



Comparative- Historical Methods

Matthew Lange



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About the Author



Matthew Lange has a Ph.D. from Brown University and is Associate Professor of Sociology at McGill University. His work focuses on states, development, colonialism, and ethnic violence. Lange's books include *Educations in Ethnic Violence* (Cambridge, 2012), which explores how education affects ethnic violence, and *Lineages of Despotism and Development* (Chicago, 2009), which analyzes how different forms of British colonialism initiated different developmental trajectories. He is co-editor of *States and Development* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and *The Oxford Handbook of the Transformations of States* (Oxford, Forthcoming) and has published articles in the *American Journal of Sociology*, *World Development*, *Social Forces*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *Social Science History*, the *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, and *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*. His work uses comparative-historical methods, and he specializes in mixing methods.

1

Comparative-Historical Methods: An Introduction

Since the rise of the social sciences, researchers have used **comparative-historical methods** to expand insight into diverse social phenomena and, in so doing, have made great contributions to our understanding of the social world. Indeed, any list of the most influential social scientists of all time inevitably includes a large number of scholars who used comparative-historical methods: Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, and Theda Skocpol, are a few examples. Demonstrating the continued contributions of the methodological tradition, books using comparative-historical methods won one-quarter of the American Sociological Association's award for best book of the year between 1986 and 2010, despite a much smaller fraction of sociologists using comparative-historical methods.

Given the contributions made by comparative-historical researchers, it is apparent that comparative-historical methods allow social scientists to analyze and offer important insight into perplexing and pertinent social issues. Most notably, social change has been *the* pivotal social issue over the past half millennium, and social scientists have used comparative-historical methods to offer insight into this enormous and important topic. State building, nationalism, capitalist development and industrialization, technological development, warfare and revolutions, social movements, democratization, imperialism, secularization, and globalization are central processes that need to be analyzed in order to understand both the dynamics of the contemporary world and the processes that created it; and many—if not most—of the best books on these topics have used comparative-historical methods.

Despite the great contributions made by comparative-historical analyses of social change, there is very little work on exactly what comparative-historical methods are. Unlike all other major methodological traditions

within the social sciences, there are no textbooks on comparative-historical methods; moreover, present books reviewing comparative-historical analysis touch on methods only briefly, focusing most attention on the types of issues analyzed by comparative-historical scholars and important figures within the research tradition. Thus, comparative-historical methods have produced some of the best works in the social sciences; many of the best social scientists use them to analyze vitally important social issues, but there is little discussion of what such methods actually are.

This omission is unfortunate for comparative-historical analysis; it is also unfortunate for the social sciences in general. Indeed, the works and issues analyzed by scholars using comparative-historical methods have dominated the social sciences since their emergence, so an understanding of comparative-historical methods helps improve our understanding of the entire social scientific enterprise. Moreover, comparative-historical methods—as their name implies—are mixed and offer an important example of how to combine diverse methods. Given inherent problems with social scientific analysis, combining methods is vital to optimize insight, but competition and conflict between different methodological camps limit methodological pluralism. Comparative-historical methods, therefore, offer all social scientists an important template for how to gain insight by combining multiple methods. Finally, yet related to this last point, comparative-historical methods also offer an example of how to deal with another dilemma facing the social sciences: balancing the particular with the general. The complexity of the social world commonly prevents law-like generalizations, but science—given the dominance of the natural sciences—privileges general causal explanations. The social sciences are therefore divided between researchers who offer general nomothetic explanations and researchers who offer particular ideographic explanations. Comparative-historical analysis, however, combines both comparative and within-case methods and thereby helps to overcome this tension, and to balance ideographic and nomothetic explanations.

In the pages that follow, I help to fill the methodological lacuna surrounding comparative-historical methods. This book is not meant to be an overview of everything comparative and historical; rather, using broad strokes, it paints a picture of the dominant methodological techniques used by comparative-historical researchers. For this, I summarize past methodological works, review the methods used in past comparative-historical analyses, and integrate all into a single statement about the methodological underpinnings of comparative-historical analysis. In so doing, I also offer new interpretations of what comparative-historical methods are, their analytic strengths, and the best ways to use them.

