foundations of comparative politics

introduction to comparative analysis

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questions to consider …

▪ what is the **basic argument** being put forth by moore? that is, what is his **thesis**?
▪ what sort of **comparisons** does moore use to support his thesis?
▪ are the comparisons **useful**? how so?
▪ are the comparisons “logical”—that is, do they make sense?
▪ what type of **evidence** underlies his comparisons? is the evidence sufficient, reliable, and valid?
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food for thought

“Thinking without comparison is unthinkable. And, in the absence of comparison, so is all scientific thought and scientific research.”

understanding the importance of comparison is key. but, we must also understand why we need to compare.
basics of the comparative method: purposes

not all comparisons have the same objective, but what a researcher intends to accomplish with a comparison is critical. here are three basic purposes …

- compare to control
- compare to understand
- compare to explain

let’s consider how do these objectives differ …
basics of the comparative method: **purposes**

comparing to **control**

- in the social sciences, comparing to control means that we use comparisons as a way to check whether or claims about certain phenomena are valid: we can also use the phrase, “**comparative checking**”

- comparative checking allows us to easily see if a variable of interest has a **similar effect** across a range of cases
  
  - to better understand this point, let’s consider some examples …
comparing to \textbf{control}: an example

- “the poor are poor because they’re lazy”
- “rapid capitalist development is \textbf{incompatible} with an authoritarian political system: strong capitalism requires political ‘freedom’”
- “islamic culture is \textbf{fundamentally} incompatible with democracy”
- “governmental \textbf{control} of school systems (which results in a lack of competition) is the main reason for the relatively poor math and science skills of American students”

\textbf{reprise}: to determine whether any of these statements is right, wrong, or something else, we have to “\textbf{test}” each one
one effective way to **test arguments** is to use comparisons as a method of control

consider the myriad arguments about gun violence …
testing arguments about gun violence (possible causes)

- violent video games and entertainment
- anti-social rock music and/or Marilyn Manson
  - too many guns
  - too much poverty
- too much ethnic/racial diversity
- a history of violence in the United States
testing arguments: comparing to control

through comparative checking, many possible causes of gun violence can be easily eliminated

- **violent video games and entertainment**: there are plenty of violent games and entertainment in Japan, Germany, Canada, and so on. All have low rates of gun violence

- **anti-social rock music and/or marilyn manson**: Germany is home to “Goth Rock,” yet has a low rate of gun violence

- **too many guns**: several countries have very high rates of gun ownership (e.g., Norway, Canada), but relatively low rates of gun violence

the basic procedure is the same for other possible causes
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the other purposes: comparing to understand

- focus on a specific place and time; idiographic (definition: “of or relating to the study or discovery of particular scientific facts and processes, as distinct from general law”)

- researchers interested in understanding, use comparisons to better understand a single case of particular interest (we might say that moore was also comparing to understand gun violence in the United States when he looked at canada)
the other purposes: comparing to explain

- focus on theory or general principles; nomothetic (definition: “of or relating to the study or discovery of general scientific laws”)

- researchers interested in explanation, use comparisons to build all-encompassing explanations or “big theories” that apply across a range of specific cases
**goals of comparing: summary of the three purposes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>comparing to control</th>
<th>comparing to understand</th>
<th>comparing to explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>basic strategy or purpose</td>
<td>comparative checking</td>
<td>interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logic or approach to comparative analysis</td>
<td>researcher uses a range of cases as a way to “test” (verify or falsify) a specific claim, hypothesis, or theory.</td>
<td>researcher is primarily interested in a single case and uses different cases or general theories as a way to learn more about the case he/she is studying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>general purpose</td>
<td>researcher uses cases as a way to build a stronger theoretical explanation.</td>
<td>cases are used in a “step-by-step” manner, with each case contributing to the development of a general theory.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**remember!**
- comparing to control
- comparing to understand
- comparing to explain
more questions

as comparativists, we also need to know …

what is comparable? that is, we need to know what we can compare?

consider the following question …
can we compare apples and oranges?
(why do many people consider apples and oranges non-comparable?)
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what is comparable?

if apples and oranges can be compared can, say, Haiti and the United States also be compared?

why or why not?
**what** is comparable?

