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UlfRathje  
Bundesarchiv Koblenz

## Towards a European Database for Comparative Social Research

*Eric Tanenbaum and Ekkehard Mochmann\**

The creation of an integrated European database is a mandate from the pioneers of comparative social research. More than 30 years ago Stein Rokkan addressed the problems and possibilities of cross-national comparative social research and the internationalization of the social sciences (Rokkan, 1962). Ithiel de Sola Pool acknowledged the contribution of rapidly spreading international travel, improved channels of international communication, the establishment of data archives and the use of highspeed computers to facilitate the kind of joint enterprise which comparative survey research must be (de Sola Pool, 1963, p. 17). Merrit and Rokkan's *Comparing Nations* (1966), provides a synopsis of ideas emerging from the conferences at the Yale University (1963), in Cologne (1963) and La Napoule (1962) which explored ways and means to promote and improve conditions for comparative research (see also Rokkan, 1964, pp. 7 and 16). The predominant topics on the agenda were:

<sup>16</sup> Dietz, Rudolph, (wie Anm. 3).

\* Introduction to a special issue of the *International Social Science Journal* on »European Social Science Databases«; first published in: *International Social Science Journal*, No. 142 (Dec. 1994), pp. 491-497.

- promoting and popularizing the idea of comparative and cross-cultural research;
- creating a database and infrastructure for comparative research;
- developing and popularizing methods and techniques for comparative research;
- launching data confrontation seminars;
- stimulating the use of data from different sources such as survey research, statistical microdata and process-produced data.

All endeavours were supported by the International Social Science Council of UNESCO and its programme to internationalize the social sciences. This programme ranged over a wide variety of techniques and methodologies of comparative cross-cultural and cross-national research, including analysis of aggregate national statistics, data for localities and regions, historical data and data from cross-national surveys. High priority was given to the joint development of infrastructure services for the social sciences: data banks, program libraries and computer packages (Szalai, Petrella et al., 1977, p. vii). In addition they emphasized the need for information retrieval tools that would identify relevant data by subject and provide an overview of ongoing research to avoid duplication of effort.

This agenda was developed in times when social research was reconstituted and returned to international co-operation which had been disrupted by the Second World War. The methodology of comparative research and its infrastructural prerequisites were promoted by a few committed enthusiasts under the programmatic perspective of internationalizing social research in a world of nation-states. This situation has changed drastically. Integrating the European database is a need resulting from European integration itself. With political and economic integration it became an omnipresent topic on the agenda of the media and of social research. European integration has shifted the emphasis from inter-European to intra-European comparisons. Nevertheless, students of Europe can benefit from developments stimulated by the classical proponents of international comparative research. Much of what they placed on the agenda 30 years ago has been achieved: social science data archives exist or are being established in most of the west European countries. Our task now is to extend the network to Greece, Spain and Portugal, as well as to east Europe. International training seminars have been offered continuously since the late 1960s, enjoying wide and active participation from all over Europe and beyond. Methods and instruments for comparative research were developed. The basis for professional research has improved drastically with increasing European wide co-ordination in the commercial sector. Telecommunication, computer networks and advanced analysis software are widely available.

Even though much social research is parochial, several remarkable international studies can be named, such as the International Social Survey Programme, ISSP (Jowell et al., 1993; Mohler, 1992; Uher, 1993), the

Eurobarometer (Moschner, 1993; Reif, 1991), Values Studies (Abrams et al., 1985; Stoetzel, 1983), Political Action (Barnes and Kaase, 1979), Time Budget (Szalai, 1972) and Civic Culture (Almond and Verba, 1963).

Going beyond a historical retrospective and assessing the improved conditions under which social research is operating now, the integration of the European database remains a challenge for the 1990s. While our focus in this volume is on Europe, we want to emphasize that ongoing globalization - and regionalization at the same time - demand activities beyond a European perspective. Here, Europe may provide a model for international efforts.

The holdings of European archives comprise survey data, statistical micro data, aggregate data, regional data and textual data covering the period from 1944. Some archives also include historical data for earlier centuries. Almost all areas of social life are reflected. Each archive has a catalogue describing the topics covered by its holdings. Based on these documents, we can observe that social sciences today are data rich.

