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Scheuch, Erwin K.

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THE USE OF ISSP FOR COMPARATIVE RESEARCH¹

ERWIN K. SCHEUCH

“...over the years, the capacity to compare nations has improved. One of the results of many people learning a lot of little things.” (Henry Teune)

Comparing the current sessions of RC 33 September 2000 in Cologne with conference schedules of meetings as early as about 40 years ago one could easily come to conclude: “Nothing new under the sun”². However, that would be in error.

True, problems of translation, response sets in various countries, effects of modes of administration, capturing novelties in societies by means of new indicators, finding functional equivalences, and testing the stability of indicators have all been discussed earlier. As additional knowledge has accumulated since, there is much to be said for a further discussion of such earlier topics. If anything is to be criticized here it is a certain lack of cumulativeness. This can be attributed to absence of a true textbook in the methodology of comparative research.³

An additional cause of a certain deficiency in cumulativeness are changes in emphasis. They are in part not due to mere fashions in scientific discussion, but judgments that earlier problems of research are now under control. Some further topics are also added to the agenda, such as working with archives. In this connection the problems with face-sheet data/background data intensify as the countries compared are increasingly dissimilar. This is the consequence of the very success as the number of countries cooperating in the ISSP increased from the original four to now thirty. This change in the urgency of methodological problems with the now heterogeneous body of countries is the trigger for this essay.

¹ Vortrag gehalten auf der Fifth International Conference on Social Science Methodology, Köln, 3. - 6. Oktober 2000.

² Erwin K. Scheuch: „The Development of Comparative Research – Towards Causal Explanation.“ In: Else Øyen (Ed): *Theory and Practice in International Social Research*. London: Sage 1990.

³ G. Ragin: *The Comparative Method*. Berkley (CA): University of California Press 1987, is helpful but not sufficient.

We bypass the growth of the variety of modes of data collections as this is covered by another contribution.⁴ Thus, we shall focus our contribution on two areas:

- Working with complex data sets such as those resulting from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP)
- On using “country” as an explanatory variable.

In this connection we call into question whether it is reasonable to use all the data sets from a particular year of the ISSP.

1. Is there a new problem or a different problem understanding?

Most research is comparative. Already John Stuart Mills observed that characteristic for the social sciences would be observation under differing conditions. Of course, that renders causal explanations more difficult than with data from experiments. Only a part of such comparisons is cross-national or cross-cultural, although with the Classics that was different. At that time most comparisons were historical i.e. vertical; after 1945 horizontal comparisons prevailed.

The most spectacular studies of this first round of comparative research 1950 are macro sociological: The “World Handbook of Political Indicators” organized by political scientists from Yale University⁵, the Human Relations Area File⁶, (also housed in Yale) and the Handbook by Banks and Textor.⁷ In the HRAF the units of analysis were around 150 Human societies, ranging from the Andamanese, over the Chinese, to the Yankees of Connecticut. The YPDP and Banks and Textor used as units the “state” in the sense of the United Nations.

There was no reflection on the social science meaning of these units of analyses: Studies were considered most impressive if the number of countries was large.

An example of this use of countries/states as “black boxes” is the investigation of the role of the military in the newer independent states. The units of analysis were 51

⁴ Knut Kalgraff and Janet Harkness: Response effects by Mode and Culture. A Mode experiment in Seven Countries. (later in this session).

⁵ C. Taylor and M. Hudson: World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators. New Haven (CT): Yale University. Press, 2nd edit. 1976.

⁶ George P. Murdock: Social Structure. New York: The Macmillan. 1949.

⁷ Arthur S. Banks and Robert B. Textor: A Cross-Polity Survey. Cambridge (MA): The M.I.T. Press 1963.

politically self-governing areas, and the dependent variable the type of political regime. This was the character of the data base:

Country	Population (Millions)	Date of Independence	Civil-Military Model	Political Role	Origin of Armed Forces
Saudi Arabia	6,000	est. Non-col.	Authoritarian personal control	Mark of sovereignty	Non-colonial
Yemen	4,500	est. Non-col.	Military oligarchy	Political ruling group	Non-colonial
Syria	4,539	1946	Civil-military oligarchy	Political ruling group	Ex-colonial
Tunisia	3,935	1956	Democratic-competitive	Mark of sovereignty	Ex-colonial

Obviously, the weight of the intervening variable between the military and the type of political regimes is much greater than is represented in the few control variables here. The result was that the correlation in all the black box structures of current countries mentioned here were useless.⁸

Often units of analysis are not nation-states in our meaning. Many are not even states in the sense of Teune: "Organization of authority for peoples living in recognized, bounded territories."⁹ In this sense, Burma – Myanmar – has never been a state, the political regime penetrating only parts of the area that was inside the UN-recognized boundaries.