Defining Comparative-Historical Analysis

Comparative-historical methods are linked to a long-standing research tradition. This tradition was previously referred to as comparative-historical sociology, but Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003) refer to it as **comparative-historical analysis** in recognition of the tradition's growing multidisciplinary character. In addition to sociology, comparative-historical analysis is quite prominent in political science and is present—albeit much more marginally—in history, economics, and anthropology.

As the Venn diagram in Figure 1.1 depicts, comparative-historical analysis has four main defining elements. Two are methodological, as works within the research tradition employ both within-case methods and comparative methods. Comparative-historical analysis is also defined by epistemology. Specifically, comparative-historical works pursue social scientific insight and therefore accept the possibility of gaining insight through comparative-historical and other methods. Finally, the unit of analysis is a defining element, with comparative-historical analysis focusing on more aggregate social units.

A **methodology** is a body of practices, procedures, and rules used by researchers to offer insight into the workings of the world. They are central to the scientific enterprise, as they allow researchers to gather empirical and measurable evidence and to analyze the evidence in an effort to expand knowledge. According to Mann (1981), there is only one methodology

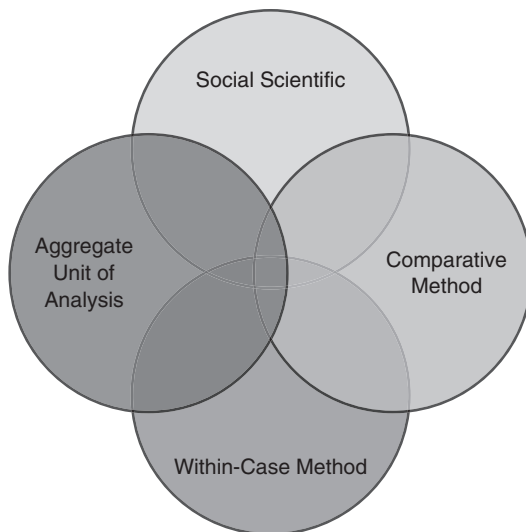


Figure 1.1 Venn diagram of comparative-historical analysis

within the social sciences. It involves eight steps: (1) formulate a problem, (2) conceptualize variables, (3) make hypotheses, (4) establish a sample, (5) operationalize concepts, (6) gather data, (7) analyze data to test hypotheses, and (8) make a conclusion. He suggests that the only methodological differences in the social sciences are the techniques used to analyze data—something commonly referred to as a **method**. Because particular techniques commonly require particular types of data, methods are also linked to different strategies of data collection.

All works within comparative-historical analysis use at least one **comparative method** to gain insight into the research question. By **insight**, I mean evidence contributing to an understanding of a case or set of cases. As described in considerable detail in Chapter 5, common comparative methods used within comparative-historical analysis include narrative, Millian, Boolean, and statistical comparisons. All of these comparative methods compare cases to explore similarities and differences in an effort to highlight causal determinants, and comparative-historical analysis must therefore analyze multiple cases. Although some comparative methods offer independent insight into the research question, others must be combined with the second methodological component of comparative-historical analysis: within-case methods.

Within-case methods pursue insight into the determinants of a particular phenomenon. The most common within-case method is causal narrative, which describes processes and explores causal determinants. Narrative analysis usually takes the form of a detective-style analysis which seeks to highlight the causal impact of particular factors within particular cases. Within-case analysis can also take the form of process tracing, a more focused type of causal narrative that investigates mechanisms linking two related phenomena. Finally, comparative-historical researchers sometimes use pattern matching as a technique for within-case analysis. Different from both causal narrative and process tracing, pattern matching does not necessarily explore causal processes; rather, it uses within-case analysis to test theories.

Within-case methods constitute the “historical” in comparative-historical analysis—that is, they are temporal and analyze processes over time. Moreover, they commonly analyze historical cases. This historical element has been a commonality unifying works within the comparative-historical research tradition to such an extent that works using within-case methods that do not analyze historical/temporal processes should not be considered part of the research tradition.