**key point:** the question, “what is comparable?” does not have a fixed answer

the answer always **depends on**
the purposes of the researcher
and the research question
what is comparable? another answer

we can compare “entities whose attributes are in part shared (similar) and in part non-shared”

consider shared and non-shared attributes of apples and oranges, or of the united states and haiti
what is comparable? one last point

comparisons are not limited to countries:

- **events** (such as wars or revolutions) are comparable
- **political or social institutions** are comparable (e.g. the executive branch, the military, economic agencies)
- **policies** are comparable (e.g. health care, educational policies, welfare)
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the logic of comparative analysis
to do comparative analysis properly, one absolutely, positively must have a grasp of the general logic or general principles of comparing

“It may be a model, Captain, but it’s highly illogical.”
the logic of comparative analysis

in the dictionary, here are a few ways in which logic is defined. here is one …

the study of the principles of reasoning, especially of the structure of propositions as distinguished from their content and of method and validity in deductive reasoning
the logic of comparative analysis

the general definition is useful for our purposes: good comparative analysis requires researchers to be guided by basic principles.

These principles are meant to ensure sound reasoning and valid conclusions based on valid comparisons.

so what are these basic principles?
basics of the comparative method: logic

there are many “logics” or principles of comparative analysis, but perhaps the two simplest are these …

- most similar systems (mss)
- most different systems (mds)
the mss design

- the mss design is based on comparing two or more very similar social systems …

- more importantly, it’s based on matching up and then comparing two more systems that share a whole range of similarities, but also differ in at least a couple of important respects

- differences are key!
Example. A comparison between twins makes no sense if there are absolutely no differences. However, if one twin is “smarter” than the other, then a comparison might be useful. A researcher assumes that the difference is due to another variable--perhaps one drank more milk than the other.
real world study of twins: researchers at case western reserve university found, though a study of identical twins, that “healthy living” habits resulted in a younger appearance. siblings who smoked and didn’t use sunscreen looked significantly older than those who avoided cigarettes and tanning. divorce also made one twin look older.
the mss design

if differences are key, what needs to differ?

a: __________ independent variable

b: __________ dependent variable

note: make sure you understand the difference between these two types of variables: consider the previous example on twins … what are the independent variables? what is the dependent variable?
aside: important **principles** in social science arguments

- generally speaking, all social science arguments require the **independent** and **dependent** variables to be explicitly identified

- in a social science argument, both variables need to be **defined** or **operationalized** as precisely as possible

- social science arguments must explain the **relationship** between the independent and dependent variables with precision, clarity, and depth (**vagueness is not a virtue**)

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the "rubber ducky" example

the task when comparing two very similar systems is to find the key differences in a sea of similarities

in the figure, each plain rubber ducky represents a similarity between two systems, A and B

are there any differences?
if there is variance on the dependent variable between the two systems, the similarities can be eliminated as potential causes of the variance.

any differences may be the independent variable or cause

Independent variable?

dependent variables
the mds design

- the mds design is based on comparing two or more very different social systems ...

- more importantly, it’s based on finding two systems that differ in almost all respects, except with regard to the presumed independent and dependent variables (the many differences are eliminated as potential explanatory variables)

- similarities are key!

in principle, the u.s. and haiti can be compared using an mds design
**the mds design**

- to repeat: **unlike** the mss design, you don’t need, nor do you want variance on the dependent variable

- on other words, the dependent variable should be the **same** for all the units in an mds design, and so should the independent variable

**consider the logic of mds design:** in contrast to the mss, if absolutely **nothing** is similar between two units, a comparison makes no sense. **why?**
### the mds design: some practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male Suicide Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>70.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Americans</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>62.6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Fed.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Kitts</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Except for “Native Americans” all data from WHO Suicide Information and OECD. Rates are per 100,000
- For the age group 20-24 (source: CDC)

### instructions.

Look at the figures on the chart and, based on your general knowledge, identify at least two sets of “units” that can be compared using an mds design. **Write down your answers.**

Can you describe the logic of your comparison? That is, explain why the comparison makes sense and how it would help us better understand the causes of suicide or, conversely, the factors that make suicide less likely.

**Note:** don’t worry, for now, about the what year the statistics are from