

SEMESTER 4/GE 4

Comparative Method in Sociological Research

The comparative approach to the study of society has a long tradition dating back to Ancient Greece. Since the nineteenth century, philosophers, anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists have used cross-cultural comparisons to achieve various objectives in understanding social processes.

The Phrase “comparative method” refers to the method of comparing different societies or groups within the same society to show whether and why they are similar or different in certain respects. Both Montesquieu and Auguste Comte, often regarded as the founders of sociology, used or recommended ‘comparison’ to establish and explain both differences and similarities between societies. The comparative method was, for long, considered the method par excellence of sociology. The comparative method, so called, is thus the process of comparing situations, groups, cultures, or whatever, which are similar and yet which differ in known ways.

Comparative approach in sociological studies is one of the research methods to study social formation and transformation. “Comparative” studies examine and contrast social structures and processes across countries or regions to identify general patterns. As a research method, comparative method aims to understand complexities and identifies causal mechanisms.

In comparative method, the researcher collects data about different social groups and then compares one group with another to identify what is evident in one group but not another.

The principles behind such a method come from the positivists who try to isolate and identify the cause of social events and behaviour. Durkheim's study on suicide was an example of the comparative method. By comparing official statistics between various societies he argued he was able to identify what was evident in one society and not in another which might cause suicide.

For researchers adopting a normative perspective, comparisons have served as a **tool** for developing classifications of social phenomena and for establishing whether shared phenomena can be explained by the same causes. For many sociologists, comparisons have provided an analytical framework for examining (and explaining) social and cultural differences and specificity. More recently, as greater emphasis has been placed on contextualisation, cross-national comparisons have served increasingly as a means of gaining a better understanding of different societies, their structures and institutions.

Constant comparative method is label given to a procedure designed for analysing qualitative data. The process is one of continually comparing segments of the data with each other. Such a process leads to the emergence of categories and helps reveal the relationships between them so that a model of social processes can be developed. However, constant comparative method does not provide a rigorous and systematic test of the model. It is very closely related to analytic induction.