

1 Comparative Intuition

Is it possible to compare French presidential politics with, say, village level politics in rural India? The conventional wisdom in both naturalist comparative social science and humanist area studies is a resounding ‘no’. Even if this comparison could reveal interesting insights, it would be impossible to design a study that would make methodological sense.

For naturalist social scientists, the main objection would be that the contexts are too different, irrespective of the variables we might choose to investigate (that is, institutions, economic development, political culture or religion). We might compare (say) Indian and French political systems at the national level, or small-town politics in France with village politics in rural India. But the scales of presidential politics and village politics are just too different. In fact, they are so different that they do not even conform to a ‘most different’ design (Lijphart 1971) because there is not even *one* variable that might link them. In other words, it is not like comparing apples with oranges; it is like comparing an elephant with an ant. Rather than varieties of fruit, they are different species.

Humanist area studies scholars would reach the same negative conclusion though using a different logic. Comparison, from this perspective, runs the risk of sacrificing rich, nuanced and context-bound insights on the altar of parsimony, generalisability and theoretical elegance. In this tradition, the concern is that these types of studies often contain inaccuracies and misunderstandings due to insufficient knowledge of the place under study. The point here is not that we cannot make this trade-off, but rather such an exercise would not produce meaningful insights.

The aim of this book is to present an alternative to these two common ways of seeing and studying the social world. French presidential politics and village politics in rural India may seem beyond meaningful comparison. But if we probe deeper, we begin to see that presidents and village leaders share common dilemmas – how to mobilise supporters, how to ensure the loyalty of allies, whether to weaken or placate rivals, how to manipulate crisis and

survive scandal, whether to implement change or preserve the status quo. Indeed, when we think about politics in this actor-centred way, we start to realise that the comparison we propose is not as incongruous as first appeared. We might even begin to imagine a president and a village leader sitting down together and discussing political tactics and manoeuvres, sharing what works and what does not. Rather than having nothing to offer, the findings of such a study might turn out to be interesting, even illuminating. Indeed, such research might find that some presidents have more in common with counterpart village leaders than they do with other presidents.

This example is not a thought experiment. It echoes the logic of F. G. Bailey's (1969) classic *Stratagems and Spoils*. Context, for Bailey, was not a constraint, either methodologically or philosophically. Unlikely juxtaposition allowed him to render both the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic, opening space for thinking about politics as an essentially human activity in which we all take part. In doing so, he revealed *both* the universal and the particular; the dilemmas are similar but the strategies actors pursue and the consequences of their choices can be different (cf. Adcock 2006: 62).

The implications of this approach for how we undertake comparative research across the social sciences is potentially profound. As our brief illustration highlights, conventional wisdom about when, how and why to compare severely limits how we study and understand the social world. As a result, we are missing potentially rich and illuminating insights because our analysis is either too rigid, structured and systematic or too bespoke, detailed and idiographic. We seek to address these limitations – and expand the horizons of comparison – by outlining a novel, clear and sound approach to comparative interpretive analysis.

We are indebted in this pursuit not just to a long line of innovators like Bailey, but also to a recent eruption of interest in the means and ends of comparison in social science. For example, the late Benedict Anderson's (2016) memoir *A Life beyond Boundaries* challenges old presumptions about the practice and utility of small-n and medium-n research. Reflecting on his own career, and in particular on the slow-burning but spectacular success of *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson revels in the creative spark that enabled him to make 'surprising' but revealing comparisons across apparently disparate contexts. His approach bemused his naturalist colleagues in comparative politics, while his contemporaries in humanist area studies regarded it with caution.

While Anderson's reflections open new possibilities for comparative research, they are limited because he treats the work of making comparisons

as a mysterious and indescribable form of alchemy. He provides no basis for different comparative strategies, and no guidance on how to conduct such research. This book seeks to demystify the process. Its chief contribution is to provide a philosophically sound and practically useful guide to a distinctively interpretive form of comparison.