In addition to methods, comparative-historical analysis is also defined epistemologically. **Epistemology** is a branch of philosophy that considers the scope and possibility of knowledge. Over the past few decades, there has been growing interest in postmodern epistemological views

that deny the possibility of social scientific knowledge. They take issue with **positivism**, which suggests that social scientists can gain knowledge about social relations by using social scientific methods. Instead, the postmodern view suggests it is impossible to decipher any social laws because of the sheer complexity of social relations. These works go beyond Max Weber's claims that social scientists should pursue *verstehen*—or understanding—instead of social laws, suggesting that even a limited understanding is impossible. *Verstehen* is impossible, according to this view, because discourses impede the scientific study of human relations. Most basically, our social environments shape human values and cognitions in ways that severely bias our analysis of social relations and—in combination with extreme social complexity—prevent any insight into the determinants of social relations.

It is not my intention to discuss the merits and demerits of postmodern epistemological views, but such a position necessarily prevents a work from being an example of comparative-historical analysis. In particular, when a researcher denies the ability of social scientific methods to provide causal insight, they are inherently anti-methodological. Further, because methodology is the primary defining element of comparative-historical analysis and because comparative-historical analysis is focused on causal analysis, postmodern works are epistemologically distinct from comparative-historical analysis and should be considered separate from the research tradition.

The final definitional element of comparative-historical analysis concerns the unit of analysis. Traditionally, all works that are considered examples of comparative-historical analysis have taken a structural view and explore meso- and macro-level processes—that is, processes involving multiple individuals and producing patterns of social relations. Along these lines, Tilly (1984) described comparative-historical analysis as analyzing big structures and large processes, and making huge comparisons. As such, states, social movements, classes, economies, religions, and other macro-sociological concepts have been the focus of comparative-historical analysis. This focus does not prevent comparative-historical researchers from recognizing the causal importance of individuals. For example, Max Weber was a founding figure of comparative-historical analysis and paid considerable attention to individuals. More contemporary social scientists using comparative-historical methods also employ individual-level frameworks that consider individual-level action. Both Kalyvas (2006) and Petersen (2002), for example, analyze the causes of violence and focus on individual-level mechanisms. However, in doing so, Weber, Kalyvas, and Petersen all analyze how the structural and institutional environments shape individual actions and, thereby, the actions of large numbers of people. Even when analyzing individual-level processes,

therefore, comparative-historical researchers retain a structural focus and consider the interrelations between individual and structure.

While one might justify this final definitional element based on historical precedent, there are practical reasons to limit the category of comparative-historical analysis to works at the meso- and macro-level. Individual-level analyses that do not link individuals to structure are inherently different from the analysis of collective units, as scholars of the latter analyze collective processes and dynamics rather than individual thought processes and actions. Most notably, micro-analysis draws on individual-level data to understand the perceptions, interests, motivations, and actions of a single person and is, therefore, very biographical. Biography can also be an important component of more macro-level analyses, but such analyses also include structural analysis. That is, because meso- and macro-level analysis explores causal processes involving a number of people, it analyzes common structural and institutional factors shaping how large numbers of people act. As a consequence, familial, religious, economic, and political institutions as well as warfare, population growth, and other events that affect the lives of large numbers of people hold prominent positions in comparative-historical analysis.

Using all four defining elements, the size of the body of work that constitutes comparative-historical analysis is greatly reduced, leaving a large body of work that is similar to comparative-historical analysis in several ways but is not an example of it because the work lacks at least one of the four defining elements. Thus, Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and other postmodern works that compare cases and use narrative analysis to explore meso/macro-level processes are not examples of comparative-historical analysis because they are not social scientific: they deny the ability to gain insight into our social world through comparative and within-case methods. Similarly, Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson's (2001, 2002) statistical analyses of colonial legacies are social scientific, analyze macro-processes, and use comparative methods; but they are not examples of comparative-historical analysis because they omit within-case analysis. Next, Tilly's *The Contentious French* (1986) offers a social scientific analysis of the French political system through the use of within-case methods, but the book is not a clear example of comparative-historical analysis because it does not gain insight through the explicit use of inter-case comparison. Notably, all three of these are influential works of exceptional quality. By excluding them, I am not suggesting that they are inferior to comparative-historical analysis in any way; they simply do not conform to the main defining elements of the methodological tradition.

