

CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN URBAN PLANNING

Key questions

What is cross-national comparative research? What is its purpose?

What research purposes and questions do researchers investigate?

What justifications are there for such questions?

What is an appropriate logic for answering the question?

What methods of data generation are available?

How is data analysed?

What ethical issues are involved?

Key concepts

Cross-national comparative research, policy transfer, the rule of maximum similarity, the rule of maximum discreteness of focus

Overview

In recent years there have been many opportunities for students from the UK to begin to identify some differences in the way planning is practiced elsewhere in Europe. Mechanisms include courses on international comparative

planning, and short field trips abroad, but also exchanges with planning schools abroad, where students may spend a period of perhaps a semester or more in a foreign country, and participation in cross-national workshops and seminars where groups of students from different countries make presentations on issues of common concern. Most of these activities require some reflection on what has been learned and some students will be sufficiently inspired by this experience to write a dissertation with a comparative dimension. In parallel with students from the UK travelling abroad there has been an increase in students from abroad coming to the UK to study, and some of these may also write a dissertation. This chapter looks at some of the research design issues involved, issues which have been discussed in earlier chapters in this book, but drawing on the decisions and research practice of established comparative workers.

What is cross-national comparative research in planning?

Masser and Williams (1986) distinguish between studies of planning in specific foreign countries and comparative planning research. The essential difference they draw between these two types of study is that comparative planning involves the cross-national comparison of planning activities in two or more countries.

Masser (1986) argues that there is general agreement that there is no distinct field of cross-national comparative planning studies. The subject matter of cross-national comparative planning therefore differs from planning as a whole only in its cross-national dimension. There could be cross-national studies of planning for any subject that a researcher studying planning within their own country might study: housing, retailing, economic development, urban region governance, urban regeneration and so on. What is distinctive is that each country may have a different set of institutions responsible for planning or influencing planning, thus the context for studying planning in different countries is different. Cross national planning research, then, is 'the study of planning problems and practice in different countries in relation to the institutional context' (Masser, 1984, quoted in Masser, 1986: 12). This is consistent with the definition of Bendix (1963: 532) (quoted in de Vaus, 2008) that comparative studies 'represent an attempt to develop concepts and generalizations at a level between what is true of all societies and what is true of one society at one point in time and space'.

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).

Not everyone in any case, I expect, would see the harmonisation of planning systems as a desirable objective but the borrowing of 'good practice' from abroad would tend to lead to some convergence in planning in different countries. There is something of a debate on this at the moment in the context of discussions about the impact of the European Union on planning systems in Europe. The literature referred to in this chapter is largely to cross-national studies involving countries in Europe. Some studies are cross-national in the sense that they compare aspects of the national planning systems in two nations (Booth et al. 2007; Farthing 2008). Much recent work, however, has involved a comparison of cases *within* different nations in Europe, rather than a comparison of nations *as* cases. For example, Herrschel and Newman (2002) were interested in the nature and workings of city regions in a sample of cities in Germany and England.

Research purposes and research questions

There is a range of descriptive and explanatory purposes in comparative research, and 'what' and 'why' questions are as appropriate to comparative research as they are to research within a country. Individual pieces of research often attempt to answer both.

Descriptive questions

Couch et al. (2003) have aims which are both descriptive and explanatory in relation to their research into urban regeneration in European cities. Their descriptive aim is to provide 'a comprehensive and informed presentation of urban regeneration problems and policies in a number of European cities' and the editors 'examine the similarities and differences in the processes of urban regeneration between different situations (p. 4).

Much comparative research describes itself as exploratory. This may be because the writer claims that there is not much evidence about policy in different countries. But another reason, and a strong theme in the literature from the 1980s (Masser and Williams, 1986) and again more recently in the 2000s (Knieling and Othengrafen, 2009) is that the 'institutional context' means paying attention to the importance of understanding differences in planning 'culture' between countries whilst emphasising the difficulties of doing so. Booth (1996: vii) points out the difficulties he had in the early 1980s in understanding French planning: 'I attempted to

grapple with the complexities of French planning, so that in turn I could brief my students. And I had a hard time of it. Such French sources as I could find, and the few English sources which then existed, all seemed to be based on assumptions that I did not seem to share. Intrigued, I dug deeper.' Sharpe (1975: 26–7) makes a more general 'ontological' point that 'countries are really very different', and he pointed to the 'immense difficulties in making comparisons of public policies in different countries and of the machinery and processes through which policies are given effect'.

This view, highlighting the importance of culture, would suggest that to understand planning in a different country from our own we need to understand how planning is interpreted and understood by those who work in the system and interact with it. For example, Booth (1996: 2), interested in how development is controlled in Britain and France, writes 'Britain and France have radically different understandings of the nature of the state, of the nature and purpose of administration, and by extension of the way that [planning] control should be practiced'. The concept of 'town and country planning' as used in Britain follows, then, from a particular view of planning rooted in a set of institutions and a history which shapes how planners in Britain (and planning academics like Booth mentioned above) see planning. This concept is different from the concepts of 'urbanisme' or 'aménagement du territoire' which are used in the context of French planning.

One might conclude from this perspective that it is a sufficiently challenging task to study the system of planning in another country without introducing a comparative element. Here the aim of research would be essentially descriptive. Cropper (1986) indicates that an ethnographic account might be the aim in these studies with the purpose being to present as authentically as possible, the experience of planning, and of those in planning in the place in question. This would provide an understanding of planning in that place of how and why actors operate in the way they do in that locality. But there is a practical dimension to this: how well-versed a researcher is in the language of the country in which the study is to be conducted, language being a key mechanism through which social reality is represented (see the discussion in Chapter 8 on discourse).

