

## **Reflective questions for *International Comparative Research***

### **Chapter 1: Defining and mapping international comparative research**

The questions raised with reference to the first part of the chapter (pp. 1–11) are intended to enable students and researchers who are embarking on international projects in the social sciences and humanities to think through and gain a better understanding of the issues involved in research that crosses national and cultural boundaries, and apply this understanding to their own work. The first set of questions concerns definitions of international comparative research.

1. Why is it said at the beginning of the chapter (p. 1) that: 'Not all international research is comparative, and not all comparative research is international or cross-national'?

2. From your reading of pp. 1–5 and your own work:

2.1 What, if any, distinction can be made between comparisons across nations, societies or cultures, and within-country, within-society or within-culture comparative studies?

2.2 What are the key characteristics that distinguish international comparative social research from comparative social research that is not international?

2.3 What are the key characteristics that distinguish comparative international social research from international social research that is not comparative?

2.4 What is the difference between comparative and parallel international studies?

3. From your reading of pp. 5–9 of the chapter and other methods books, on balance, what do you think is the relative strength of the arguments for and against there being a distinct method and/or methodology in comparative studies that cross national, societal or cultural boundaries?

4. Why do you think it is important to understand these distinctions when embarking on international projects?

5. In view of the issues identified in questions 1–4, does the definition offered on p. 2 adequately cover the defining characteristics of international comparative research in the social sciences and humanities, namely: 'studies of societies, countries, cultures, systems, institutions, social structures and change..., when they are carried out with the intention of using the same research tools to compare systematically the manifestations of phenomena in more than one...sociocultural setting'?

6. With reference to your own work, what definition of international comparative social

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research do you feel is most appropriate and most closely matches your objectives?

7. Would you describe your research as international and/or comparative?

The second set of questions, based on pp. 9–11, addresses the scientific, sociocultural and practical reasons why researchers in general are conducting international comparative research projects. It goes on to look at the implications these reasons can have for the research design, its implementation and, ultimately the findings.

8. Why it is important for researchers to do international comparative research?

9. What are the scientific and practical reasons why researchers devote time and effort to the immensely complex task of designing, managing and conducting systematic comparative research projects?

10. How do the reasons given for undertaking international comparative research differ according to sociocultural factors?

11. Why is it important, as recommended on p. 6, to ensure that a comparative approach is adopted from the research design stage through to the interpretation of findings if a project is to be truly comparative?

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### **Chapter 2: Disciplinary approaches to comparative research in international settings**

The questions relating to the contents of this chapter are intended to raise awareness of the many ways in which international comparative research has developed in different disciplines. They also set out to encourage researchers to reflect on the extent to which approaches have or have not remained discipline bound. You may find it helpful to consult the Additional reading for this chapter as well as the chapter references when answering these questions.

1. Why did scholars over the centuries and, more especially, in the twentieth century adopt a comparative approach to the study of society and its institutions (pp. 24–5, 30–1, 33–6, 36–8)?

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2. How can you explain variations in the terminology used to describe comparative methods in the social sciences and, more especially, in sociology (pp. 26–8) and political studies (pp. 31–3), and why have different approaches been controversial?
3. Why were disciplines such as economics and history less interested in adopting comparative methods than sociology or political studies (pp. 36–9)?
4. How have ethnologists, anthropologists and psychologists exploited comparative approaches in their disciplines (pp. 39–42)?
5. Why has the field of comparative education been described as 'methodologically fragmented and pluralistic' (p. 43)?
6. Why is it important to know about the epistemologies and paradigms used by researchers from different sociocultural and disciplinary backgrounds?
7. Why might researchers from different disciplines have an interest in working together and pooling resources in the social and human sciences?

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### **Chapter 3: Project design in international comparative research**

The first part of the chapter and the related questions (pp. 46–57) concern the justification for selecting a particular object of inquiry, units and levels of analysis, and for adopting a specific formulation of the research questions during the planning stages of an international comparative research project.

1. With reference to your own work, and from a review of the literature in your field, what would seem to be the topical themes in your research area and the gaps in knowledge (pp. 47–8)?
2. What topics and issues have been examined in your field from an implicit and/or explicit comparative perspective, and what sort of questions (what, why and/or how) have been addressed (pp. 48–9)?
3. How would you assess the validity, reliability, replicability and plausibility (p. 50) of the international comparative studies that have been conducted on your research topic?

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4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of choosing countries, societies or cultures as units of analysis (pp. 51–4)?

5. What factors need to be taken into account when selecting an appropriate level of analysis and distance from the object of inquiry (pp. 54–7)?

The second part of the chapter (pp. 57–69) and related questions explore the methods and methodologies used in international comparative research projects and the issues that they raise.

6. What are the main research paradigms that are documented in your research area (pp. 57–59)?

7. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the research designs formulated by and adapted from J.S. Mills' comparative method (pp. 59–64)?

8. What are the main issues that have to be dealt with in the data collection and analysis stages of international comparative projects, and how can they be avoided or resolved (pp. 66–9)?

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### **Chapter 4: Defining and analysing concepts and contexts**

The first part of the chapter (pp. 72–85) is concerned with defining, constructing and measuring concepts in international comparative research.

1. Why is it important in international comparative research to pay attention to the social construction of concepts (pp. 72–73)?

2. How have concepts been defined in different disciplines (pp. 74–6)?

3. What is the relationship between concepts and theories, and between variables and concepts (p. 75)?

4. How can researchers ensure that concepts are 'universally understood, unambiguous and consistent' while also being 'adequate' and 'parsimonious' (p. 76)?

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5. What is meant by conceptual, functional and semantic equivalence of concepts (pp. 77–9)?