In doing so, we contribute to fast-moving debates about the universal-particular divide. In recent times, these discussions have been dominated by naturalist social scientists seeking to defend the value of qualitative research (for example: Bennett and Checkel 2015; Blatter and Haverland 2012; Coppedge 2012; George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2012a, 2017; Goertz 2006; Goertz and Mahoney 2012). But while we are sympathetic to aspects of this cause, we challenge the underlying mantra of ‘diverse tools, shared standards’ (Brady and Collier 2010). This book attends to the question of how small facts can speak to large issues from the other side of the naturalist-humanist divide. We seek not only to provide an overlapping set of tools, but also a distinct set of standards by which to conduct and judge comparative interpretive research.

This contribution is vital because interpretive social science remains widely typecast as idiographic, both among its critics *and* its practitioners. For naturalist social scientists, interpretivists – if they enter the conversation at all – are deemed to be in the business of ‘mere description’. They provide rich, detailed and illuminating accounts of isolated social phenomena, but the relationship to theory building and testing is tangential at best. Insofar as naturalists seek accommodation with the humanist tradition, it is by adopting a strict division of labour in which detailed descriptive inferences are reinterpreted by social scientists seeking law-like generalisability (see Gerring 2012b). Some humanist scholars who embrace, or at least are sympathetic to, the interpretive approach, invert this condescension and wear their idiographic robe with pride (for discussion, see Bates 1997). Following Geertz (1973), these scholars provide ‘thick descriptions’; that is, rich, detailed and illuminating accounts of particular social phenomena. Theoretical generalisation is seen as a fraught and fallible task (Abu-Lughod [1991] 2006; Vrasti 2008). But whether ‘mere’ or ‘thick’, whether meant as disparaging or approving, the dividing line stays the same. The common perception is that the interpretive enterprise remains rich, but context-bound, and idiographic, unable to see the wood through the trees (see Chapter 2).

We join a swelling group of interpretive scholars who are dissatisfied with this state of affairs. The group traverses diverse fields including comparative

politics (for example, Fujii 2013; Wedeen 2010); organisational studies (for example, Flyvbjerg 2006); public health (for example, Greenhalgh et al. 2011); human geography (for example, Robinson 2011); international relations (for example, Pouliot 2014); and area studies (for example, Gibson-Graham 2004; Wesley-Smith and Goss 2010). We argue that the dichotomy between the naturalist pursuit of analytical clarity and generalisability and the humanist pursuit of rich idiographic detail is a false one (cf. Brady and Collier 2010; Coppedge 2012; King, Keohane and Verba 1994): interpretive researchers can and do make meaningful comparisons that speak to themes of general significance (see Adcock 2006; Bevir and Rhodes 2015, part 2). Our goal is to outline and promote this distinctly interpretive way of thinking about and doing comparative research.

There are at least four main reasons interpretivists might want to compare. The first is that comparison provides us with a better understanding of a particular case. So, we compare cases A, B and C because they help shed new and illuminating light on case D, which is the one we are interested in. Relatedly, comparison can also help us provide policy solutions – we can suggest a policy response to case D because we know what happened in cases A, B and C. Much interpretive comparison that does exist is justified on these grounds. A third rationale is that we place a particular case in a broader social context. Nothing in this book contradicts attempts to undertake these types of comparison. But our primary rationale is that we compare because it is essential to providing ‘decentred’ explanations of the social world. To decentre is to unpack practices as the contingent beliefs and actions of individuals as the basis for explanation, as opposed to laws and rules, correlations between social categories or deductive models. The risk of in-depth idiographic studies is that they treat context as the *de facto* explanation for all social and political phenomenon, rendering impossible any attempt to generate more general insights. We argue that decentred explanations can speak to general themes. But, to do so we need to rethink the nature of comparison.

We argue that the dilemmas actors experience in their everyday lives are the intellectual skeleton key that unlocks the potential of comparative interpretive research. When we ask why actors act, we create an opportunity for reflection on alternative meanings and actions, and the pros and cons of each. By reflecting *with* actors, we uncover the choices and questions they confront. By understanding how they *see* these choices, as a reflection of the webs of belief in which they are embedded, we are able to explain why actors do what they do. In Geertz’s (1973: 15) classic formulation ‘we begin with our

own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematise those'. When we ask whether others experience the same dilemmas, we necessarily explore how their experience is either similar or different, unlocking the comparative dimension of this approach. By abductively moving back and forth between the meanings and beliefs of individual actors and our sensemaking of their practices, we provide an interpretation of their interpretations. The result is a decentred approach that focuses on the social construction of a practice – theirs and ours – through the ability of individuals to create, and act on, meanings.

