

# HISTORICAL- COMPARATIVE RESEARCH



# History

- ▶ Has several meanings.
- ▶ One meaning: the events of the past.
- ▶ *Historiography* is the method of doing historical research or of gathering and analyzing historical evidence.

# Major questions:

- ▶ How did major societal change take place?
- ▶ What fundamental features are common to most societies?
- ▶ Why did current social arrangement take a certain form in some societies but not in others? Revolution in society and not in another. Feelings about the value of children. Changes.
- ▶ H-C research strengthens conceptualization and theory building.

# Focus on:

- ▶ Tracing the development of social forms (patterns) overtime as well as its broad historical processes, and
- ▶ Comparing those social forms and its developmental processes across cultures.

# Follows scientific approach

- ▶ Can be a survey of events in history – could be through the study of documents (using statistics, doing communication analysis), interviewing people who may recall historical events.
- ▶ Mostly a longitudinal analysis i.e. look into developmental processes.
- ▶ Make cross cultural comparisons of the social forms as well as the developmental processes.

# Social forms

- ▶ Historical development of ideas about different forms of society.
- ▶ Progression of social forms from simple to the complex, from rural-agrarian to urban-industrial societies.
- ▶ Savagery to barbarism to civilization. Folk society to urban society. Division of labor as studied by Durkheim. Nomadic (*Al-badawi*) to sedentary (*Al-hadari*) by Ibn Khaldun

# Forms of economic systems

- ▶ Studied by Marx. Progressing historically from primitive to feudal to capitalist forms.
- ▶ All history was a history of class struggles – “haves” struggling to maintain their advantages and the “have-nots” struggling for a better lot in life.
- ▶ End of this struggle is classless society.
- ▶ Economic determinism – economic factors determine all other aspects of society.

# Economic forms and ideas

- ▶ *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Weber.
- ▶ Predestination. God gave each person an earthly “calling” – an occupation. Success or failure indicating the will of God. Success as a means to salvation – work hard. Earn, save, and reinvest capital. Ultimate development of capitalism.
- ▶ Why capitalism did not develop in India, China? None of the religions supported the accumulation and reinvestment of capital.




# Logic of Historical-Comparative Research

- ▶ Is there a distinct method and logic for this research? Or is it simply a research that examines life in the past or in several societies?
- ▶ Some researchers use positivist, quantitative approach to study historical or comparative issues.
- ▶ Others rely on qualitative approach.

# Quantitative Approach

- ▶ Measure the variables, test the hypothesis, analyze quantitative data, replicate research to discover generalizable laws.
- ▶ Make no distinction between H-C research and other quantitative research.
- ▶ Can focus on one society or multiple societies.
- ▶ Can focus on one time in past or across time.
- ▶ Can focus on present time.
- ▶ Data can primarily be quantitative or qualitative.
- ▶ Debate continues.

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- **Use time series data to monitor changing conditions over time – population, crime rates, unemployment, infant mortality rates. Such data need comparability.**
  - **Historical development of Unionization and the frequency of strikes.**

# Qualitative Approach

- Qualitative method. No easily listed steps.
- Max Weber used the German term *verstehen* – “understanding.”
- Researcher must be able to take on, mentally, the circumstances, views, and feelings of those being studied to interpret their actions appropriately.
- Must find patterns – Weber called them *ideal types*: conceptual models composed of the essential characteristics. Bureaucracy.

# Qualitative Approach (cont.)

- ▶ Intensive examination of a limited number of cases. Elaborate historical process and concrete historical details. Evidence.
- ▶ Focuses on culture;
- ▶ Sees through the eyes of those being studied i.e. gets the “understanding;” and
- ▶ Reconstructs the lives of those being studied.
- ▶ Follows lot of anthropological approach.

# A Distinct H-C Approach

- ▶ Avoid the excesses of quantitative and qualitative approaches.
- ▶ Combines sensitivity to specific historical or cultural contexts with theoretical generalization.
- ▶ H-C researchers may use quantitative data to supplement qualitative data and analysis.
- ▶ Logic and goals of H-C research are closer to field research than to those of traditional positivist approaches.

# Similarities with Field Research

- ▶ Researcher's point of view is an unavoidable part of research. Both involve interpretation.
- ▶ Examine a great diversity of data. Empathic understanding of events and people. Capture subjective feelings and look for social meaning.
- ▶ Both often use *grounded theory*. Theory usually emerges during the process of data collection.

# Similarities with Field Research (cont.)

- ▶ Both involve a type of translation. Understand people's point of view and translate it for others.
- ▶ Both see social reality as something constructed by people through actions and over time.
- ▶ Generalizations and theory are limited. Replications limited.



# Unique features of H-C Research

- ▶ Evidence is limited and indirect. H-C researcher reconstructs what occurred from evidence. Does not have absolute confidence. Evidence may not be sufficient.
- ▶ Personal interpretation of the evidence. People may derive different meanings. Researcher becomes immersed in and absorbs details about context.

# Unique features of H-C Research

(cont.)

- ▶ H-C researcher is usually more aware of events occurring prior to the time studied, events occurring in places other than the location studied, and events that occurred after the period studied. More coherent construction of past than while it was happening.
- ▶ H-C researcher does not use deterministic approach. Uses combinational explanations. All factors appeared together rather linearly. Look at the whole. Apparent and hidden meanings

# Steps in a H-C Research Project

- ▶ Does not involve rigid set of steps.
- ▶ Does not use complex or specialized techniques.

