METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES in COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Presentation prepared for the European Workshop to Introduce the EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions and the EU Labour Force Survey data.

MANCHESTER.
AUGUST 2011
Comparative Research Design

- At its most basic comparative design consists of contrasting two cases using more or less identical models/forms of data collection and analysis.

- Its strength rests on the assumption that we can best understand social phenomena in relation to a contrasting case. The cases can be people, communities, *countries*..

- The main type of comparative research that will be discussed in this presentation is cross-national comparative research (sometimes called cross-cultural research).

- While comparative research can provide unique insights into your phenomenon of interest, it can also be considerably more complex.
Cross-national Comparative Research

- Linda Hantrais (2009) defines cross-national comparative research as: ‘comparisons across legally delimited and administratively implemented national boundaries, recognising that different countries, societies or cultures are contained within ...[these] borders’ (p4).

- The socio-political, economic and historical context in cross-national comparative research is vital to an explanation of the differences revealed.

- Some regard x-nat. comp research to be quasi-experimental, as it allows for a control of the environment [policy/cultural/economic] within which a social phenomenon or action occurs.

- Some (Lisle 1985) go as far as to argue that x-nat or x-cultural studies are the ‘equivalent of the controlled experiment of the natural sciences’.
Why do Comparative Research?

- Given that cross-national comparative research tends to be more complicated than single country studies, why do it?

- **personal reasons**: desire to find out about different cultures, broaden your perspective. Also to identify differences between 2 cultures, you often develop a greater understanding of your own culture.

- To guard against **ethnocentrism**, a pitfall of both earlier comparative work and of single country studies that try to generalise their findings to other countries and cultures.

- Opportunity to **develop contacts**, both during the research process as well as during dissemination, with academics in the ‘foreign’ country often interested in research in their own countries.
Comparative Data

• More recently interest in comparative analysis has risen as a result of the diffusion of new information technologies that allow more and more sophisticated collection, dissemination and analyses of data. This workshop is a case in point.

• So what are the main methodological issues in comparative research?

I would argue that they are:

• TRUE COMPARABILITY OF THE DATA
• CONVINCING RATIONALE for the COMPARATIVE CASES (if doing a reduced N country analysis).
• A CONVINCING and INVOLVED ASSESSMENT OF WHY countries differ.
(How) shall I compare thee...
Classification Systems or Individual Policies?

• There is a very strong tradition of x-nat comparative analysis within social policy.

• During the post-war period of welfare state expansion, welfare campaigners became interested in learning from the experiences of other countries. Attempts were made to develop taxonomies to classify welfare states, across advanced industrial economies.

• While Wilensky et al. (1985) sought to assess patterns of convergence or divergence in welfare states, it was Esping-Anderson’s work which become the most seminal in early comparative policy.

• 1990. The Three-Worlds of Welfare Capitalism. OUP.

• Esping-Andersen asked: Why is the world composed of three qualitatively different welfare-state logics? Why do nations seem to crystallize into distinct regime-clusters?
Classification systems can be frail...

- While E-A work has become a classic, it has also been subjected to a sustained critique from several quarters:
  - **Misclassification of countries**: notably the Mediterranean welfare states.
  - Alternative typologies are easily constructed. Other scholars have developed different typologies which resulted in countries being classified differently.
  - Classification was only of western Europe, etc....
Alternatively, try to examine the impact of policies shared by countries

- Most multilevel modelling of countries aims to identify the effect of shared (country) policies on outcome.

- In the next few slides I will provide an illustrated example of how MLM can be used to tease out cross-national context.


- Please note these are PRELIMINARY RESULTS. PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR DISTRIBUTE
The Issue (1)

- This paper asks how unemployment affects social engagement.

- Previous work has shown that unemployment reduces the level of participation in social life (e.g. Paugam & Russell 2000; Brand & Burgard 2008).