Following the logic of this argument, in order to understand how 'planning' operates in another country requires that a considerable length of time to be devoted by comparative researchers on their research learning the culture of planning, compared with studies restricted to their own country. Established research staff may have this luxury but students may

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!

A justification of the question

In Chapter 4 we saw that planning academics usually justify their published research on two grounds: practical and academic. In relation to the first, one of the generic purposes and justifications of cross-national study outlined above is that this might lead to learning some lessons about good practice.

An academic justification could be that an interesting question has not been answered, that there is a gap in the literature, or that there have been attempts to answer it but these answers have not been satisfactory. A review of the literature either confirms the argument that there is a gap in the coverage of the question or the argument that the literature unearthed by the review has certain limitations that mean that further research is warranted.

When it comes to cross-national studies, the same argument applies. It is important to establish what claims and conclusions previous researchers have made. But there may be difficulties here. Booth (1996) referred to the paucity of sources in English and of accessible French sources on French planning. The output of work on planning has grown substantially since then. For various reasons, much is published in English language journals. There is a substantial literature in other languages referring to research on planning in specific countries, but in order to read this literature you need some language skills.

Comparative research can also be stimulated by published research into planning in Britain. For example, if there is a study of the preparation of local development plans in Britain, this could be used as the basis of a comparison with the production of a local plan in another country. The study by Wilson (1983) of local plans in France, although restricted to observation of working groups preparing local plans in four départements in France, with no equivalent research in Britain, was effectively a cross-national comparative study. It was a study of local plans in France from someone whose perspective on local plans was shaped by her understanding of the system in Britain with explicit comparisons being drawn between the nature of participation in the process between the two countries.

An appropriate logic for answering the question

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potential cases which you are going to represent by the research you conduct on your selected cases. For practical reasons, any small scale research for a dissertation is likely to have to use the non-probabilistic method of convenience sampling, as described in Chapter 5, that is, a case or cases which are readily available in countries to which you happen to have access, or where you have contacts. This sampling practice is also followed by more experienced academics like Healey, who in the account of her study of spatial strategy-making in three urban regions in Europe argues that 'The selection of cases for in-depth qualitative research is always more a practical question than the product of systematic choice criteria' (2007: 291), and who states, 'The three cases chosen ... are very diverse and should not be considered in any sense as a "sample" or as exemplars of "good practice"'. They are merely examples of efforts at spatial strategy-making for cities or urban areas' (2007: 32). The consequence of this approach is that you will have to acknowledge that the cases you study may not be 'representative' of the countries in which they are located or of any wider population of interest, and empirical generalisations of the sort associated with probability sampling are not appropriate.

As we saw in Chapter 6 making a causal claim is to make a universal claim, about what will happen when the causal conditions are met. But in social research the context counts (Flyvbjerg, 2001), and at best theory might apply to certain historical periods, and they may also apply only to certain places where contextual conditions are similar. The broader population to which the theory might apply is thus limited in time and space. There has been an influential causal theory which has been of interest to British comparative planning researchers interested in planning in Europe. This theory claims that European integration has led to a change in the agenda of spatial planning in cities – from urban managerialism to urban entrepreneurialism – in order to attract businesses and employment. And as part of this shift there has been accompanying institutional change – from overarching metropolitan authorities (government) to public-private sector partnerships (governance). The first part of the theory suggests that European integration, that is the creation of a single European market during the period from the 1970s to the 2000s has had the effect of changing the objectives of policy in cities (and city regions) from a concern with delivering services to the local population to one focused on attracting jobs and businesses. At the same time, this change of objective has been accompanied by institutional change so that private sector partners have become more prominent in policy formulation and implementation. This theory might be 'ethnocentric', in the sense that it assumes that what has happened in Britain over the last 40 years or so

has happened or is happening everywhere in Europe. But it is a testable theory and the population to which it refers is all cities or city regions within the EU. Where a small sample of cases may be a problem if the objective of the research is a descriptive one, where there may be an interest in empirical generalisation, in this situation, since this theory is meant to apply to all these cases, research into trends in any one city region within Europe examining the objectives of policy and the institutional context could in principle falsify this theory (see Chapter 6 on the falsification of theories).

When comparing countries, Sharpe (1975: 28) proposed the 'rule of maximum similarity' to ensure that, as far as possible, in any comparative study, and in so far as one can tell from existing evidence, one should compare like with like. 'In this way we can minimise the number of variables to be compared'. If the idea is to compare the nature and working of city regions, and one has the hypothesis that the nature and working of city regions are influenced by, (a) the general constitutional provision for regions within a country, and (b) the nature of urban settlement in the region, then the countries of Germany and England are useful to select for comparative research because they differ in these variables of interest but 'other factors' which might influence the nature and working of urban regions, like the general level of economic development of the country, the democratic nature of the country, and the influence of the European Union on policy and practice are all controlled by this selection (Herrschel and Newman, 2002). This, of course, also restricts the population to which the results of the research can be generalised. A further example of a restrictive definition of the population of interest in cross-national study in Europe is the research by Couch et al. (2003) introduced above. They were interested in how the processes of urban regeneration differed between 'obsolescent urban areas' in Europe, and why they differed. The population of cases to which their theory might be generalised was, however, limited to those that met certain criteria. First, the population was limited to cases within countries which in the European context could be considered to have 'a broadly similar experience of economic development, urbanisation and economic restructuring' (2003: 14) (UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France and Italy). All were described as 'prosperous industrialised countries'. Within those countries they were only interested in: conurbations large enough to be regional centres but not capital cities; conurbations that had experienced large scale restructuring; conurbations that had some distinctive characteristics of locality that could be easily identified and whose impacts could be examined. The