# Conceptualizing the Object of Inquiry

- ▶ Become familiar with the setting and conceptualize what is to be studied.
- ▶ Start with a loose model for study. Assumptions, concepts, interrelationship of concepts.
- ▶ Decide on the historical era or comparative settings (nations or units).
- ▶ List of questions relating to specific issue.

# Locating Evidence

- ▶ Gather evidence through bibliographic work. Which libraries will have. Shall have to travel to those libraries.
- ▶ Researcher reads lots of literature. May have to learn foreign language (s).
- ▶ Creates his own bibliography with complete citations along with notes.
- ▶ Adjusts his initial model – concepts, questions, and even the direction.

# Evaluating the Quality of Evidence

- ▶ Researcher has two questions in mind:
  - ▶ 1. How relevant is the evidence?
  - ▶ 2. How accurate and strong is the evidence?
- ▶ Question of relevance is difficult – with the shift in focus, the relevance of evidence may change
- ▶ Accuracy is looked for: the implicit framework, particular details (that are required), and empirical generalizations.

# Organizing Evidence

- ▶ As evidence starts coming in, the researcher organizes the data. Looks for some preliminary analysis, low level generalizations.
- ▶ More evidence may lead to new ways of organizing the data and new questions may emerge.

# Synthesizing

- ▶ **Researcher:**
- ▶ **Refines the concepts and moves toward a general explanatory model.**
- ▶ **Looks for patterns across time or units, and draws out similarities and differences with examples.**
- ▶ **Organizes divergent events in sequences and creates a coherent picture. Process.**
- ▶ **Links specific evidence with an abstract model.**



# Writing a Report

- ▶ Combine evidence, concepts, and synthesis into a research report.
- ▶ Needs careful crafting of evidence and explanation.
- ▶ Weave together evidence and arguments to communicate a coherent, and convincing picture to readers.

# DATA AND EVIDENCE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT



# Historical evidence comes from:

- ▶ Sources of historical-comparative research data:
  - ▶ 1. Primary sources
  - ▶ 2. Secondary sources
  - ▶ 3. Running records
  - ▶ 4. Recollections

# 1. Primary Sources

- ▶ Letters, diaries, memos, newspaper or magazine article, movies, novels, articles of clothing, photographs.
- ▶ Lived the past and are found in the archives, in private collections, family closets, or in museums.

# Potential problems with Primary sources

- ▶ Only a fraction of it survives.
- ▶ Whatever survived is a non-random sample of what once existed.
- ▶ Reading the primary sources with the eyes and assumptions of a contemporary. Difficult to get inside the minds of writings and look at things as they saw. An account of a slave holder. Moral judgments.

# Potential problems with Primary sources (Cont.)

- ▶ Locating primary documents is time consuming.
- ▶ Incomplete, unorganized, decaying.
- ▶ Weighing the authenticity.
- ▶ Many types of distortions: Bowdlerization – a deliberate distortion designed to protect moral standards, or furnish a particular image.

## 2. Secondary Sources

- ▶ Books and articles written by historians and other researchers, as evidence of past conditions.
- ▶ Has certain limitations:

# Potential problems in secondary sources

- ▶ Volumes of descriptions. Needs transformation. Pictures to be consistent, bridge many time periods or locales.

## Problems:

- ▶ - **Historians do not present value free facts.**  
Problems of inaccurate historical accounts.
- ▶ - Lack of studies in areas of interest.



# Potential problems in secondary sources (Cont.)

- ▶ - No rigorous definition of concepts – mixture of journalism, everyday language.
- ▶ - Cannot be used for testing hypotheses. Cannot meet positivist criteria of falsifiability – no replicability.
- ▶ - Selection procedure is not transparent. It is arbitrary selection. Biases.

# Potential problems in secondary

## **sources** (Cont.)

- ▶ Problem with the organization of evidence. All narrative. Temporal logic. Does not denote causality – meets one of the 3 conditions.
- ▶ Historian influenced by historiographic schools, personal beliefs, social theories, and current events.
- ▶ History of powerful. His story (History) gets written by the people in power. History may not coincide with what actually happened.

# 3. Running Records

- ▶ Files or existing statistical documents maintained by organizations. Vital statistics.

# 4. Recollections

- ▶ The words written by individuals about their past lives or experiences based on memory. Memoirs, autobiographies, interviews.
- ▶ Gathering oral history, conducting unstructured interviews with people. Non-elite, illiterates can provide information.

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- ▶ H-C researchers often use secondary sources or different data types in combination.

# Evaluating the documents

- ▶ Who composed the documents? Why were these written? What methods were used to acquire the information?
- ▶ What are some of the biases in the documents? How representative was the sample?
- ▶ What are the key categories and concepts used?
- ▶ What sorts of theoretical issues and debates do these documents cast light on?

# Problems in Comparative Research

- ▶ The units being compared: Nation-state boundaries may not match those of culture. Nation-state may contain more than one culture
- ▶ Problems of equivalence: contextual differences over time, across places. Measurement validity. Meaning of a friend.
- ▶ Ethical issues.