6. What are the problems raised by linguistic equivalence, and how can they be resolved (pp. 79–81)?

7. What are the additional sources of error and bias that arise when measuring concepts in comparative research across cultural and linguistic boundaries, and how can measurement equivalence and appropriateness of indicators be achieved (pp. 81–5)?

In recognition of the centrality of contextualization for the theory and practice of comparative studies, the second part of the chapter (pp. 85–93) and the related reflective questions focus on approaches to the contextualization of concepts.

8. How do disciplines differ in the importance they attribute to the sociocultural and linguistic contextual embedding of concepts in international comparative research (pp. 85–90, 94)?

9. How can the transportability of concepts be improved across cultural and linguistic boundaries (pp. 90–1)?

10. What factors do researchers need to take into account in determining the most relevant contexts for situating concepts in their research area (pp. 91–4)?

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### **Chapter 5: Combining methods in international comparative research**

The first part of the chapter (pp. 96–108) explores the arguments for and against combining methods in international comparative research.

1. Why, in some disciplines, were different epistemologies and the methodologies associated with them believed to be incompatible (pp. 96–7)?

2. What are the main characteristics and dichotomies attributed to quantitative versus qualitative approaches as applied traditionally in comparisons in the social and human sciences (pp. 98–100)?

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3. How have these two approaches been linked to theoretical debates, and to what extent are these debates relevant to international comparative research (pp. 100–3)?

4. Can the different epistemological approaches be reconciled in international comparative research and, if so, how (pp. 103–4)?

5. What are the relative strengths of the mutual criticisms made within disciplines by researchers espousing quantitative or qualitative methods (pp. 104–5)?

6. What are the signs that methodological pluralism is being more widely accepted (pp. 105–8)?

7. What are the benefits to be gained from combining different methodological approaches in international comparative research (pp. 106–8)?

The second part of the chapter (pp. 108–16), the conclusion (pp. 116–17) and related reflective questions explore the reasons for combining methods and techniques in international comparisons.

8. What are the main reasons for combining different strategies and techniques in international comparative research (pp. 109, 117)?

9. How can multiple methods strategies avoid the risk of drawing erroneous conclusions in international comparisons (p. 109–13)?

10. What do you understand by triangulation, facilitation and complementarity in multiple methods strategies, and how have they been applied in different disciplines (pp. 110–13)?

11. How can multiple methods strategies be applied in comparisons across international research projects (pp. 113–15)?

12. What do you understand by methodological compromise in international comparative projects, and how can researchers maintain the integrity of their findings (pp. 115–16)?

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13. Why are combination methods not necessarily a panacea in comparative research (pp. 116–17)?

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### **Chapter 6: Research and policy in international settings**

The questions relating to the first part of the chapter (pp. 119–25) are designed to help readers develop a greater understanding of the complex relationship between research and policy.

1. Why were international databases established initially in the mid-nineteenth century, and how were they used (p. 119)?

2. Why did international organizations have difficulty in producing harmonized social indicators (p. 119)?

3. In what ways can social science research support policy making (p. 120)?

4. Why are the objectives and perspectives of researchers and policy makers often considered to be incompatible (pp. 120–2)?

5. How can the 'communications gap' between researchers and policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders be bridged (pp. 122–4)?

6. How does the relationship between researchers and policy actors differ between countries (pp. 123–4)?

7. What is the added value of incorporating an international dimension into policy-relevant research (pp. 124–5)?

The second part of the chapter (pp. 125–34) and the related questions are concerned more explicitly with the international comparative dimension in policy-relevant research.

8. How has policy evaluation and evidence-based policy research been developed by different disciplines within and across countries (pp. 126–30)?

9. How have international organizations contributed to the information base on the social

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situation (pp. 130–1)?

10. What are the problems that arise in identifying policy effects in international comparisons, and how can they be overcome (pp. 131–4)?

The third and concluding sections in the chapter (pp. 135–41) and the related questions review the approaches used to investigate international policy transfer and learning, and to assess the contribution of international comparative research to policy development.

11. How has interest in policy transfer developed at international level, and what are the distinguishing features of obligated and voluntary policy transfer (pp. 135–7)?

12. What are the preconditions for successful international policy transfer and learning (137–40)?

13. How can international comparative research contribute to effective policy formation and implementation (pp. 140–1)?

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### **Chapter 7: Managing international comparative research**

The questions raised in the first part of the chapter (pp. 143–56) are intended to guide readers through the issues raised elsewhere in the book regarding research governance.

1. What were the main challenges confronting international research teams in the 1960s and 1970s, the solutions pursued in the 1980s and 1990s, and the lessons that can be drawn for researchers today (pp. 143–6)?

2. What are the key components in the code of practice proposed for achieving high professional and ethical standards in the conduct of international research projects in Europe, and how applicable is such a code to other parts of the world (pp. 146–9)?

3. What factors do project leaders need to take into account in building an international team of researchers (pp. 149–54)?

4. What do you understand by 'intellectual styles' and 'traditions', and 'research cultures' (pp. 150–3)?

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5. How can differences in intellectual styles and traditions, and in research cultures, affect the conduct of international cooperative research (pp. 153–4)?

6. What are the additional research skills and strategies that need to be brought into play throughout the research process in managing international comparative projects designed to cross national, cultural, linguistic or societal boundaries (pp. 155–6)?

The questions relating to the second and final parts of the chapter (pp. 156–67) address issues of funding, dissemination of findings for international comparative research projects and the contribution of international research in the social sciences and humanities to the knowledge base.

7. How do the requirements of funding bodies impact on the design and conduct of international research projects (pp. 157–9)?

8. Why are disciplinary classifications relevant to funding opportunities and dissemination strategies (pp. 159–67)?

9. How would you assess the contribution made by international (comparative) research to scientific inquiry, international understanding and the knowledge base in contemporary societies (pp. 167–9)?