Despite my use of a specific definition, the boundaries of comparative-historical analysis are very blurred. Some works clearly use within-case

methods to answer their research questions but do not make explicit comparisons that explore similarities and differences. Others use comparative methods to gain insight into their research questions but include brief case studies that offer little insight. Similarly, some researchers question—but do not deny—the possibility of social scientific insight, and some analyses focus primarily on micro-level processes while briefly considering how the structural environments shape the micro-level. Ultimately, I am not concerned with delineating precise cut-off lines because the quality of an analysis is not determined by whether or not it is an example of comparative-historical analysis. Instead, I have defined comparative-historical analysis in an effort to clarify the major elements of the research tradition. A comparison of comparative-historical methods with other major methodological traditions in the social sciences is also helpful in this regard.

Social Scientific Methods: A Review

Comparative-historical methods are one of several methodological traditions used by social scientists in their efforts to understand our social world. In this section, I briefly review the major social scientific methods—statistical, experimental, ethnographic, and historical—and compare them to comparative-historical methods. I conclude that comparative-historical analysis employs a hodge-podge of methods and therefore has affinities with almost all other methodological traditions. Indeed, the main distinguishing characteristic of comparative-historical analysis is that it combines diverse methods into one empirical analysis that spans the ideographic-nomothetic divide.

Nomothetic/Comparative Methods

Different methodological traditions take a positivistic approach and attempt to provide **nomothetic explanations** of social phenomena. That is, they pursue insight that is generalizable and can be applied to multiple cases. At an extreme, nomothetic explanations pursue law-like generalizations that apply to the universe of cases, something implied by its name (“nomos” is Greek for law). Given the dominance of the natural sciences and their ability to offer insight that applies to the universe of cases, nomothetic explanations are commonly—but incorrectly—viewed as more scientific, so researchers who attempt to make the social sciences as scientific as possible commonly pursue this type of explanation. Rarely, however, do they go to the extreme of pursuing social laws that apply to the universe of cases, believing that extreme social complexity makes

social laws impossible. So, instead of exploring the causes of ethnic violence in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, these works explore common determinants of several episodes of ethnic violence, but they rarely try to discover a cause of all episodes of ethnic violence.

Methods pursuing nomothetic explanations necessarily analyze multiple cases because it is impossible to generalize based on one or a few cases. Although a researcher might simply complete numerous case studies, nearly all researchers pursuing nomothetic explanations gain insight from inter-case comparison. The two most common comparative methods used to provide nomothetic insight are statistics and controlled laboratory experiments.

Statistical Methods

The most popular and formalized methodological tradition in the social sciences is **statistical methods**, a massive methodological category that includes a number of subcategories. Statistics attempts to approximate controlled experiments by analyzing natural variation among a set of cases. The insight gained from statistical methods is derived primarily from inter-case comparison, although an increasing number of works use time-series data and also analyze variation within cases over time. For statistical comparison, variables are operationalized for a number of cases to explore whether one variable is commonly related to another among the set of cases. If there is a strong relationship between variables among the set of cases, the statistical analysis provides evidence that the two might be causally related. Thus, if a cross-sectional study finds that per capita GDP is strongly and negatively related to the incidence of civil war, it provides evidence that national wealth deters civil war in some way, as the natural variation among cases shows that non-wealthy countries are at a heightened risk of civil war.

Statistical methods are advantaged in several ways. By including multiple variables in the same model, statistics allows researchers to test different theories simultaneously. Statistics also allows researchers to estimate causal effects and risks. Third, cross-sectional statistics analyzes several cases and offers insight that is generalizable across the set. It therefore allows researchers to pursue nomothetic insight. Finally, statistics is very formalized, which makes possible the replication of findings, and has numerous techniques that can be matched to best suit the analysis at hand.

