he was blackened by the charcoal, and he called out in pain “Wa!Wa!Wa!” Eaglehawk pronounced what was to be the law “You will never be a hunter, but you will forever be a thief.” And that is how things are now.” (pp 96)

Radcliffe-Brown observed that in the stories narrated by the Australians there are number of parallels to the tale of Eaglehawk and Crow. The tale of Wombat and Kangaroo from the region where South Australia adjoins Victoria tells us that in the beginning Wombat and kangaroo lived together as friends. One day Wombat began to make a ‘house’ for himself. The Kangaroo annoyed him. Then one day it rained and the Wombat went inside his ‘house’. When the Kangaroo asked to make room for him but he Wombat explained that there was only one room. Thus the two of them fought. Kangaroo hit the Wombat with a stone on his head and flattened his skull, Wombat on the other hand threw a spear at Kangaroo which fixed itself at the base of the backbone. The wombat has a flattened skull

to this day and the kangaroo has a tale and are no longer friends. There are many more tales which have the same single theme. The resemblances and differences of animal species are translated into terms of friendship and conflict, solidarity and opposition. "In other words the world of animal life is represented in terms of social relations similar to those of human society.

A comparative study therefore reveal to us the fact that the Australian idea about the eaglehawk and crow are only a particular instance of widespread phenomena. First, these tales interpret the resemblances and differences of animal species in terms of social relationships of friendship and antagonism as they are known in the social life of human beings. Secondly, natural species are placed in pairs of opposites. They can only be so regarded if there is some respect in which they resemble each other. Thus the eaglehawk and crow resemble each other in being the two prominent meat eating birds" (*Radcliffe-Brown*, 1958;98).

The next step in comparative study is to try and discover the diverse forms that the opposition between the moieties of a dual division takes in actual life. The expression of opposition between moieties may take different forms. One is the institution of 'the joking relationship'. This institution is found in various societies. Opposition is also expressed in another major custom. Some tribes of Australia and North America the moieties provides sides in games such a football. Such matches provide an opportunity for the two groups to be opponents. Two continuing groups in a social structure can be maintained in a relation in which they are regularly opponents.

There is also a third relationship of opposition which is a combination of agreement and disagreement of solidarity and difference. Radcliffe-Brown began with the existence of moieties named after the Eaglehawk and Crow in Australia and by making comparisons amongst other societies, observed that this was not particular or peculiar to one region but is a widespread general tendency of human societies (*Radcliffe-Brown* 1958). He thus substitutes for a particular problem of the kind that calls for a historical explanation certain general problems. "There, is for example the problem of totemism as a social phenomenon in which there is a special association of a social group with a natural species. Another, and perhaps more important problem that has been raised is that of the nature and functioning of social relationships and social structures based on what has there been called 'opposition.' This is a much more general problem than that of totemism for it is the problem of how opposition can be used as mode of social integration. The comparative method is therefore one which pass from the particular to general, from general to more general, with the end in view that we may in this way arrive at the universal, at characteristics which can be found in different forms in all human societies" (*Radcliffe-Brown* 1958; 67).

6.4 WEBER'S COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The use of ideal types, which helps to conceptualise the research, identify and assess the causes and also aids in explaining the historical diversity, is very important for this method. Ideal types are models that are selectively developed as aids to genetic explanations. Structural properties of ideal types are often closely related to specific genetic issues. Capitalism as a model is inseparable from rationalisation. Because of this Weber calls ideal types "genetic concepts". "The ideal type is an attempt to analyze historically unique configuration or

their individual component by means of genetic concepts” (Weber, 1949;93). For example the concept of Church and sect can be formulated genetically or statistically says Weber. However, in formulating the concept of sect genetically eg “with reference to certain important cultural significances which the “sectarian spirit” has had for modern culture, certain characteristics of both become essential because they stand in an adequate causal relationship to those influences” (Weber,1949; 93-94). Genetic explanations select events based on theoretical assumptions, events which are causally relevant. However, these must satisfy the criteria of logical consistency and objective possibility (92). Genetic explanations provides the solution to historical problems. For this solution “the *cultural significance* of a phenomena eg, the significance of exchange in a money economy, can be the fact that it exists on a mass scale as a fundamental component of modern culture. But the historical fact that it plays this role must be causally explained in order to render its cultural significance understandable. The analysis of the *general* aspects of exchange and technique of a market is a-highly important and indispensable-*preliminary task*” (77).

For Weber, the trans-historical generalisation is a means to another goal, genetic explanation of historical diversity. The correlations would only be one among many possible techniques for forming concrete concepts-that is for forming ideal types as a tool of comparative historical analysis (Ragin and Zaret, 1983). With the use of ideal types one can formulate and evaluate genetic explanations of historical diversity with the focus on concrete cases. Ideal types helps us in constructing hypothesis. Its function as a research tool is for classification and comparisons. Weberain method uses qualitative historical methods to identify different patterns of invariance within the diversity each pattern of invariance constituting a historical path.

Weber’s work on religion illustrates the nature of his comparative method. He was interested to understand the reasons for the emergence of capitalism in Europe. He was of the opinion that the socio economic conditions of many societies were similar to that of Europe but capitalism developed only in Europe. To find out the reasons for this he studied some societies but mainly India and China. Weber was looking for the unique factor that was applicable to Europe and not other societies that facilitated the growth of capitalism there.