In spite of this wealth, the analyst faces pitfalls. Even within nations, data generated at different times are hard to compare. In one of the best developed fields, electoral research, some European archives have provided continuity guides for question wording and answer categories in the respective national election studies. A 100 per cent identity, as sometimes requested for replication studies, is the exception rather than the rule. Even functionally equivalent indicators are hard to find for all facets of social life. The basis for future research could be improved if more indicator testing and validation established what question wordings are functionally equivalent as indicators in data analysis. So far, and despite of well-known proposals by Paul Lazarsfeld, too little has been done in this field of indicator validation. Existing archives provide raw material to test the measurement value of data in a laboratory situation. Nevertheless, these tests must be complemented by well prepared new data which, ideally, should be based on results of indicator validation research

With the fall of the iron curtain much of what we have seen in western Europe has to be promoted in eastern Europe. Some scientific communities can build on old research traditions, while others have to be recreated from scratch. Overall, there is an urgent need to build the basic infrastructure required to enable these countries to monitor the transformation of their societies into parliamentary democracies. Fortunately, they can draw on experiences collected in over 30 years in the international social science community. By the same token, international social science can profit from experiences during times when comparative research, although constrained by tight political control, nevertheless managed to lay the foundations for a database which now provides some empirical evidence from the transition to postsocialism (Kiuzadjan et al., 1988).

The relevant methodological and organizational issues have been on the agenda of the international statistical and social research communities for many

years. The European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) has agreed on a standard demography to be employed by its members across Europe (Jung, 1993). In Germany, the Association of Market Research Institutes (ADM), the Association of Social Science Institutes (ASI) and the Federal Statistical Office agreed on a minimum standard for demographic background variables facilitating comparisons across surveys from the statistical offices, the academic and the commercial sector (ASI News, 1992; Ehling et al., 1992). Nevertheless, much work remains to achieve a harmonized, integrated database. The frequently-cited generalizations about research design that everything takes more time and 'everything costs more money' (Verba, 1977) apply to the creation of databases necessary for comparative analyses. Existing social science data services lack the resources to conduct the basic research to bring diverse data together. Similarly, few primary data generators can afford to direct their efforts towards the goal of comparability. Both require additional resources dedicated to this end. Only then will we be able to study the natural barriers to integration and harmonization imposed by the diversity inherent in social reality itself.

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## Abstracts of the Contributions

ERIC TANENBAUM AND EKKEHARD MOCHMANN: *Integrating the European Database: Infrastructure services and the need for integration*

The article focuses on the tasks necessary to build an integrated European socio-economic Database. The article begins by describing the history of nation-orientated computerized data facilities and shows how many of the techniques that have evolved to service national research interests can be adapted in the cause of comparative research. As much of the work has been stimulated by national data archives' need to meet the demands of their individual research communities, the article argues that attention is now required to address the needs of researchers with cross-national interests.

DAVID SANDERS: *Methodological considerations in comparative cross-national Research*

This article reviews the main alternative logics ('theory evaluation' and 'substantive illumination') that underlie comparative cross-national research. The basic assumptions that underpin individual-level and aggregate-level comparisons are described and the sort of measurement problems typically encountered in cross-national analysis are examined. It is argued that, even if the researcher's primary purpose is 'theory evaluation', comparative analysis is at its most productive when it is solidly grounded in a thorough appreciation of the subtleties and complexities that characterize the different political systems that are being compared.

MARCIA FREED TAYLOR: *Ethical considerations in European cross-national research*

The article highlights some of the ethical dilemmas facing the European comparative social researcher and reviews some of the national, and international, procedures aimed at resolving them. It provides a preliminary report on an ongoing survey of research funding bodies, research institutes and centres, institutions and individual researchers, launched by the author in 1993, to assess the extent to which professional researchers have recognized such ethical dilemmas and accept the need for the maintenance of ethical standards, and to identify the measures which are currently in force, or are planned, to assist the research community in doing so. A final section suggests future developments which can assist the cross-national and comparative researcher.

