The comparative ambition

Svein Olav Daatland

Published online: 17 May 2007
© Springer-Verlag 2007

Clemens Tesch-Römer and Hans-Joachim von Kondratowicz (2006) want us to move comparative ageing research beyond the descriptives that are dominating most of today's comparative studies to a more theory informed approach. This is an honorable ambition, and they present a good case in their article on 'Comparative ageing research: a flourishing field in need of theoretical cultivation'. They conclude that it is often unclear what is indeed compared in many cross-national studies, and they illustrate this by pointing out how explicit hypotheses are often lacking while the design and the selection of countries are often not driven by theory. When the start of a project is hesitant, the continuation will be even more so. What we need therefore is a theoretical foundation for comparative ageing research, either by integrating ageing issues into more general comparative theories or by modifying ageing theories to include comparative issues and sound methodologies. Both strategies will do, and the two authors illustrate their points well by suggesting how comparative theories such as the theory of cultural syndromes by Triandis could be expanded to include ageing issues, and how ageing theories such as disengagement theory and socio-emotional selectivity theory could benefit from explicit comparative perspectives.

So far, so good.

The authors then suggest four criteria (and steps) for how theory informed comparative ageing research should be carried out: First, research questions should be explicit as to what the project compares. Second, the relevant levels of analysis should be identified and described, e.g. how macro level societal structures such as policies or gender roles may influence micro level individual behaviour such

as retirement or quality of life. Third, mechanisms should be explicitly formulated, and fourth – hypotheses about the similarities and differences that are produced through these mechanisms should be guided by theory and formulated a priori. These hypotheses should indeed also guide the selection of countries and how the study is otherwise designed if I read the authors correctly, and this is where the trouble starts.

I have no problems with the diagnosis but I am not totally happy with the treatment. The first three criteria are indeed rules of good practice for any study be it comparative or not, but the fourth is a more narrow matter and is in my mind an ideal for variable-oriented comparative research only. Let me return to this point after a short detour.

Comparative studies are often driven by one of two contrasting ambitions: to search for similarities between otherwise different countries (cultures, regions etc.) or to identify what is specific for a country. Observed similarities indicate that there may be general, even universal, processes at work. Observed differences point towards what is unique for each unit or case. The first strategy demands that you break down the countries to a set of variables. Each variable is then assumed to have the same effect in all countries to be compared while the differences between them are reduced to a different mix of variables. This is what Gauthier (2000) calls the *structuralist* approach, where social structure is assumed to have a uniform effect in all countries that are compared. The strength of this approach is one of stringency in that the researchers are forced to define clearly what they are indeed comparing. The researchers are unable to hide behind vague and convenient categories and explanations such as 'culture', 'country' or 'society'. They must specify actors, motives and opportunities that may have produced the observed patterns, and they should

S. O. Daatland (✉)
Norwegian Social Research, Oslo, Norway
e-mail: svein.o.daatland@nova.no

abide with the four criteria of Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz. They will then often find structural explanations for what is conveniently assumed to be cultural. For example, (some of the) differences in family care and intergenerational households may be found in opportunity (geographical distance, availability of housing) rather than in cultural norms, and you may estimate how and how much should be attributed to each if you have defined the model and the variables included. A variable oriented approach thus help us identify actors and motives and to go beyond a convenient reference to ‘culture’ or for that matter to ‘welfare state regime’ when you should in fact have broken these categories down to identifiable agents, motivations and opportunities that may have produced the observed patterns.

