Hot tips for *International Comparative Research*

Chapter 1: Defining and mapping international comparative research

To avoid the many pitfalls of international comparative research, you need to:

- know why you are undertaking international research, what you mean by a comparative international project, and what your reasons are for adopting a comparative approach;
- ensure that you, and your co-researchers, have a sound knowledge, understanding and experience of operating in different cultures and languages;
- be aware of how your reasons for carrying out a comparative research project will influence your approach;
- remember that the decision you take in the early stages of your research will determine the validity of your findings.

Chapter 2: Disciplinary approaches to comparative research in international settings

To avoid researcher bias in conducting projects in international settings, it is important to:

- be aware of the epistemologies and traditions not only in your own discipline but also in those of other researchers with whom you are working;
- when conducting a review of the literature on your topic, also examine literature in other disciplines on the same subject and consider using different disciplinary approaches;
- identify available data sources, areas of possible overlap and gaps in knowledge across disciplines;
- explore ways of contributing to theoretical and methodological advancement in comparative research in your discipline with a view to developing robust theoretical frameworks for comparative analysis of sociocultural phenomena.

Chapter 3 Project design in international comparative research

Since the research design and choice of methods are an essential key to the success of international comparative projects, the list of hot tips is much longer than for the two introductory chapters. You are advised to:

- conduct a review of the literature on your topic to identify available data sources and gaps in knowledge, and avoid duplication of effort;
- be aware of the challenges you are likely to encounter and explore ways of preventing or overcoming them;

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- check the feasibility of the project within the available resources;

- ensure that all your partners will be able to gain access to comparable data;

- when undertaking secondary analysis of data, check the criteria used in data collection over time and space, and be mindful of possible changes over time in national and institutional definitions;

- record any differences in data collection and handling, and be mindful of their possible effects on the integrity of the research and the validity of the findings;

- when new datasets are being compiled, explain how the data have been collected, why they are or are not comparable, and what inferences can and cannot be drawn from them;

- if data have been harmonized, refer to the original datasets, and use the lowest level of aggregation to locate data that may not have been included in global figures;

- do not foreclose methodological options at an early stage, and maintain an open mind throughout the research process;

- schedule adequate time, especially when using qualitative methods, for comparing notes, validating data, developing common analytical frameworks and techniques, translating key documents and scrutinizing interpretations of data;

- if problems cannot be overcome at the design stage, take time to reflect, individually and collectively, on the implications of decisions regarding design and implementation;

- explain and justify any changes in orientation and any limiting adverse 'method effects' if it is not feasible to apply identical techniques and methods in different cultures;

- engage in self-conscious observation and critique throughout the research process;

- guard against drawing inferences and making generalizations that cannot be validated by the data;

- implement any tactical modifications that may become necessary as the research evolves, with the aim of maximizing the validity, reliability, replicability and plausibility of the findings.

Chapter 4: Defining and analysing concepts and contexts

To ensure that your key concepts are appropriate and can be exploited to greatest effect, you are advised to:

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- devote time at the design stage to reaching consensus among team members on the concepts to be adopted in the research;
- review the tools needed for the analysis of social constructions of concepts;
- ensure that team members understand the meanings of concepts in different sociocultural and linguistic contexts;
- document any differences in understandings of concepts and their implications for measurement equivalence;
- identify the factors affecting the comparability of indicators;
- be mindful of the implications of issues of non-equivalence in interpreting data;
- take steps to avoid or counteract researcher and other forms of bias.

Chapter 5: Combining methods in international comparative research

Arguments can be made both for and against mixed methods in international comparative research. The following guidance is intended to assist you in taking advantage of multiple methods strategies while avoiding the pitfalls:

- consider the benefits to be gained from combining different methodological approaches and techniques at the research design stage of your project;
- in reviewing the literature on your topic, examine critically the methodological approaches adopted and identify those that might bring new insights to your work;
- ensure that team members are familiar with the different methodological approaches to be used, understand the reasons for combining methods and have the resources needed to carry out the work;
- prepare an analytical framework that will enable you to integrate data collected using different methods and techniques.

Chapter 6: Research and policy in international settings

The following tips are intended to assist you in avoiding the main pitfalls that result from the potential incompatibility between the aims and objectives of researchers and policy actors in the research process. You are advised to:

- ensure that you understand and can meet the requirements of those commissioning the research within the available resources;
- at the outset, establish arrangements for managing the relationship between researchers, funders, policy actors and other stakeholders;

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- ensure that team members have a sound knowledge and understanding of the policy environments, cultures and languages of the countries or societies selected as comparators;
- take account of different cultural approaches to policy analysis;
- be prepared to challenge assumptions made about systems and processes;
- avoid bias in the analysis of evidence of policy effects, for example by triangulating;
- ensure that comparability preconditions are observed for policy learning and transfer by factoring into the research design analysis of the social, economic, political and ideological characteristics of exporting and importing countries;
- in reporting findings, ensure that a range of policy alternatives are presented clearly, concisely and objectively;
- consider different ways of disseminating findings to the various stakeholders.

Chapter 7: Managing international comparative research

To maximize the success of an international comparative research project, you are advised to:

- consider appointing a project manager with appropriate training and experience in the management of international comparative research projects;
- devote time to building a committed, professional and self-aware international research team;
- ensure that team members are aware of the challenges they will face, possess complementary skills and share common objectives and a common language;
- ensure that team members have a sound knowledge and understanding of the cultures and languages of the countries or societies you have selected as comparators;
- insist that all the contributors to contextually embedded comparative projects have prior experience of working across languages and cultures in international teams, making them aware of the issues they will have to deal with, and the invisible work involved in international research projects;
- capitalize on diversity, while avoiding the formation of cliques;
- ensure that team members fully understand the requirements of those funding and commissioning the research;
- ensure that internationally recognized ethical and professional standards are observed by researchers from the participating countries;

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- be mindful of the institutional and personal constraints on participants (overload, insecurity, unpaid time of academics), including from different sectors (researchers in the commercial sector with no leisure to develop or reflect on the process) and plan the scope of the project accordingly;
- remain alert to time management issues and be realistic about time available for project management;
- promote understanding of regional diversity, and seek to develop synergy and effective cooperation between researchers from different scientific and cultural traditions;
- make provision for contingencies at the planning stage;
- encourage reflexivity about method and process among researchers throughout the project and be transparent in reporting methodological issues;
- foster good practice in international comparative research by allowing time for the development of training materials for researchers with less experience of working on international projects;
- allow for intensive discussion of concepts, scrutiny of interpretations among team members, research subjects and stakeholders;
- create opportunities for bilateral cross-border fieldwork, collective analysis and interpretation of data, and the participation of team members in the drafting of interim reports using the Internet;
- factor into project planning the time needed for the confrontation of findings obtained by combining a variety of methodological approaches;
- identify potential users of the research and make plans for dissemination at an early stage in the process;
- foresee a range of deliverables;
- avoid collecting new data in the final year, write up reports and findings and publish as you go along;
- be mindful of the implications of using social media and Internet market research, and of issues of informed consent when publishing findings;
- remain pragmatic and flexible, and be prepared to compromise.