Like all methodological traditions, statistics also has shortcomings. First, statistical results are commonly open to question for two reasons: statistical analysis is based on numerous assumptions that are commonly broken, and there is no way of determining which model is most appropriate for

any statistical analysis (and results vary according to the model). Even if one accepts the validity of the statistical findings, correlation is not the same as causation, and frequently statistical methods are unable to provide insight into whether a relationship is causal or spurious. Indeed, statistical findings have difficulty highlighting causal mechanisms that underlie relationships, as they provide little ideographic—or case-specific—insight into causal processes. Finally, statistical methods commonly cannot be used because some social phenomena either lack appropriate data sets or have an insufficient number of cases.

Experimental Methods

Experimental methods are most prominent in psychology and attempt to use controlled laboratory experiments on humans. Notably, statistical methods are a central element of this methodological tradition. What separates experimental methods from standard statistics is data collection, as researchers using experimental methods manipulate subjects and then use statistical methods to analyze the impact of this treatment. Standard statistical methods, on the other hand, explore natural variation instead of variation caused by a treatment.

Researchers using controlled laboratory experiments usually assign subjects to different treatment groups to see whether the various groups react differently based on their different treatments. For example, to analyze whether gender stereotypes shape our perceptions of others, a researcher might tell one-third of the subjects that a toddler is a boy, tell one-third of the subjects that a toddler is a girl, and deliberately conceal the child's sex to the remaining subjects. After the subjects have played with the toddler, the researcher can then interview the subjects and ask them to describe the personality traits of the toddler, noting whether the treatment—what they have been told regarding gender—affects how the subjects perceive the toddler (see Seavey, Katz, and Zalk 1975).

Although the use of different treatment groups is common, researchers using experimental methods sometimes give the same treatment to all subjects but analyze whether they react differently to the treatment based on some measurable characteristic of the individual subjects. For example, a researcher exploring how self-esteem affects violent action might ask subjects to complete questionnaires that allow the researcher to assess the self-confidence of the subjects. The researcher could then ask the subjects to write an essay, have an employee critique the essays harshly, and then give each of the subjects an opportunity to retaliate against the employee who critiqued their paper by blowing a loud horn at them. Finally, the researcher could measure each subject's retaliatory act by timing how long the subject honked the horn, to see whether

there is a relationship between an individual's self-confidence and the length of the retaliation (see Bushman and Baumeister 1998).

Experimental methods provide very powerful insight into general determinants of causal processes. Relative to statistics, they offer researchers a superior ability to manipulate a particular factor while controlling for others, an advantage allowing researchers to gain more precise insight into causal determinants. Most notably, controlled laboratory experiments are much less likely to produce spurious findings, have a greatly superior capacity to offer insight into causal mechanisms, and measure causal effects with much greater accuracy. The main disadvantage of experimental methods—and the factor that prevents them from being used more broadly—is their impracticality. Notably, experimental methods are most appropriate for simple micro-level processes and become difficult—if not impossible—for processes involving large numbers of people. For example, it is virtually impossible to use experimental methods to explore directly the causes of social revolutions or the rise of capitalism. Similarly, experimental methods cannot easily be used to analyze either processes lasting extended periods of time or complex social phenomena requiring multiple treatments and interactions. Finally, for moral reasons, experimental methods cannot be used to analyze phenomena when the treatment is potentially harmful to the well-being of the subject. Thus, a researcher cannot explore the impact of severe verbal abuse by a stranger on feelings of self-worth among adolescents because the subjects could be harmed by the treatment.

When researchers are unable to use experimental methods, they can try to approximate them through natural experiments, which use natural variation in an effort to isolate the impact of certain factors (see Diamond and Robinson 2010). Unlike laboratory experiments, researchers attempting natural experiments cannot control for all factors and manipulate only one. Instead, they select cases that were very similar in many ways but subsequently differed in one key way. The researcher is thereby able to compare the cases and estimate the impact of the difference. Unfortunately, even the most similar of cases cannot control for all influential factors, so one cannot be as confident in their findings. This is especially the case given that a natural experiment commonly compares only two cases, not the hundreds or thousands of cases compared through more controlled experiments. Moreover, it can be very difficult to find appropriate natural experiments to answer all types of research questions.