And yet, you will often find that this breaking down and putting together does not help you understand the true character of your study matter. We cannot construct a country (nation, culture) from a collection of variables, and may need to undust the old truth that the whole is more than the collection of the parts. Each country and culture has unique features and a unique history and need to be understood and studied as such. This is what Gauthier (op. cit.) labels the *culturalist* approach, which assumes that social structure will have different meanings and implications in different contexts, the implication being that the uniform variable assumption is not valid. Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz would hardly disagree, indeed they conclude that we need both perspectives, yet they let the ideals of the variable oriented tradition be the criterias of the game. As I read them, they reduce the more holistic case oriented approach to a preparatory stage when they check the equivalence of variables they want to compare across countries. The suggested procedure is then first to explore a problem area through qualitative observations in order to identify variables and mechanisms that may be tested in a comparative design under the four criteria of good practice they have outlined. The Finnish sociologist Erik Allardt (1990) suggests we should do it the other way around. Allardt criticizes cross-national studies for being modeled on ideals of the natural experiment which they are unable to live by. Therefore, instead to start with an exploratory qualitative study to be followed by a more strict quantitative study we should switch directions. The quantitative analysis is usually at its best at the exploratory stage whereas a qualitative case-oriented analysis can provide the final insight and understanding according to Allardt.

This is possibly a good rule also for other types of studies that have often given us fragmented bits and pieces rather than to construct the pieces into a meaningful whole. We learn often more about the average trend of selected variables than how the individual trajectories look like. But if 50% fall into a plus category and the other 50% into

minus, it makes little sense to conclude with an average of zero. The general lesson is that we need to go from variables to individuals (or whatever other unit we are studying) and investigate the different trajectories and pathways of these units. This is done successfully by Smith and Baltes (1999), when they in BASE identified nine subgroups with different patterns and combinations of functioning. While they did not find clear correlations between intelligence and personality characteristics on the group (average) level, they found clusters of traits when they moved from variables to individuals. The more holistic approach may help us move beyond the often trivial and technical exploration of variables into the joys and tragedies of real people also in cross-national studies.

There is often a long way from the complex character of the countries we are exploring to the small pieces we extract and try to make sense of via comparative studies. Paradoxically, this weakness may be a strength in that it reminds us of these limitations. Comparative studies may be worth while for many reasons even when they do not comply with the four criteria suggested by Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz. Cross-national studies add variation to the study matter and they let us pool competencies and perspectives. They help us see things differently, like browsing over a large field and for each position see other details emerging from the larger picture. Comparative research may also put problems and ideas on the political agenda when they illustrate how things are done differently elsewhere and are examples to be applauded or resisted.

Therefore, I support Kohn (1989) when he concludes that we need both perspectives and approaches, the point is how we use them. The critical issue is how to interpret similarities and dissimilarities when you find them, says Kohn. Finding similarities is an avenue to more general knowledge. The most efficient way to explain cross-national similarities is through structural similarities between the countries. Cross-national differences are often harder to interpret as they may have been produced either by structural differences and/or be idiosyncratic responses.

Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz are promoting an ideal which is difficult to satisfy because comparative studies may also have other motivations and merits than a search for explanations (theory) and general laws. In particular the suggested criterium four is too strict, and this is implicitly recognized by the authors themselves when they select examples of both good and poor practice from the very same projects. While they in the introduction to the article use examples from the OASIS and SHARE projects to illustrate how a priori hypotheses are often not spelled out and therefore violate criterium number four, they use examples from the very same projects later in the article to illustrate research that accomodates to this very criterium. They illustrate then how a comparative study need not

comply with all the suggested criteria in order to be worth while and of quality and luckily so for the sinners among us.

References

- Allardt E (1990) Challenges for comparative social research. *Acta Sociol* 33(3):183–193
- Gauthier AH (2000) The promises of comparative research. Paper prepared for the European Panel Analysis Group (<http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/epag/pubs/>)
- Kohn ML (1989) 'Cross-national research as an analytical strategy'. In: Kohn ML (ed) *Cross-national research in sociology*. Sage, Newbury Park, pp 77–102
- Smith J, Baltes PB (1999) 'Trends and profile of psychological functioning in very old age'. In: Baltes PB, Mayer KU (eds) *The Berlin aging study. Aging from 70 to 100*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 197–226
- Tesch-Römer C, von Kondratowitz HJ (2006) Comparative ageing research: a flourishing field in need of theoretical cultivation. *Eur J Ageing* 3:155–167