- This decrease in social participation is regarded as problematic for a variety of reasons:
  - Social participation increases a person's social network.
  - Social networks in turn provide social and economic resources, such as information about jobs (Coleman 1988; Granovetter 1973, Moerbeck 2001), which should facilitate labour market re-entry.
  - We expect a link between social participation and well-being (Putnam 2000).
  - From a functionalist perspective social participation can be seen as a mechanism to integrate disparate communities (Fukuyama 1995).
The Issue (2)

Why might the unemployed be less socially involved?

- Some argue that the economic distress associated with unemployment may reduce social participation (Putnam 2000).
- Some emphasise the psychological dimension of job-loss as an important factor for declining participation (Brand and Burgard 2008) as workers self-esteem and self-perception may suffer.
- Others underscore the normative context of unemployment, if countries have high rates of unemployment, the status of being unemployed will be less stigmatised.

As institutions can mediate the financial as well as the psychological consequences of unemployment the effect of unemployment on participation should differ cross-nationally, supporting a cross-national research design.
Principal Research Questions:

1. Can we replicate previous findings that find unemployment decreases social participation?
2. Is there cross-national variation in this tendency?
3. What country level factors are associated with decreased (or increased) social participation of the unemployed?

Our overarching aim is to identify the different effects of country (macro)level variance on unemployed workers propensity for social engagement relative to employed workers.
The data (1)

- This paper uses the **2006 EU-SILC module on social participation**.
- The dataset provides information for **25 EU countries** with rich information on the different spheres of sociability. These include questions relating to:
  - cultural participation (i.e. # of times went to cinema/to live performances)
  - the frequency of contact with friends, family and neighbours
  - participation in public life
- This paper predominantly looks at the impact of the **tertiary sphere** of social participation. We examine unemployed respondents participation in:
  - church or religious activities,
  - activities of recreational groups or organisations
  - charitable organisations.
- The data provides the best data for a cross-national comparative analysis of social participation among the unemployed relative to the employed.
- Note high # of unemployed in the next table
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Working full-time</th>
<th>Working part-time</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>5074 (42%)</td>
<td>1158 (10%)</td>
<td>361 (3%)</td>
<td>12010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>4369 (39%)</td>
<td>1294 (12%)</td>
<td>793 (7%)</td>
<td>11246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Rep.</td>
<td>7055 (47%)</td>
<td>365 (2%)</td>
<td>688 (5%)</td>
<td>14856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>8591 (33%)</td>
<td>5059 (19%)</td>
<td>1295 (5%)</td>
<td>25979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>6050 (54%)</td>
<td>1097 (10%)</td>
<td>264 (2%)</td>
<td>11246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>6452 (50%)</td>
<td>440 (3%)</td>
<td>503 (4%)</td>
<td>13007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>11956 (42%)</td>
<td>1448 (5%)</td>
<td>1856 (7%)</td>
<td>28142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>11286 (51%)</td>
<td>1552 (7%)</td>
<td>1057 (5%)</td>
<td>22134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>8091 (42%)</td>
<td>1757 (9%)</td>
<td>1127 (6%)</td>
<td>19252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>5100 (40%)</td>
<td>593 (5%)</td>
<td>662 (5%)</td>
<td>12606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>6580 (40%)</td>
<td>441 (3%)</td>
<td>842 (5%)</td>
<td>16516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>4143 (36%)</td>
<td>1272 (11%)</td>
<td>418 (4%)</td>
<td>11479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>17871 (39%)</td>
<td>2336 (5%)</td>
<td>2520 (5%)</td>
<td>45975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>6185 (36%)</td>
<td>4546 (26%)</td>
<td>228 (1%)</td>
<td>17377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>6114 (55%)</td>
<td>993 (9%)</td>
<td>211 (2%)</td>
<td>11108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>13817 (40%)</td>
<td>1344 (4%)</td>
<td>3488 (10%)</td>
<td>34893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>4684 (46%)</td>
<td>525 (5%)</td>
<td>574 (6%)</td>
<td>10148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>6424 (49%)</td>
<td>1688 (13%)</td>
<td>456 (3%)</td>
<td>13108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>12908 (48%)</td>
<td>358 (1%)</td>
<td>2194 (8%)</td>
<td>27066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak Rep.</td>
<td>6379 (51%)</td>
<td>272 (2%)</td>
<td>885 (7%)</td>
<td>12630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>7214 (42%)</td>
<td>2383 (14%)</td>
<td>352 (2%)</td>
<td>17012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU average</td>
<td>187020 (43%)</td>
<td>33270 (8%)</td>
<td>22442 (5%)</td>
<td>430119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Incomplete table of LF Status by Country (SILC 2006)
The data (2)