RICHARD SINNOTT: *Theories of integration and the integration of the European database*

The purpose of this article is to examine the imperatives regarding the integration of the European database that stem from theories of political integration. Specifically, it seeks to determine what might be learned about the European integration process if a fully integrated public opinion database

were available and what a research agenda on European integration indicates should be borne in mind in designing the integrated database. The article begins with what theory tells us about the nation-state and its role in integration and in the internationalization of governance. Secondly, it examines the role of public opinion in theories of integration. In dealing with both of these themes, the article emphasizes the importance of the revisionist neo-functionalism of the late 1960s, of theories of the obstinacy of the nation-state, theories of nationalism and disintegration and recent international relations theory. It then applies the general lessons drawn from these considerations to three specific areas: integration and the policy agenda, integration and democracy and integration and political identity. It concludes that integrating the European database would contribute significantly to understanding the European integration process itself.

FRANZ ROTHENBACHER: *Statistical sources for comparative European social research*

This article gives an overview of main national and international statistical sources as a basis for comparative European social research. The availability of statistical sources, such as population censuses, micro-censuses, and different types of household sample surveys (e.g. labour force survey, household budget survey) is described for western and eastern European countries. In addition, information on existing harmonized data from such supra- and international organizations as the European Union or the Nordic Council is presented. Surveys and social data emerging from national social reporting activities are classified. In a last section problems of access to statistical surveys, especially from the European Union, and new forms of access to national micro data are discussed.

TOM BRYDER: *Com-com technology and integration of the European political database*

During the 1980s, the New Information Technologies (NITs) have made substantial progress affecting empirical political scientists and data archivists alike. This progress concerns: PC-programs that can handle large amounts of statistical data, more efficient personal computers, international research networks operating on standardized file transfer protocols, and enhanced possibilities for communicating both data and research results across borders through remote control and e-mail.

These possibilities for integrating data and research results between different countries imply both opportunities and problems for researchers and data archivists. With the increase of data exchange, we are likely to face difficulties with surveillance and overview. Also, there is a danger of hypertrophy, a pace of development where we can no longer keep up with innovations. That may result in apraxia - an inability to co-ordinate the information necessary to produce good comparative research. Data overload



can in principle be handled technically with devices that provide guidelines to the content of other database structures and file content overviews. Security issues, copyright of the principal investigators and the practical administration of data from different archives and databases require a standard formula for distribution. Also there has to be expertise at data archives to provide infrastructural services, but the issue of commercialization of academic data services is too complex to allow for easy marketing solutions.

JOSTEIN RYSSEVIK: *Laboratories for comparative social science*

Recent technological development is about to revolutionize our schools and universities. By means of modern information technology, students, even at a very young age, can be given access to tools and data resources that until recently were the exclusive privilege of a minority of university graduates. This article focuses on the concept of social science laboratories' - a teaching environment, where students are allowed to practise the role of social scientists through confrontation with concrete research material. Several ongoing projects are presented, as well as plans for future developments. This includes outlines of four laboratories based on comparative data for Europe.

PETER LENGYEL: *MOST, the first intergovernmental programme in the social sciences*

The article outlines three phases in the internationalization of the social sciences since the 1960s (the middle phase regressive). Major agents in the current phase are listed, together with the characteristics and advantages of intergovernmental programmes and reasons for establishment of the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) programme. The three substantive research themes of MOST and other features are discussed, as well as its structure, financing and prospects.

ARNAUD F. MARKS: *The interplay of research and information in MOST*

Researchers require specific information for their work. Information needs vary according to the phases of research - the preparatory phase, the design phase and the fieldwork and report phase. Social scientific information is also rapidly becoming a central resource for policy-making. Active information provision is replacing passive information collection and storage; there is a shift from stock to flow management. The increasingly strategic value of information leads to the development of strategic information management

Strategic information management is concerned with capacity-building in research and policy-making. Six crucial aspects are discussed: exploitation of existing databases, creation of databases, national and regional networking, development of technical infrastructures, solution of the problem of multilingualism in information and communication, and training of