So, this book is a call to arms for interpretivists to embrace creatively comparative work that uses the dilemmas of situated agents as its empirical starting point to develop plausible conjectures. It justifies and explains the approach. We hope that researchers across social science disciplines might find inspiration in our attempt to reassert the place of richly interpretive analysis in broader theory-building efforts. Readers searching for a comprehensive, step-by-step guide to conducting interpretive comparative research will most likely be disappointed. There is simply not space to spell out in any detail the philosophical basis of the interpretive approach nor to provide a textbook on qualitative data collection and analysis. In fact, there is no need. Existing textbooks and handbooks do this job comprehensively (see, for example, Bevir and Blakely 2018; Bevir and Rhodes 2015; Schaffer 2015; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Wagenaar 2011). We focus on demonstrating, with concrete examples, the potential of a *comparative* interpretive approach. The examples come from our fieldwork and the work of scholars who have adopted a similar approach even if they would not explicitly identify it as comparative interpretive work. The argument is therefore not limited to political science but applies equally to richly qualitative research in cognate disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

This chapter consists of five substantive sections. First, we outline our basic argument. Here, we put forward the need for a consciously and explicitly comparative interpretive approach, and the creative benefits that such an approach can provide. Second, we provide a brief summary of the interpretive approach. Third, we seek to justify the rigour and sensitivity of a comparative interpretive orientation. Fourth, we foreshadow in greater depth the structure of the book and detail of its component chapters. Finally, we provide guidance for readers on how to use the book, and in particular on how to combine its insights with those stemming from canonical texts in the field.

The Comparative Intuition

At the heart of this book is the idea that comparing is intuitive (see Anderson 2016). People in general, and social scientists in particular, are engaged in ‘constant comparison’. Comparison is what enables us to make sense of events as they unfold across time and space. We compare to identify patterns and disjuncture in the social world. We compare new experiences with old ones to help us make sense of the exotic or unfamiliar. By doing so, we sometimes see familiar settings in a new light. We also draw on comparisons to help communicate ideas and make insights interesting for a broad audience. Human beings are comparative animals.

Seen in these terms, naturalist approaches to social science discipline and restrict the comparative intuition. Here, comparison is something to be designed into the project from the beginning. The core problem – and one to which anyone with experience of detailed fieldwork can attest – is that the best-laid comparative plans can go wrong. Expected categories of comparison can melt away on closer inspection. Unexpected categories can emerge to take their place. As Gerring (2007: 149) concedes in highlighting the limits to even the most careful and robust process of case selection in naturalist research: ‘Not all twists and turns on the meandering tail of truth can be expected’.

Meanwhile, humanist approaches to the social sciences tend to smother the comparative intuition. The goal is to understand and highlight the rich specificities of the context under examination. Attempts to draw out comparative themes across cases can be derided as erasing or blunting these specificities. This concern is at the heart of the radical critique of efforts to draw broader theoretical lessons from bespoke settings (see e.g. Vrasti 2008). The effect, ironically given the commitment of these humanist scholars to reflexivity, is to wish away a key part of the interpretive process. Doing so prevents analysts from reflecting on, and giving voice to, how they impose their own sense-making systems and categories on their data in order to render their fieldwork observations intelligible to others.

We argue that interpretivists who embrace the comparative intuition can overcome these limitations. Unlike the naturalist approach to disciplining this intuition, such a move can enable the analyst to explore comparative insights that emerge in the field after the development of authentic and in-depth case knowledge. Unlike the humanist approach to denying or negating this intuition, it can authentically present the world as the analyst sees and

experiences it. Indeed, rather than flatten or misrepresent context, comparison in these terms becomes a vital means of both *understanding* and *conveying* context. It is only through comparison that new insights and experiences become meaningful, and we can communicate meaningfully to relevant audiences.

Embracing the comparative intuition can also help immensely in unlocking creativity. Creativity is central to all forms of social science research but little understood. Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) usefully distinguish between Big-C creativity and Pro-C creativity. Big-C creativity refers to ‘the remarkable and lasting contributions made by mavericks in some domain’, while Pro-C (or professional creativity) refers to ‘professional creators, [who] have not reached eminent status’ (and for a review of the field see Kozbelt, Beghetto and Runco 2010). Scholars in both naturalist and humanist traditions produce work of Pro-C quality, but work of Big-C quality is frustrated increasingly by the restrictive paradigms in which they work. Leading naturalists concede that, in spite of their advocacy of strict standards and rigid protocols, creativity remains an elusive but essential ingredient in good research. It enables researchers to situate their findings, to design and execute effective research programmes and, above all, to find the spark of inspiration that propels the voyage of discovery. In their naturalist bible for political science, for example, King, Keohane and Verba (1994: 14) quote Karl Popper approvingly: ‘Discovery contains an “irrational element”, or a “creative intuition”.’ Yet, in practice, any sense of creativity is all too often suppressed when writing-up findings (cf. Feyerabend 1988; Gerring 2017; Polanyi 1958). Indeed, thoughtful writers of a naturalist persuasion have acknowledged this methodological bind. For example, Collier, Brady and Seawright (2010: 197) write that naturalist procedures may ‘sharply narrow their substantive research questions, thus producing studies that are less important’. They identify a conflict between ‘the methodological goals of improving descriptive and causal inference’ and ‘the objective of studying humanly important outcomes’. Gerring (2017: 31–32) goes further when he states that ‘the task of discovery is a comparatively anarchistic affair. There are no rules for finding new things’ (Gerring 2017: 31).

If naturalist social science favours justification (i.e. verification and refutation) over discovery, humanist social science favours exploration and innovation. Leading proponents typically present the opportunity to be creative as one of the chief virtues, and pleasures, of this approach to social science (see most famously Geertz 1973). The core logic is to move iteratively between an inductive account of the data and a deductive reading of the

relevant literature, thus leaving space for creativity to flourish. For example, Geertz's (1973: chapter 15) famous account of the Balinese cockfight starts by describing it as a vice raid – cockfighting is illegal. Next, he interprets it as a symbol of Balinese masculinity – the double entendre of cockfighting is deliberate. The next layer of meaning is cockfighting as blood sacrifice to keep demons at bay. It is followed by a discussion of gambling that casts cockfighting as a dramatisation of status concerns in the tiered status hierarchy of Balinese society; men are allegorically humiliating one another, although their status is not changed by the cockfight's outcome. Finally, he considers the cockfight as a typical spurt in Balinese life. Cockfighting is the story the Balinese tell themselves about themselves. Cockfighting is no longer a vice but a text that Geertz is reading to say something about Balinese culture. His account is both a creative and a masterly thick description of small facts speaking to large issues.

However, in practice, most authors remain narrowly channelled, bound by the focus on the specific context, which takes priority over all else. In the humanist tradition, rigour is defined as the richest, most bespoke forms of contextual knowledge. So, interpretive researchers working in the humanist tradition feel free to forge their own creative connections to broad theoretical concerns. But only if theory speaks to the specific context under examination. Breadth must be sacrificed for depth. Those who do manage to escape this trap, and speak to broader debates, risk scorn. Take James C. Scott's (1979, 1985, 1990) hugely influential trilogy on agrarian politics as an exemplar; it has been humorously categorised across graduate classrooms as 'First, peasants in Malaysia; then, peasants everywhere; finally, everyone everywhere!' (see Rabinowitz 2014).

More commonly, then, it is skilful scholars working on particular issues who have a big impact on the field. Seemingly, we cannot explain or reproduce their broader impact. Again, we confront a form of magic or alchemy by which the rich insights of humanist scholarship somehow achieve broad resonance.

The key to demystifying this alchemy, we argue, is to unlock creativity in making comparisons. We use the word 'puzzling' to describe this creative process. It refers to solving a problem or answering a question creatively (see also Adcock 2006: 62). It may involve clever guesswork or a novel experiment. We are drawn to the word for two reasons. First, it contains its own contradiction. If something is a puzzle, it means it confuses us, yet by puzzling over the confusion we attempt to make sense of it. The field – and especially the multiple fields entailed in comparative research – can

throw up many puzzles we do not understand, so we puzzle over them to find their meanings. Fujii (2013), for example, is puzzled by why acts of extra-lethal violence (e.g. forcing victims to dance and sing before killing them, mutilation and so forth) occur. Given the risks involved, these acts defy rationalist explanations. Using cases from Vietnam, Rwanda and Malaysia, she argues that these acts can be explained by the participants' roles and activities, which contribute by producing graphic effects. This type of work operates according to a 'logic of discovery' – iterative, open-ended, evolving – as opposed to the typical social science preference for a 'logic of justification' in which invariant procedures are rigorously applied with the aim of producing generalisable and predictive results.

Following a 'logic of discovery', the second attraction is that puzzling is a process with no clear destination; we change the puzzle as we seek to resolve our confusions, often multiple times over the course of a complex comparative project. Through deep, rigorous and continuous puzzling, interpretive scholars can feel emboldened to explore and tease out comparisons that surprise and intrigue, that uncover new insights or force readers to confront familiar insights in new ways. In this way, our account of interpretive comparison can provide a new set of tools and insights to seed, exploit and channel creativity in crafting effective and affecting comparison.

Interpretation and Comparative Intuition

Interpretive research offers a distinctive approach to channelling the comparative intuition because it consciously offers interpretations of interpretations. It concentrates on meanings, beliefs and discourses, as opposed to laws and rules, correlations between social categories, or deductive models. An interpretive approach is not alone in paying attention to meanings. It is distinctive because of the extent to which it privileges meanings as ways to grasp actions. Its proponents privilege meanings because they hold, first, beliefs have a constitutive relationship to actions and, second, beliefs are inherently holistic.

For example, when other political scientists study voting behaviour using attitude surveys or models of rational action, they separate beliefs from actions to find a correlation or deductive link between the two. In contrast, an interpretive approach suggests such surveys and models cannot tell us why, say, raising one's hand should amount to voting. They do not tell us why there would be uproar if someone forced someone else to raise their hand against

their will. We can explain such behaviour only if we appeal to the intersubjective beliefs that underpin the practice. We need to know voting is associated with free choice and, therefore, with a particular concept of the self. Practices could not exist if people did not have the associated beliefs. Beliefs or meanings would not make sense without the practices to which they refer.

The aim of interpretive research is to decentre: to unpack practices as the contingent beliefs and actions of individuals as we just did with our short example of voting. Decentred analysis produces detailed studies of people's beliefs and practices. It focuses our attention on everyday dilemmas. It challenges the idea that inexorable or impersonal forces drive politics, focusing instead on the relevant meanings, the beliefs and preferences of the people involved. Like a kaleidoscope, decentring produces changing patterns. We use this metaphor to allude to the way that all agents are situated within multiple, intersecting social fields (age, gender, ethnicity, profession, etc.). The classic social science approach is to make each field the subject of empirical analysis. Starting with agents rather than fields allows us to see how dilemmas recur and intersect. The effect is akin to looking through a kaleidoscope, with the same practices and processes given new meaning depending on the agent narrating it.

Not Anything Goes

In seeking to unlock the creativity of interpretive comparison, we want to be clear that we do not suggest that 'anything goes'. Underlying this scepticism is a suspicion that any attempt to bridge the particular–general divide in an interpretive approach necessarily entails a lack of rigour. We do not so much have in mind here the scepticism that might be expected from naturalist social scientists. While we will argue that such scholars might derive important insights from close engagement with our argument, we do not expect them to come all the way with us. To invert the common mantra here, we have some shared tools, but different standards. Instead, our chief target is the humanist impulse to look down on any attempt to go beyond idiography as 'airplane ethnography' (Bevir and Blakely 2018: 94); a pale, even dangerous, imitation of the real thing. We combine breadth and depth and focus our discussion on defending the rigour of comparative interpretive research against such prejudices (see Chapter 4).

Rigour in the humanist tradition depends on reflexivity. A long-standing and penetrating critique of the naturalist approach is that it airbrushes out