- The EU-SILC is billed as a comparative cross-national dataset.
- However, the strategy of ex-post harmonisation in the SILC has resulted in considerable **risks of undocumented non-comparability**.
- We therefore spent some time examining the wording of the questionnaires.
- We have (to date) compared the questionnaires in: UK, FR, IRL, DE, DK, AU, SE.
- With plans to further review the questionnaires for: PL, CZ, SP, IT and FI.
Is the SILC cross-nationally comparable?

While *broad agreement in the questionnaire wording was identified*, there are a number of imperfections with the social participation module:

- Some countries provide examples of the different types of social participation, while others provide none, e.g. **UK respondents** are presented with a show card asking which forms of social participation they engage in, with examples offered: “Sports/exercise groups, including taking part, coaching..”
  **French respondents are prompted**: and asked: “are you involved in a sporting association (**such as a sport club, a sport federation, hunting, fishing etc..**). There is a risk that countries without prompts will have lower observed social participation.

- There is also disagreement between countries in the social groups included in measures of social participation at the secondary level. Some national surveys prompt that respondents should exclude people they live with while others don’t, which is likely to lead to upward bias in the latter case.
Bigger Comparability Problems

- Other imperfections are such that the data is not comparable for some countries. *These questions are not used in our analysis* i.e. Q: **PS090- Ability to ask relatives/friends/neighbours for help (y/n)**

**UK:** I am going to describe two situations where people might need help. For each one, could you tell me if you would ask any of your neighbours for help?

(1) You are ill in bed and need help at home. Would you ask any of your neighbours for help?
Yes, No.

(2) You are in financial difficulty and need to borrow some money to see you through the next few days. Would you ask any of your neighbours for help?
Yes, No.

Two Vignettes are used
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Yes, No.

(2) You are in financial difficulty and need to borrow some money to see you through the next few days. Would you ask any of your neighbours for help?
Yes, No.

**IRL/FR~/DE/DK:** If the need arose would you feel able to ask a relative, friend or neighbour for help?

Interviewer: Only relatives and friends (or neighbours) who don’t live in the same household as the respondent should be considered

1. Yes
2. No
3. Has no friends relatives or neighbours

**Two Vignettes are used**

**Question is directly asked**
Research Questions

Principal Research Questions:

1. Can we replicate previous findings that find unemployment decreases social participation?
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Our principal aim is to identify the different effects of country (macro)level variance on unemployed workers propensity for social engagement relative to employed workers.
Conclusions for comparative research more generally

• Multi-Level Models are an important tool for cross-national comparative research.

• Small country-N comparison tries to explain observed cross-national differences by means of a regime approach. It thus focuses on specific ‘combinations of institutional features’. Evidently the small N approach has many merits, especially since institutions do not exist in isolation of each other but tend to complement each other (Hall and Soskice, 2001)

• However, this type of comparative analysis cannot provide a ‘direct test’ of macro-level effects, or give any indication of the relative strength of different macro-level factors.

• Multi-level models, by contrast, bring the researcher closer to making ‘causal’ claims about institutional or other macro-level effects.
At the same time, however, this research also has its limitations. Since in ML models countries are the unit of analyses, researchers tend to be constrained to a small N analysis, and hence a very small number of degrees of freedom => the number of macro-level variables that can be included is also limited.

Nevertheless, the possibility of directly measuring institutional or other macro-level effects has made these models very popular and as long as the analyst is aware of the limitations it can be a very powerful tool for comparative cross-national research.