In all of these large-scale studies there was a complete absence of any reflection on the character of the units that were compared world wide. This may be one reason why these "broad brush" endeavors are by now largely forgotten.

Another, better remembered group of studies around this time attempted to identify the causes for the success of authoritarian regimes in some countries, while others showed immunity. Examples are Ruth Benedicts study of Japan¹⁰, or Rodnicks essay on Germany¹¹ - to name but two of a multitude of publications.

⁸ Morris Janowitz: *The Military in the Political Development of New Nations – An Essay in comparative analysis*. The University of Chicago Press: 1964.

⁹ Henry Teune: "Comparing Countries – Lessons learned." In: Else Øyen (ed): *Theory and practice in International Social Research*. London: Sage 1990, p. 38-62; here p. 39.

¹⁰ Ruth Benedict: *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin 1946. The diagnosis by Benedict is sharply contradicted on the basis of survey data by Jean Stoetzel: With-

There the choice of country was self-evident. In such studies, however, the country or rather its former political system was the dependent variable, and something else the cause: past history and “culture”, the family system, educational practices. While we would question the logic of these studies as post hoc propter hoc, they do not relate to our problem, namely the question: Is country the relevant unit, or more technical the adequate sampling frame.

Yugoslavia was undoubtedly a state but never a society in the sense of sociology. The Holy Roman Empire was a loose federation of societies sometime aspiring to become a state. We can no longer assume what in the post war time was for a long time considered normal: the coincidence of state and nation and/or society. However, at this point there is no need to enter in the debate about the presumed general end of the nation state as a form of political organization.¹²

At this moment it is sufficient to recall that the lack of a coincidence between state and society was even known to the social scientists. However, it has to be also realized that at that time this was considered as a condition to be overcome by “nation building”.¹³ And nation building was considered indispensable for development, as the state was understood to be sole carrier of modernization.¹⁴

Currently, we experience the emergence of entities that we do not know how to call. The former parts of the perished UdSSR, Kirgisistan, Kasachstan, Usbekistan, Dagestan, etc. are entities that are not even true administrative units. And in most of Africa the states that emerge with de-colonization are disintegrating now. Somalia is a case in point as is most of West Africa, and possibly Nigeria – once hailed by Banks

out the Chrysanthemum and the Sword. Attitudes of Youth in Post-War Japan. New York Columbia University Press. 1955.

¹¹ David Rodnick: Postwar Germans. New Haven (CT): Yale University press 1948. See also Erich H. Erikson: Childhood and Society. New York: Norton 1950.

¹² As an example for the currently wide-spread assertion of the end of the nation-state see *Jean-Marie Guéhenno*: The End of the Nation-State. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1995. Of course, the self-image of all nation states included fictitious elements, central to them were founding myths cf; *Monika Flucke* (ed): Mythen der Nationen – ein europäisches Panorama. Bonn: Deutsches Historisches Museum 1998. On the relative strength of the state vs. the social system see *J. Migdal*: Strong Societies and Weak States. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988. The relative importance of state vs. social systems vs. nation is an issue in all surveys covering a large number of countries.

¹³ Stein Rokkan: Citizens, Elections, Parties. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1970, especially Part I.

¹⁴ R. Holt and J. Turner: The Political Basis of Economic Development. Princeton (NJ), D. van Nostrand 1967.

and Textor as most promising. At the same time, regional groupings emerge that take over functions of the nation state: EU, NAFTA, MERCOSUR and others.

Thus, in reality what in international relations is treated as a nation-state calls for reflection as to what social meaning the respective unit has today. And this should have obvious consequences for ISSP.

