

Introduction: Cross-national seminar on biographical methods

24/25 November 2005

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Background to seminar

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) – ESRC initiative on research methods

NCRM has funded a number of sub centres or nodes and was concerned that in its coverage of the spectrum of research methods it had ignored comparative or cross national research. Before preparing and launching a more substantial initiative in the area it had a competition for some small awards. The funding for this set of workshops and a training seminar was one of three that have been funded.

Methodological project

It is a methodological project intended to create a step change in methodological practice especially in cross national qualitative research. We have chosen to focus on three methods/ types of data and to focus on issues of **analysis** since this is the sticking point even if researchers manage to carry out comparative designs and to do the fieldwork

- Biographical methods
- Visual methods
- Organisational case studies

In a fourth event we will organise a training seminar – a rather bigger event and more inclusive in its audience and disciplinary focus on general/ broader issues of doing cross national research.

The workshops and training seminar comprise two types of activities:

- (a) *Capacity building exercises* as in the case of the workshops in the above three methods: By bringing together those with cross-national experience and expertise and those with less, the idea is to address some of the methodological challenges of these methods and stimulate debate especially in respect of how to analyse such data and how to write it up;
- (b) *Training events* will highlight the challenges and compromises in doing cross-national research more generally– bringing in experts and those with experience of doing cross-national projects to present and demonstrate their work in relation to particular aspects of working cross nationally. The training seminar to be held next May will focus on three issues: (a) case/country selection, (b) contextualising primary data gained in cross national research and (c) issues concerning use of and equivalence of concepts. We will do this by drawing on existing networks of researchers engaged in cross-national work especially of a qualitative variety

This workshop in **comparative biographical research** was proposed by us on several counts

- Context of growth in EU funding leading to larger research teams
- Increasing variety in types of research engaged in cross nationally; no longer is cross-national research limited to international/ cross national surveys or bilateral country comparisons
- Growth in mixed methods research in general and specifically engaged in cross nationally including use of qualitative methods
- Growth in biographical methods especially in the UK especially in the context of the excellent training work that Tom Wengraf and Prue Chamberlayne have been doing over the past ten or so years.
- The fact that biographical methods lend themselves to understanding changing lives as they are shaped by changing contexts. A great deal of work done in Eastern Europe and Russia and on biography of those experiencing major and sudden transition such as migrant groups

Defining the terms: comparative versus cross-national?

Isn't all research comparative? According to de Vaus (2001), cross national research can be seen as a sub type of comparative research. Cross national is taken by some to refer to research which is descriptive and deductive while comparative research is more analytical and seeks to establish a relationship between micro and macro (Grootings 1986). This terminological distinction is not often adhered to in practice (Hantrais 1999).

Case-based versus variable based studies in cross national research (surveys versus case studies)

As a general introduction to this workshop I think it may be useful to think for a moment about case- based approaches as opposed to variable based approaches or approaches that work at the level of thematic analysis.

The main features of case-based research include:

- like other cross-national studies to describe, classify or explain
- use of interpretation as explanation;
- a focus on wholes rather than parts;
- explorations of context and bringing context to bear at different levels;
- transgression of the individual/ structural divide;
- the incorporation of complexity and multiple causes/ explanation;
- application of explanations that are particularistic to a set of conditions for a particular person in a particular context and location that may not be ideal typical for a country pattern - as suggested in national statistical data;
- logic of replication and saturation;

- logics of induction and deduction: from context to individual and from the individual to the contextual level;
- choice of cases according to theoretical sampling, searching for deviant cases etc.

Problems:

I want to say a little about some of the problems with working with countries as cases notably the need to work with a small number and more generally the fact that a small number of cases are implied in qualitative research. Here I refer mainly to the political science literature I have recently come across which is levelled at country comparisons – the meat of much political science research (see Anckar in press)

The problem is how to ensure **comparability**.

The problem of the small N (numbers to choose from and to work with) is related and inevitable in country comparisons. Care has to be taken in choice of cases and in choice of concepts. The concepts must travel without losing their meaning (Rose 1991) – they must be capacious enough to apply beyond one or two cases/ countries but not so capacious as not to show variation (Sartori 1991). Concepts may appear to travel but may need deconstructing in each context so that the concepts become objects of comparison.

