Applied Comparative Methods

Masters in Public Policy and Social Change (MAPS), 2012-2013

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Aims and Objectives

This course provides an introduction to the theories, principles and practicalities of conducting comparative public and social policy research. It sets out the rationale for its use, outlines the key methodological decisions in designing and conducting a comparative study and discusses the strengths and limitations of the approach. Upon completion of the course, students should be able to demonstrate their understanding of the key issues involved in comparative research and their capacity to design and critique a study using comparative methods.

In the majority of classes, articles from the recent literature will be used to illustrate how comparative methods can be applied in different research contexts. As these articles will form the basis for group discussions in class, students are asked to familiarise themselves with the material in advance.

Assessment

Students are required to submit a short paper. The titles, length and date will be agreed in the first class.
Course Outline and Syllabus

1. The Role of Comparative Research

This introductory lecture focuses on the key position that comparative methods hold in public and social policy research. It examines why comparative research is important, what can be compared and what purpose it serves and will discuss various theoretical perspectives on comparative methods, arguing that a comparative approach must be guided by theory-driven research questions. The class will also discuss the challenges of developing theoretical concepts and typologies in public policy research and outline strategies for concept formulation.

Required Reading:


Additional References:


2. Comparative Strategy: The Logic of Comparative Research

This class discusses important concerns in designing a comparative study, namely the logic of comparative research, the scale of analysis, the selection of cases, as well as considerations of necessity, sufficiency and causal complexity. The lecture will focus on the advantages and disadvantages of using small-N comparisons (such as detailed knowledge and “thick description” of the cases considered), but will also address the disadvantages (limited generalisability of results) and the problems often inherent in small-N research designs (e.g. the problem of selection bias).

Required Reading:


Additional References:


3. **Alternative Designs: Large-N studies and Single Cases**

Although not always considered part of the comparative method, large-N studies are valuable for making inferences and achieving generalisability and because more options for statistical testing are also available. However, the number of variables that can be included in a statistical model can often be quite limited and the extent to which variables and indeed the cases (e.g. countries) are comparable is often open to question. In contrast, though single case studies and historical cases are limited in terms of generalisability, they are often used for validating theories, for studying deviant cases (outliers) for theory generation or as the first step in a comparative study. This lecture considers the advantages and disadvantages of both large-N studies and single cases and discusses approaches for overcoming the inherent challenges involved.

**Required Reading:**


**Additional References:**


4. Analytical Strategies

This lecture outlines various quantitative and qualitative techniques for analysing comparative data. The lecture will outline the logic behind each technique, how they work and their limitations.

Required Reading:


Additional References:


5. Comparative Methods in Perspective

This concluding class considers the role of comparative analysis in a wider perspective, examining its role, and limitations, in influencing policy decisions and in providing insights into public and social policy. The lecture also offers insights into how to write up a comparative methods section in writing publications and research proposals.

Required Reading:


Additional References:


