

Unit 9

Comparative Method

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Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading Unit 9 you will be able to

- ❖ Locate the significance of the comparative approach in the context of the core issues of the objective versus subjective, macro versus micro and value neutrality versus partisanship
- ❖ Identify a few lessons for your own research on social issues.

9.1 Introduction

Navigating with the core issues of the objective versus subjective, macro versus micro and value neutrality versus partisanship, Unit 9 refers to the relationship of comparative method with common sense and interrogates its ideological location. Next, as comparative method has its own distinct historical legacy and trajectory, the author has provided a discussion of the historical context within which the method emerged. The trajectory of the method is relevant to the way it is operationalised during the course of empirical research. Further, there is a systematic delineation of key features of the method. Throughout the unit, there has been a focus on the linkages between the overall theoretical assumptions, research methods and field techniques. There is also substantial reference to social science research carried out in India on comparative method and this will provide you with a solid base in applying comparative method in your own research because, as said earlier, there can be no sociology without comparisons. This unit will provide you with some identifiable lessons for your own research on social concerns.

9.2 Relationship with Common Sense; Interrogating Ideological Location

Students of sociology are well aware about both the distinction between common sense and sociology as well as the danger of collapsing sociological knowledge to common sense understanding (Beteille 2002). It is in the context of a discussion on the comparative approach that this allusion to common sense again becomes important. You are well aware that we use comparison and contrast in everyday life and it is no wonder that

application of 'compare and contrast' in the study of human society and culture is also equally common. If you think about your day-to-day understanding of the social world around you, you would realise that you are involved in comparing and contrasting processes. In addition, all of us keep evaluating things, people, foods, cultures etc, in terms of their inherent qualities being superior or inferior. It is quite commonplace to hear comments that "our food is tastier than theirs" or that "they have a more developed culture than ours". In the latter statement one detects an evolutionary assumption, meaning that there are stages of development and each successive stage is superior to the preceding one. For long in sociology it seemed perfectly in order to compare the "barbaric" to the "civilised", or the "primitive" to the "modern". Sociologists now more self-consciously use "simple" and "complex" societies to avoid the embedded value judgment that rests on an evolutionary comparative approach. Interestingly however, there is also awareness even at the everyday level that comparisons are not nice and we ought to value each person, object or idea for itself.

You would notice that some themes of the comparative approach also make their presence within everyday notions. Indeed the connection and spilling over of the two levels make it doubly difficult to distinguish the sociological approach to comparison and our own lay approach. Beteille (2004: 112) makes a careful and important distinction between the lay comparative and sociological comparative approaches.

While the extensive, not to say automatic, use of comparison may be natural to the process of human thought, the same cannot be said about *the conscious search for a comparative method with definite or at least defined rules of procedure*. Here one will find characteristic differences among the various disciplines that together make up the social sciences. Some disciplines, such as economics and psychology, have focussed largely on universal structures and processes common to all human beings everywhere, and paid little attention to characteristic and persistent differences between societies. Others, such as history in particular, have dwelt much more on the specific features of given societies without venturing too far across their chosen boundaries in space and time. *The comparative method as a tool of investigation, designed consciously to discover the general features of all societies (or cultures) without losing sight of the distinctive features of each, has been a particular obsession of sociology and social anthropology....* (Emphasis mine)

In his L. T. Hobhouse Memorial Trust Lecture, 33, Evans-Pritchard (1963: 3) stressed the necessity of comparison and commented that 'in the widest sense there is no other method. Comparison is, of course, one of the essential procedures of all science and one of the elementary processes of human thought'. Evans-Pritchard was echoing what Durkheim (1964: 139) 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'.

Macfarlane (2004:95) wrote that 'a number of observers have noted

that in order to understand one phenomenon, one must place it in perspective or comparison to others' and quoted Lowie (1950: 9) who put it, thus: 'At the same time a phenomenon is understood only in relation to others: "He little knows of England who only England knows." Hence it is well to look at western culture in perspective'.

Most social scientists are generally aware that they are involved in



R Lowie
(1883-1957)

comparison all the time. As Macfarlane (2004: 94) has put it, "In the case of history, the comparisons are usually in time, in that of other social sciences, predominantly in space. The most familiar method of the historians is to take their own societies as the norm and then to see how far the past is similar or different from them. This is also what an anthropologist, sociologist, or economist tends to do, in the dimension of space rather than time." Further Macfarlane has quoted Pocock (1961: 90), who commented, "Informally, comparison is built

into the method of the subject, for even in his first piece of field-work the anthropologist is comparing the categories of his own society with those of the society he studies..."

Macfarlane has further quoted de Tocqueville's (1861, i: 359) work, which illustrates such a method of comparison, revealed in his memoirs.