2. The changing meaning of “state” and its consequences for ISSP data

ISSP is in principle a blessing – but one that accentuates methodological problems in comparative research. Many questions make sense only in nations that are not too dissimilar. Küchler cites the first ISSP survey on the role of government: Many of those questions would be meaningless in Chiappas or the slums of Delhi.¹⁵

In a number of countries internal differentiation for many issues is greater than external differences between nations. In Western Europe cases in point are Italy and Belgium.

When we tried to measure whether the countries within the European Union were becoming more similar over time – we used Correspondence Analysis for a large number of opinion questions – it appeared advisable to treat data from Northern Italy and from Southern Italy as coming from two different countries. Also data from Belgium were split into a sample for the Flemish part and for the Walloon part of the state.¹⁶ Over a period from 1977 till 1987 the populations in Western Europe became generally more similar in their basic attitudes, while the differences within the two states mentioned did not diminish.

When West and East Germany were reunited on October 3rd 1990, there was general consensus among social scientists that as a rule the two parts of Germany should be sampled as though they were still two different countries. This is continuing without an end in sight.

In routine surveys Western Germany is represented by a sample of 2000, Eastern Germany by 1000 respondents. In behavior and attitudes related especially to the

¹⁵ Manfred Küchler: “The Utility of Surveys for Cross-National Research.” In: *Social Science Research*, vol. 16 (1987), pp. 229-244, specifically p. 235.

¹⁶ Erwin K. und Ute Scheuch: *Wie deutsch sind die Deutschen*. Bergisch Gladbach: Lübbe Verlag 1991, especially chapter 4.

spheres of work and of politics this has proven to work well. However, in other realms such an ex ante division might blur the differentiations existing within East Germany, as they certainly are pronounced in the West (e.g. differences between Northern Germany and Bavaria). Even for an entity such as the Federal Republic it remains necessary to reflect what geographical space is to be interpreted as constituting the proper sampling frame.

This is even true for a country with such a long history of centralization as France. In a secondary analysis by Mattei Dogan it became obvious that the meso levels beneath the nation/country are by no means of secondary importance. And that could also be shown to be relevant for other Western nation states.

Dogan reported: "it is therefore not surprising to find in a bibliography of about fifty survey-based electoral studies published in Europe and in the United States during the last twenty years, that relatively few have explained more than one third of the variance."¹⁷ A national sample without considering the meso level "extracts" an individual from his social environment. Focusing exclusively on the personal characteristics of an individual at the expense of his social context has been criticized earlier by Scheuch as the "individualistic fallacy".¹⁸

Using only data for French voters Dogan performed various recalculations using different contexts for his regression analyses. With data reported on the level of the 2.450 "cantons" a multiple regression analysis for all of France resulted in a weak correlation of 0.13 between the percentages of industrial workers in a canton and the proportion of the leftist vote, but a strong negative relationship between religious practice and the leftist vote of -0.63 .¹⁹

In a second calculation Dogan replaced the national regression analysis with regression analyses for each of the 87 departments. Here the correlation between being a worker and preferring a party of the left went up from the mere 0.13 to 0.43.²⁰ Dogan then proceeded to show the interaction between religious practice (varying between 1% and

¹⁷ Mattei Dogan and Daniel Derivry: "France in Ten Slices." In: *Electoral Studies*, vol. 7 (1988), p. 251-267, specifically p. 251.

¹⁸ Erwin K. Scheuch: "Social Context and Individual Behavior". In: Mattei Dogan and Stein Rokkan (eds): *Social Ecology*. Cambridge (MA): M.I.T. Press 1969, pp. 133-155.

¹⁹ Dogan op.cit. p.251.

²⁰ Daniel Derivry and Mattei Dogan: "Unité d'analyse et espace de référence en écologie politique. Le canton et le département français. In: *Revue française de science politique*. Vol. 21 (1971), pp. 517-570.

97% at the cantonal level) and the leftist vote (varying between 3% and 86%).²¹ Ordering the 2.450 cantons into deciles by the strength of a respective variable, and also taking into account the population size, he observes strong differences in intercorrelations depending on context, with the population size as the least important variable. Being an atheist e.g. has a different meaning depending on the degree of religiosity in a local context.