Ideographic/Within-Case Methods

Whereas statistical methods and experimental methods compare multiple cases in pursuit of nomothetic explanations, several social scientific

methods specialize in providing case-specific—or ideographic—insight. Such analyses explore either what happened in a particular case or what the characteristics of a particular case were through in-depth analysis of the case. Authors pursuing this type of analysis commonly believe that extreme social complexity caused by free will and multicausality prevents researchers from making discoveries that can be extended across a large set of cases. They therefore strive either to pursue findings that can be applied to only one case or to show how social processes unraveled very differently in multiple cases.

It is possible to pursue **ideographic explanations** through comparative methods, as comparisons might not highlight commonalities or strong relationships. Most commonly, however, researchers employ within-case methods when making ideographic explanations. Two prominent examples of within-case methodologies are ethnographic and historical methods.

Ethnographic Methods

Ethnographic methods are the dominant method within anthropology, and a substantial minority of researchers in sociology and political science use them. They are commonly used for the study of culture within a particular group of people, ranging from elites, to ethnic groups, to criminals, to students.

Ethnographic methods have two distinct components. The first is concerned with how to gather data through participant observation and interviews. Much of this literature discusses appropriate ways to find subjects, observe and interact with subjects, and gather data from subjects. For example, a researcher using ethnographic methods to analyze elite culture has to figure out sites to observe elite culture, how to find elites for interviews, how to conduct the interviews, and what questions to ask. The second component deals with how to analyze and present the findings. These ethnographic analyses lay out and interpret the data, thereby giving an account of the phenomenon under analysis. The analyses usually take the form of a narrative description and commonly present photographs, texts, and tables. Unlike statistics and controlled experiments, ethnographic analyses commonly are not formalized, and the ultimate insight gained from them depends on both the quality of the data and the analytical skills of the researcher. Such skills primarily involve making sense of the data, recognizing patterns, and being able to present the findings clearly. Interpersonal skills are also very important as they are vital to the data collection process.

Two notable strengths of ethnographic methods are its ability to offer descriptive insight into the characteristics of a phenomenon and its ability to analyze complex phenomena. Most notably, ethnographic methods are

usually the best means of gaining insight into motivations, perspectives, values, rituals, and other factors commonly considered as subcomponents of culture. These advantages help to explain their dominance in anthropology and why researchers using ethnographic methods commonly take a more interpretivist approach. Along with these advantages, however, ethnographic methods also have three notable disadvantages. First, ethnographic methods cannot be used for many historical phenomena, as the past cannot be observed directly and relevant individuals might not be available for interview. So, while ethnographic methods would be an excellent source of insight into the causes and characteristics of the French Revolution, they cannot now be used for this research question. Second, ethnography pursues case-specific insight for a particular time and place and is therefore poorly suited for nomothetic explanation. This is not to say that ethnography cannot provide generalizable insight. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman's (1956) *Union Democracy*, for example, offers a superb ethnographic analysis of the International Typographical Union and offers generalizable insight into the mechanism underlying Michels's (1911/1968) iron law of oligarchy. Still, gaining nomothetic insight from ethnography requires that one either perform multiple ethnographic analyses or link the ethnographic analysis of one case to a larger theory or literature. Third, ethnographic methods require willing participants, and it can be very difficult to find willing participants when researchers want to analyze delicate topics which reveal the private lives of individuals. Moreover, even if a researcher finds participants willing to allow her or him to analyze sensitive issues, it is possible that the participants will modify their behavior when being observed or respond inaccurately to interview questions in order to portray themselves to the researcher in the most positive light. Researchers must therefore critically assess the validity of the data they collect through ethnographic methods.

Historical Methods

Historical methods, also known as historiography, are the most common analytic techniques used in the discipline of history. They are generally used to explore either what happened at a particular time and place or what the characteristics of a phenomenon were like at a particular time and place. Similar to ethnographic methods, methodological discussions of historiography focus on both data collection and data analysis. The first includes guidelines for finding historical data, as this is a major concern of historians. The second component consists of guidelines for interpreting and presenting data. These guidelines generally describe how to judge the validity of historical data but rarely discuss how the data is analyzed once its validity has been assessed. This overlooked