In my work on America...though I seldom mentioned France, I did not write a page without thinking of her, and placing her as it were before me. And what I especially tried to draw out, and to explain in the United States, was not the whole condition of that foreign society, but the points in which it differs from our own, or resembles us. It is always by noticing likenesses or contrasts that I succeeded in giving an interesting and accurate description...

As would be obvious to you by now, sociologists at different times have been aware about the problem of comparison and value judgements. How did the classical sociological thinkers and advocates of the comparative approach like Durkheim and Weber negotiate this? How did they manage to resolve the conflict between their commitment to a value neutral sociology and a commitment to comparison in terms of an evolutionary progression that tacitly accepted that western societies had reached the highest stage of evolution? We discuss this in the next section, which is on the historical context of the comparative method in sociology.

Before turning to the next section, it is good to keep in mind that not only had classical sociologists succumbed to the appeal of comparative method, but such thinkers as Herodotus, Aristotle, Polybius, Plutarch among the ancient scholars and Bodin and Machiavelli from the Renaissance had also used it. You can also draw a long list of scholars who derived inspiration from classical sociologists' application of comparative approach and gained a rich understanding of different societies and cultures. Macfarlane (2004: 108) has included in such a list

the names of Perry Anderson, Fernand Braudel, Louis Dumont, Ernest Gellner, Jack Goody, E. L. Jones, David Landes and William McNeill. Contemporary sociologists, for example Andre Beteille, would make a case for continuing the application of the comparative method, though with due care to avoid the mistakes made by its earlier practitioners. This point of view has a lesson for you – to look at the method with considerable caution and possibilities of entering into debates about various ways of using the method.

9.3 The Historical Context

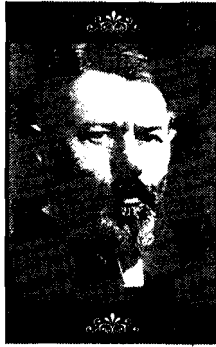
Although ancient and medieval scholars made use of comparisons in their writings, the comparative method as a designated method of social research was a product of nineteenth-century sociology and social anthropology. In the nineteenth century, the principal attraction of the comparative method came from the belief that it could be used for discovering scientific laws about human society and culture. The strong advocates of the comparative method believed in the possibility of a natural science of society that would establish regularities of coexistence and succession among the forms of social life by means of systematic comparisons. It must not be forgotten that in the nineteenth-century sociology and anthropology the study of social and cultural phenomena was typically combined with the study of the physical or biological aspects of human life.

The early sociologists, namely, Emile Durkheim in France, Herbert Spencer in England and Max Weber in Germany, considered comparison to be one of the basic processes of the way human beings think. Both Spencer (see chapter II of the first volume of *Principles of Sociology*, published between 1876 and 1896) and Durkheim (see chapters V and VI of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, published in 1895) were greatly influenced by the organic analogy. Durkheim, in particular, developed a methodological use of the organic analogy in formulating a comparative approach to understanding the social world. Durkheim's systematic use of the comparative method gave an impetus to its wide application in sociology and social anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century. You can mention the name of Radcliffe-Brown and all his associates as followers of this valuable method in their researches in different parts of the world (see Box 9.1 for a critical look at comparative method).

Box 9.1 A Critical Look at Comparative Method

Undoubtedly, sociologists and anthropologists were able to reap a rich harvest of scholarly monographs, comparing and contrasting the relationship between structure and social practices. Most of such social research had a particular conception of society. This view held that society is a reality *sui generis* and one could observe it from outside and describe the same objectively. Ingold (1990: 6) has questioned the utility of this concept of society and held its uncritical use responsible for the failure of the comparative method to achieve the expectations raised by its extensive application.

Max Weber's approach to the comparative method took a different route because he was not at all sympathetic to viewing sociological inquiry ending with the explorations of causes and functions of social phenomena. Weber was more concerned with their meanings. To quote Weber (1949: 15), "We can accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the component individuals." Not only was the early use of the comparative method tied to the idea of a natural science of society, it was, more specifically, tied to the theory of evolution. A large part of the nineteenth-century anthropology was concerned with the origins of social phenomena and the reconstruction of the stages through which they had evolved from their most simple to their most complex forms.



Max Weber
(1864-1920)

Beteille (2004: 114), commenting on the tension between a value neutral and objective approach and the influence of an evolutionary approach on early sociologists such as Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, remarks,

They believed that society, culture, religion, family, marriage, and so on gave shape to human life everywhere, and called for serious intellectual attention not only at home but also abroad. In this sense, comparative method required in its practitioners a certain detachment from their own society and culture that was not required of the practitioners of the historical method. Many of the latter had been ardent nationalists. Since the comparative method does not admit, at least in principle, of privileged exceptions, it cannot as easily or as openly accommodate the spirit of nationalism. The pioneers of the comparative method in sociology and social anthropology were all influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the theory of evolution. Indeed, it was the search for the stages of evolution that largely shaped the comparative method of Spencer and Morgan. This imposed certain limits on the extent to which they did in fact assign equal value to all societies and culture. It was tacitly accepted that western societies had reached the highest stage of evolution and that all other societies stood at graduated distances below them.