6.5 DEBATES ON THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

Although Durkheim attributed immense centrality to comparative method and it was considered to be a great achievement of the 19th century, there was a division among its advocates. Some were very enthusiastic while few were sceptical about comparative method (Beteille, 2002). The belief that comparative method could be helpful in discovering scientific laws about society and culture attracted many to use this method and those who favoured the method believed that it was possible to have a natural science of society “that would establish regularities of coexistence and succession among the forms of social life by means of systematic comparisons” (Beteille, 2002; 74). Franz Boas was not convinced with the generalisations made by comparative method and suggested that limited area to be studied with careful attention to facts. He was in favour of the historical method. Boas was of the opinion that before making any kind of extended comparison the comparability of the material must be proved and was in favour of comparison between ‘neighbouring cultures’. Neighbourliness, for Boas was not limited to

geographical nearness but it was at the same time important for him. Neighbourliness was to be identified in terms of cultural and evolutionary artifacts. However, this would lead us to study only the unique characteristics of a single society.

Radcliffe-Brown believed that natural laws of society could be discovered with the use of comparative method based on the observation, description and comparison of societies as they actually existed. He was in favour of system analysis and was focused on discovering laws related to the structure and functioning of societies rather than to their evolution. In contrast to Boas he believed that comparison of particular features of social life for the purpose of historical reconstruction were different from comparison for the purpose exploring the varieties of forms of social life as a basis for the theoretical study of human social phenomena. He wanted comparative method not to be heavily dependent on the organic analogy therefore said that two societies do not resemble or differ from one another in a way two animals of the same species match and from different species differ.

Evans-Pritchard acknowledged the importance of observation, classification and comparison in some form or the other but questioned the achievement of comparative method. He was very critical of the statistical use of the comparative method. He reckoned that the comparative method used by Radcliffe-Brown and many others were little more than the method of apt illustration. Evans-Pritchard took social anthropology back to historical method which viewed everything in a context while he thought that the comparative method took things out of their context. He was of the opinion that comparative method overlooked the richness of the context and they need to be treated with suspicion when statistical techniques are used. Though he favoured, like Boas, small scale comparison than large scale comparisons, but had reservation even for this.

6.6 MURDOCK'S COMPARATIVE METHOD AND THE USE OF STATISTICS

Murdock found comparative method as useful for studying cultures and rejected the Boasian cultural relativism and historical particularism which explored individual cultures in their respective historical context. He used data from many cultures and identified variables coded the data for statistical analysis. With this method he was able to establish universal generalisations. In his book, *Social Structure*, he was able to identify natural laws of social organisation by means of cross cultural comparisons. On the basis of the data collected from 250 societies for describing family as being made up of parents and children which is central to the social structure in all cultures.

Murdock contributed significantly by using sampling and probability statistics in comparative research. Although this can be productive, many difficulties arises when probability statistics are applied on cross cultural studies as done by Murdock. The sampling design used by him is however not immune to criticism. His sample includes societies which have ever existed, meaning some are historically 'extinct'. It consists of societies where we have enough data and others where we do not. Therefore, his sample is not randomly selected which may have major biases and needs extreme caution in interpreting inductive statistical techniques. For example, he used the chi-square test to generalise from

his sample to the universe. Social scientists very often use statistical procedures without examining the assumptions upon which their analyses necessarily rests (Sjoberg, 1955) as sample units need to be comparable. Researchers can use statistical comparative method in doing cross cultural studies but attention must be paid to its limitations.

Several kinds of comparisons are possible. Comparison can be made within a single cultural systems of units from a given time period or of units from different time periods. However, comparative method encounters many difficulties and there is no consensus regarding the nature of it. The focus of comparison of whole societies is to derive social laws, and it is the central focus of the method. However, this is responsible for the difficulties it encounters. While comparing whole societies we find different types of societies to exist which therefore poses difficulties in identifying the units of comparisons. Comparisons of whole societies is not satisfactory as human society is different from animal societies.

It is doubtful that we will ever have a comparative method, like some ideal method of the natural scientists, about whose proper use sociologists and social anthropologists will reach complete agreement. At the same time our deepest insights into society and culture are reached in and through comparison. We have to improvise and exercise our judgement as well as our imagination, and beyond that we can only hope that our comparisons—as well as our contrast—will be illuminating and fruitful” (Beteillie, 2002;94).

6.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we began by introducing the comparative method and further discussed the method as envisaged and used by various sociologists and social anthropologists. We have also discussed how some social anthropologists were opposed to the use of this method in order to study social reality. Furthermore we have also highlighted how the use of statistics can be helpful in comparative method and the kind of precaution that we have to maintain.

6.8 REFERENCES

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GLOSSARY

Method of Apt illustration: consists of thinking up some plausible explanation of some social phenomenon and then searching round for illustrations which seem to support it and neglecting the rest of the material relating to the topic under consideration.

Joking relations: clearly defined relationships of reciprocal ritual, mildly abusive behaviour, between persons who are not only permitted but expected to behave in ways that would be offensive or insulting to persons not so related.

Cultural Relativism: is the idea that a person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on that person's own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another. It is to judge every culture from its own standard.

Historical Particularism: To explore individual cultures in their respective historical context.

FURTHER READING

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