

not have the same opportunities. It is not unknown even for a doctoral student, with three years full time research, to start a project with the intention of completing a cross-national study but to later drop one of the countries involved.

These difficulties led Sharpe (1975) to formulate a rule of thumb to be adopted in any proposed comparative study: the rule of 'maximum discreteness of focus'. This rule means that projects which aim to compare, say, recent changes to the planning system in two countries (The Netherlands and UK) should be avoided and something more sharply focussed such as the example given by Williams (1986), 'motorway planning and approval procedures' would be more appropriate. Williams even cautions against subjects like 'urban renewal' where the scope of the study could be widened dangerously (in terms of completing a study) in many directions. Both Davies (1980) and Eversley (1978) also point to this conclusion. I followed it in my study of urban fringe residential development in the cities of Bristol (UK) and Poitiers (France) (Farthing, 2001).

## Explanatory questions

Explanations in comparative studies as answers to 'why' questions seek answers which combine common factors across countries but also nation-specific factors or institutional or administrative factors. Couch et al. (2003) are aware of the complexity of the institutional context in different countries and cities in Europe, and the wide range of organisations that might be involved in generating new economic activity in urban regeneration. This is one reason why they use local experts to conduct the research in some of the cities, because these local experts will understand the institutional context 'from the inside' as it were, thus reducing the need for the UK research team to discover this for themselves. The explanatory aims of Couch et al. (2003: 4) in relation to urban regeneration policy and practice in Europe are to: 'examine the similarities and differences in the processes of urban regeneration between different situations, drawing out conclusions around key aspects of the process. Thus factors such as location, regional economic conditions, previous land-use patterns and building forms, together with the nature of local land markets, administrative structures, tools and mechanisms of intervention, are all shown to be important in shaping local differences in urban regeneration and its outcomes.'

Of course, if you are writing a dissertation you are not normally going to be able to adopt this approach, and you won't be permitted to get an outside expert to write your dissertation for you!