Here we should recall the “breakage effect” that Paul Lazarsfeld identified in his early election studies.²² In his analyses Lazarsfeld introduced the social characteristics of a neighborhood as an intervening variable between demographic attributes of voters and their voting decision to explain why voters with the very same individual attributes decided in different ways depending on their minority status or their concordance with the majority.

The same context effects could be observed in Germany too.²³ If we conceptualize in comparative research “country” as one of the social contexts of behavior, it should then be obvious that this particular frame cannot be assumed to be dominant for all countries and for every topic.

3. The importance of the meso level in international comparisons

In addition to international comparisons designed to test propositions or to observe a variable in different conditions, comparisons also are aimed at establishing the particular identity of countries. This is often done by comparing marginals, and more often than not this is fallacious. Decades of survey research in developed countries tell us: National characteristics of countries cannot be established by aggregating individuals. In complex societies it is for most properties the meso level where lasting identities are to be located. Membership in voluntary organization is a characteristic of all Western style democracies. And we observe similarities in participation rates of members,

²¹ Dogan, op.cit. p.255 ff.

²² Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernhard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet: *The People's Choice. How the Voter Makes up his Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Duell Sloan and Pearce 1944.

²³ Erwin K. Scheuch: “Die Sichtbarkeit politischer Einstellungen im alltäglichen Verhalten.” In: Erwin K. Scheuch und Rudolf Wildenmann (Eds): *Zur Soziologie der Wahl*. Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag 1965, pp.169-214. The later concept by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann „Schweigespirale“ (spiral of muteness) belongs into this line of contextual considerations.

willingness to serve in offices, relations between ecological properties of locations and the functions served by voluntary associations.²⁴

An American club and a German Verein as collectives are more different than their members are from each other. A file in a German administration is different from a file in a French bureaucracy: a French file is more “French” than most Frenchmen.

Side by side we have the omnipresence of diffusion – with the volumes of trade, communication and travel it could not be otherwise – and the confirmation of regional and local identities. The disintegration of the former Iron Block demonstrates the tenacity of traditional identities – on the national level, but also on a regional and local one. Modern societies are hybrid cultures, conglomerates of elements of traditional structures, characteristics of contemporary developments, and islands of futuristic features.²⁵ The very looseness of the couplings between differentiated parts enables these societies to be flexible.

With survey research we can collect data both on individual properties and on collective features. Of course, a multilevel design would be preferable, including data collection on networks of daily interactions and on interlocks between organizations. This is usually beyond the resources of social research, so one must settle for approximations.

It is easier to collect information useful in selling cosmetics or canned soups via survey research. A great deal more reflection is recommended in thinking about the meaning of questions in research designed to compare nations. The lack of such reflections is the main reason why so far comparative research has been disappointing in its substantive contribution especially to macro sociology.

There is one promising approach in cross national comparison that so far has been underused, namely differences in reacting to comparable problems, although since the eighties we have witnessed a variety of projects.

24 Samuel H. Barnes, Max Kaase et al.: *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*. Beverly Hill (CA): Sage 1979; Max Kaase and Kenneth Newton: *Beliefs in Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, specifically chapters 3 & 6. Heinrich Best (ed): *Vereine in Deutschland*. Bonn: Informationszentrum Sozialwissenschaften 1993.

25 Erwin K. Scheuch and David Sciulli (eds): *Societies, Corporations, and the Nation State*. Volume 7 of the *Annals of the International Institute of Sociology, New Series*; Leiden: Brill 2000, specifically chapters 1,5, and 10.

One important case of the approach we have in mind are the comparisons by Esping Anderson how nations react to the problems of their welfare system.²⁶ The comparative analyses of market economies has become an international specialty with the label “Varieties of Capitalism” (VOC).²⁷ The most ambitious project in political science is the five volume report on “Beliefs in Government” comparing the reactions to a presumed crisis in Western European parliamentary democracies in more than eleven states.²⁸

The common denominator of the projects mentioned above is the question: How different are the reactions of basically similar countries to comparable problem situations. We tried ourselves to identify structural properties of countries by selecting challenges to a state and register how each country reacts to them.²⁹ Internal comparisons that concentrate on an slice of reality are more promising than comparisons without such a focus. Further examples of such comparisons might be “how are technical advances in communication bent to fit into the institutional structure of a country”, or “how are traditional elements and new developments combined in reacting to the challenges of modernization.” Such strategies call for a consideration what countries of the by now 30 participating in the ISSP program are suitable for a given comparison.³⁰ Just using data from all countries available, however, would be tantamount to return to the “black box” approach of the immediate post-war time that we referred to initially.

