

What is the purpose of cross-national comparative planning? In a recent book which brought together cross-national comparative studies of a variety of planning subjects for Britain and France, Breuillard and Fraser (2007) quote Faludi and Hamnett's (1975) three generic purposes: the advancement of theory in planning; the improvement of planning practice; harmonisation of planning systems. In relation to the development of theory, the contribution of comparative cross-national approach, given the definition by Masser, is to develop theory which falls somewhere between the belief that 'every country and culture is different' and 'all countries are essentially the same' or, following de Vaus (2008: 251) to: 'identify the extent to which social phenomena are shaped by universal system factors and the extent to which they are shaped by unique factors intrinsic to the specific time, place and culture in which they occur.'

There has been something of a debate in planning about the balance between these sets of forces. There has been a recent acknowledgement of the multiplicity of perspectives on social life more generally, and thus on the idea of planning itself (Sanyal, 2005) and on the definition of planning problems (Sandercock, 1998). An extreme relativist interpretation of this view might be to assume that actors involved in managing development in different places live in 'different worlds'. But, on the other hand, there has also been a tradition in planning theory (both rational planning and communicative planning) of making the (ontological) assumption that planning is 'an unproblematic global activity' (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000: 336), with no significant differences between countries and places due to local and national factors. A mid-way view sees the possibility of dialogue between cultures though recognising local contextual factors as important influences on how planning operates (Watson, 2002).

The last two purposes mentioned by Breuillard and Fraser (2007) for comparative research point to the frequent evaluative dimension to comparative studies: the desire to see if the way that planning works abroad represents an improvement on the way that it is practiced at home. This leads into a discussion about the scope for transferring policy ideas from one country to another and the obstacles there might be to such a process. Research could in principle help to identify 'good practice' in another country and this could then be implemented in Britain more widely. But there is some scepticism about whether there are 'lessons to be learned' (Cullingworth, 1993). The 'political terrain' will be different in another country. The general research point here can be posed in terms of the concept of external validity (see Chapter 6). Can we generalise from the cases we have studied? There is no guarantee that a causal mechanism which seems to work in one setting (country x) will work equally well, or in the same way in a different setting (country y).