One solution is called the *most similar designs*: using the logic of John Stuart Mill, a group of states that are most similar is chosen but a group is chosen that differs on one important factor. This is a quasi experimental design (Sartori 1991): cases are chosen that are similar in all factors with the exception of the phenomenon to be investigated.

However there are few such countries that meet such criteria. One solution is the paired comparison approach, an approach that is a basic tool in much qualitative analysis. This method requires arranging pairs of cases: cases ideally similar on most variables but that are different on one outcome variable.

Galton's problem

This problem is encountered in testing of grand theory in cross-national analysis (see Anckar 1993, Anckar in press). The problem lies in assuming that countries are closed systems and autonomous units and that they are **uninfluenced** by processes that are the focus of concern – for example processes of economic globalisation, democratisation, Europeanization, internationalisation of human rights and so on. Such processes diffuse or move across countries and so the countries as units of analysis cannot be said to be independent of these processes. Thus a comparison between several Nordic states need to be understood in this light (ibid). Similarities are due to exogenous influences that shape or diffuse countries (Karvonen 1994).

One solution to Galton's problem is to make a virtue of the problem and explore the processes of similarity. Another solution is to choose cases for comparison that are characterised by factors that can be assumed to have influenced each other to a minor extent only. An example of such a bilateral comparison of similarity avoiding Galton's problem might be a comparison between New Zealand and Norway, two

countries geographically far away from one another and with little interconnection through history and social policy (I am not sure about fishing and trade!).

Przeworski and Teune (1970) suggest that similar countries should not be chosen on simple characteristics but on **sociological variables**. Working at the level of more encompassing levels of difference one may find that these are confounded with one another. Thus one has to be careful to choose the most appropriate sociological concept and exclude others that might subsume it or be subsumed by it. Another solution to include in a binary comparison a third country as a case - a process that may prove helpful in identifying common and different features of countries.

Generalisability: Thus in applying appropriate concept and selecting cases on basis of knowing what they are cases of qualitative comparative research can be more than descriptive or typological, it can extrapolate to theory.

The two days of the workshop:

This workshop on biographical methods is intended to cover the spectrum of approaches. In general most biographical methods to some extent have an interest in the contextual and structural factors of the case and also the interpretations that informants give. The differences lie in the relative importance given to these emphases and ways in which they different approaches construe reality – their epistemological underpinning in short. The intention is to start at the more structural/ contextual end today with a Norwegian paper. Ann Nilsen's talk focuses up the life course approach and how in a cross national (7 country study) we applied a biographical / life course approach to get a handle on how the transition to parenthood can be analysed and understood in different contexts/ countries. We will carry out a bit of cross national analysis ourselves following Ann's presentation using the 'life course facts' of two cases and see how we may compare two individuals while taking into account different layers of context.

In the afternoon we turn to a French experience of working with comparative biographical case material at the family level – from Catherine Delcroix who has worked with poor families who have come from France to Morocco including in a cross-national project on migrant families live on the edge of precariousness. Then following tea, we welcome Janet Holland who is a recent convert to the biographical method and who has used other approaches in working comparatively and cross nationally. Janet is going to share her insights into working with comparative data and working in a cross-national team. Thus we will be able to compare her different kinds of experience with our own in working with biographical material. As in all case analysis, I expect we will find here just as we do in comparative case analysis that context is key!

Tomorrow we turn to a more interpretive approach with Pru Chamberlayne drawing upon the biographic-narrative interpretive approach and following her presentation we will engage in some interpretive analysis. In the afternoon Maria Kontos from Germany will discuss her work which is part of an EU project on ethnic entrepreneurs and self employment among minorities. Finally Rachel will discuss the different presentations and points made by the speakers and will help us towards clarifying some of the issues that we sent to speakers in setting up the workshops:

1. How to select cases for comparison during fieldwork and analysis of biographical data
2. Ways of working theoretically in comparative biographical research
3. Methods of analysing data
4. Ways of working in cross national teams

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