26 Gosta Esping-Andersen: *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1990. A variant of this type of approach in comparisons is Charles Hampden-Tuner and Alfons Trompenaars: *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism*. New York: Doubleday 1993.

27 cf. Peter H. Hall: “Varieties of Capitalism Project”. Mimeo, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, and Center for European Studies, England, October 1996. See also Wolfgang Steeck: *Social Institutions and Economic Performance – Studies of Industrial Relations in Advanced Capitalist Economies*. London: Sage 1992. Colin Crouch and Wolfgang Steeck: *Political Economy of Modern Capitalism*. London: Sage 1997.

28 Altogether five volumes were published, all with different editors at Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995. The series title is “Beliefs in Government”. There is no general editor for the series as a whole.

29 Erwin K. und Ute Scheuch: *China und Indien – eine soziologische Landvermessung*. Zürich: Edition Interfromm 1987.

30 For a characterization of the International Social Survey Program see *Social Trends*, supplemento aj. No. 71. Milano: Eurisko February 1996. An informative booklet about ISSP is available from the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research in Cologne. The potential of the ISSP is well documented in Roger Jowell, L. Brook, and L. Dowds: *International Social Attitudes – the 10th BSA Report*. Aldershot: Gower 1993.

4. The main problems are not technical but theoretical

This advise to consider a selective use of the ISSP samples now available is all the more pressing when wrestling with the problems in comparing face sheet data. In many cases obstacles to comparability here are reflections of structural dissimilarities.

A troubling problem area is the comparison of occupational categories. The conventional “solution” is by now the recording of national categories into classifications derived from the ISCO-codes. This does, of course, not really suffice for all purposes in comparisons across national boundaries. An example is the category “skilled worker”. In France and Germany the training of a skilled worker is modeled after the education of a craftsman, i.e. the acquisition of skills independent from the concrete employment the trainee can expect after completing his education. In the UK and the USA likewise the training is an in-house education for a specific position in a concrete firm.

Great problems present themselves in comparing educational achievement. The goals of institutions of higher learning in the USA and in France are as different as the conceptions in these cultures what an educated person should be like. The conventional “solution” in using years of schooling does not overcome the lack of congruence of educational systems.

This lack is aggravated by such structural differences as the percentage of an age cohort in higher education in various countries, and the differences between elitist systems (UK, USA) and more egalitarian systems (as in Germany).

These differences can only be resolved by specifying for a given project, why education is an important independent variable – such as a factor in social mobility, or in the ability to choose between leisure alternatives, or as an element of social distinction in the sense of Bourdieu.

Religion is obviously a difficult variable if one would wants to go beyond the boundaries of a cultural area. In the Western world you either belong to one religious grouping or not. In Japan, however, you can be at the same time a member of Shintoism and of Buddhism. Within Germany difficulties arise from the fact that in terms of formal church membership East Germany was effectively de-christianized. For a variety of topics, such as a study of values, one would have to look for functional alternatives to membership in organized churches. In this case the better solution would be to forego formal membership – except perhaps for the most conscientious practioners – and use questions on the content of beliefs. However, this would not be available for ISSP data.

From all of this follows that for an adequate design and analysis in comparative research a social scientist needs to know quite a bit about countries other than his native one. Consequently, it has become Best Practice to work in teams with at least one native for each of the countries included in a study.

When we were emphasizing the empirical and conceptual difficulties in comparative research by referring to nation and/or state as a context that has explanatory value, then this was obviously not done with the intent to discourage such research. Quite the contrary we believe this is at least currently THE MAJOR AVENUE FOR MACROSOCIOLOGICAL GENERALIZATIONS.

Korrespondenzadresse

*Prof. Dr. Erwin K. Scheuch
Kölner Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung e.V.
Liliencronsraße 6
50931 Köln-Lindenthal*