There were hardly any voices outside the West to challenge these settled opinions. A gulf existed from the very beginning between the aspirations of the comparative method and its achievements. As you will find in Units 10 and 11, both the feminist and participatory approaches in a very fundamental manner unsettle the assumption of value neutrality and argue instead that the perceptions of the dominant section are passed off as the universal and neutral view. For instance the perception of the privileged white male scholars of the nineteenth century could unquestioningly pass off as universal knowledge (see Unit 4). In that sense the genesis of the comparative approach is very different from the feminist and participatory approaches whose influences in social science research are more recent and whose position vis-à-vis the idea

of value neutrality are also very different. Not surprisingly the questions that have been raised by the feminist and participatory approaches have influenced in a much deeper way the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology, the main practitioners of the comparative method.

To come back to what Beteille (2004: 127) remarked about Weber and Durkheim,

They were aware that viewpoints might vary according to class or political affiliation, but they did not take much account of variations due to differences of national tradition. They took ideas and values in non-western societies into account, but only as objects of investigation and not as elements in the construction of method. This has become a source of some anxiety to scholars from Asian and African countries.

The important question that Beteille (2004: 127) then raises is whether this limitation can be remedied by 'recommending different methods for observation, description, and comparison to persons rooted in different geographical locations'. The answer probably is 'no'. However the sociologists, by explicitly stating their locations (national, ethnic, gender, even theoretical predilections[®]) at the start of the respective studies, would only promote methodological rigor. For the reader would be in a position to critically examine the internal coherence of the sociologists' studies as well as the dominant assumptions upon which they rest.

At another level, that is the level of the number and nature of the comparisons, it has been suggested that we avoid binary[®] thinking and do not employ a dyadic mode of analysis. Comparing a pair, for example England and India or the West and the rest, may inevitably imply one of the pair to be better/ superior/ higher than the other. Macfarlane (2004: 103) refers to Burke's (1972) comments on feudalism[®] as an ideal type that 'there is a tendency to see French feudalism as the 'proper' form and all other forms of 'feudalism' as deviations'. Burke has questioned this assumption and observed that this is the case because the western scholars had articulated most concepts in sociology on the basis of reflections of their own societies. Macfarlane has made a case for a three-way comparison (see Box 9.2).

Box 9.2 Macfarlane's Suggestion of a Three-way Comparison

Macfarlane (2004) has recommended 'an explicit three-way comparison of actual, concrete, historical cases, but they are set against a backcloth of the Weberian ideal types, which alone make the comparisons possible. ... By extending the triadic method of two cases and an ideal type to the more complex one of at least three cases and an ideal type, we move a long way from those problems of relativism and essentialism, which have plagued much social science for more than one hundred and fifty years. We can move towards a position where we simultaneously stress the similarities of peoples and rejoice in their uniqueness and differences'.

Let us, at this stage in our discussions of comparative approach, complete Reflection and Action 9.1 in order to fully grasp the issues involved in understanding the significance and at the same time problem of applying comparative approach to our study of the social world.

Reflection and Action 9.1

Consider the following examples and answer the questions related to them.

Examples

Sir Henry Maine contrasted India and Europe.

Marx made comparisons among the various modes of production.

Max Weber compared Protestants with Catholics within Europe and also contrasted Europe with religions like Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism.

Questions

- ❖ What is the single element that stands out as foremost in the above contrasts and comparisons?
- ❖ Are the above instances primarily of contrast or comparison?
- ❖ Are such contrasts examples of binary oppositions?
- ❖ In order to avoid comparing societies with huge gaps, as for example Europe and India, is it better to compare England and Japan? Identify the points of similarities and differences between England and Japan.

9.4 Elements of the Comparative Approach

Notwithstanding the critical remarks in the previous section on the problems of negotiating between comparison and the rule of no value judgment, the comparative method has been used in sociology as a matter of its natural practice. To state some of the features in a schematic fashion, we find the following characteristics in the comparative method.

- ❖ Belief in the possibility of a natural science of society
- ❖ The goal of detachment and an uneasy link with the theory of evolution
- ❖ Influence of organic analogy
- ❖ The intent to have systematic comparisons

Though sociologists have argued over the first three characteristics, they have remained by and large faithful to the intent of having systematic comparisons.

For this reason, it is necessary to look at the following elements of the method, namely,

- ❖ Methods of comparison
- ❖ The units of comparison
- ❖ The purpose of the comparative approach

Let us discuss each of the three elements at length so that we are able to derive some useful tips for the application of the method in our own researches.

i) Methods of comparison

As Macfarlane (2004: 99) noted, "Comparison can be undertaken in numerous ways, each appropriate to its task, and one cannot lay down in advance which will be the best. All one can do is to raise some of the alternatives". You may note the three types of approach distinguished by Durkheim (1964).

- ❖ We could consider a single society at a given time and analyse the broad variations in particular modes of action or relationships occurring in that society.
- ❖ We could consider several societies of a generally similar nature which differ in certain modes of action or relationships; more precisely, we could here compare either different and perhaps contemporaneous societies, or the same society at different periods, if these exhibit some limited cultural change.
- ❖ We could compare several, perhaps numerous, societies of widely different nature yet sharing some identical feature; or different periods, showing radical change, in the life of the same society.

ii) The units of comparison

Again, we refer you to Macfarlane (2004: 100), who noted, "The success of the comparative method will, of course, depend on the comparison of things that can be compared. This consists of several features. One is that the units compared are roughly of the same order of magnitude; for instance, it would not be particularly fruitful to compare the handshake in England with the family system in China".

Next, Macfarlane said, "Second, in order for comparison to be effective things must be of the same class or order in some way. Thus to compare, say marriage in America with tea drinking in China would probably be fruitless. The selection of the comparisons is all-important. Yet even by choosing something that looks similar, one can be deceived. Words like 'city', 'marriage', 'family', 'law' are notoriously loaded with ethnographic assumptions. Even such apparently obvious terms as 'house', 'meal', 'body' carry complex set of assumptions within each culture".

iii) The purpose of the comparative approach

Social scientists consider the comparative method as just one of the many tools in their kit. It is essential for the user to consider why one is using a particular tool, what is the purpose, and how best to use it. In this regard, Macfarlane suggests that 'it helps to a) distance the over-familiar, ii) familiarise the distant, and iii) make absences visible. Let us elaborate this point a little more.

❖ Distancing the over-familiar

'Distancing the (over) familiar', or turning the obvious into the unobvious means to create a gap between oneself and the familiar things so that one can see them in a different light. Most researchers face the problem of not seeing what is familiar or similar to one's own and hence self-

evidently 'normal'. Not touching the rim of a glass that has water meant for drinking may not appear strange to us in India. You will notice again the concerted attempt even within theoretical realms of sociology to question the common sense, the taken for granted aspect of reality.

❖ **Familiarising the distant**

Many of the things we encounter in our work are so unfamiliar and distant that we cannot get inside their logic or 'understand' them. This is equally problematic. The usual temptation is either to avoid the subject altogether or to dismiss it as irrational nonsense. Now the solution may be 'known' in a sort of way through the studies of others in other societies. Examples would be the insights which anthropological studies of curious phenomena like the blood feud or witchcraft gave to historians studying the same phenomena in the West.

❖ **Making absences visible**

The comparative method helps us to reveal absences. Always, you will find that many interesting things are the absences, and it is not easy to be aware of these. Macfarlane (2004: 97) has given the example of Robert Smith (1983: 152), who recounts how a Japanese scholar replied when he was asked why ancestor worship persists in modern Japan: 'That is not an interesting question. The real question is why it died out in the West?' Of course, both are interesting questions, but the absence is certainly just as curious.

At the end of this interesting section, let us complete Reflection and Action 9.2.

Reflection and Action 9.2

A)

Dumont (1986: 243) said, "A solid and thorough comparison of values is possible only between two systems as wholes". Basing yourself on this view of comparative method, give at least five systems of social relations for carrying out a successful exercise of comparison.

B)

How does the comparative approach help in familiarising the distant? Burgess (1982: 217) quoted the mathematician G. Polya, who suggested that we 'ransack our memory for any similar problem of which the solution is known' and try to solve the problem. Give examples of studies of curious phenomena, which have helped the researchers to understand problems in their own fields. You may give examples from your everyday experiences of a similar type.

C)

What is the difference between contrast and comparison? Obviously these are two different processes. Identify the differences with examples.

9.5 Conclusion

Dealing with the complex issues involved in the operations of contrasting and comparing, we have taken an overview of the history of the application

of the comparative method. In addition, we have also looked at the comparative method as one of the tools that social scientists use to give body to their explanations of social reality.

Further Reading

Beteille, Andre 2002. *Sociology: Essays on Approach and Method*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi (for its essays on the nature of the discipline of sociology and the methods sociologists use to study the social world)

Beteille, Andre 2004. The Comparative Method and the Standpoint of the Investigator. IN Vinay Kumar Srivastava (ed.) *Methodology and Fieldwork*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi. Pp. 112-131

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1963. The Comparative Method in Social Anthropology. *L.T. Hobhouse Memorial Trust Lecture, 33*

