

COMPARATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH : characteristics

What is CSR?

- The study of a social issue in more than 1 country that compares a situation or occurrence based on different (social, economic, historical...) contexts.
- A common comparative framework acts as the basis for research development.
- The potential of the data produced is said to lead to a sharper understanding of reality.

What is a comparative framework?

- The way by which a comparison is structured and presented
- Identifies the variables to be compared including how they will be compared

Why compare societies?

- To classify social phenomena;
- To see if common social phenomena have the same or similar causes;
- To provide an analytical framework for studying similarities and differences;
- To (better) understand how different societies function.
- ...

What is comparable (in social professional work¹)?

- Welfare systems
- Infrastructures and legislative frameworks
- Cultural determinants
- Social groups
- Organisational arrangements
- Responsibilities and tasks
- Systems of education

¹ Adams, A., Erath, P. and Shardlow, S. M. (Eds.) (2001). Key Themes in European Social Work. Theory, Practice, Perspectives. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.

What is the added value of CRS?

- Widens perceptions;
- Stimulates discussions to clarify issues;
- Develops new competencies;
- Disseminates knowledge;
- Identifies knowledge gaps;
- Promotes new ideas/insight to common concerns;
- Reflection point;
- Sharpens analysis;
- Establishes new contacts;
- Promotes complementary action.

What are the common difficulties of CRS?

- Cultural barriers;
- Language barriers;
- Lack of comparable data;
- Different (understanding of) terms and concepts;
- Different research traditions.

How can common difficulties be overcome²?

- Develop a sound knowledge of the (international, national, regional, local; cultural, social, political, economic...) conditions that shape the topic of the cross-national research;
- Develop a sound comparative framework;
- Research into a specific organisation, sector, part of society, etc., rather than an entire society;
- Identify comparable groupings and focus on the broad characteristics of the most detailed information available;
- Look towards international organisations for comparable statistics and data on welfare, i.e., EU, UN, ILO, WHO, UNESCO, OECD.
- Be willing to compromise (especially in a transnational project team);
- Be alert to cultural interference;

² <http://www.soc.surey.ac.uk/sru/SRU13.html> (25.01.03)

Developing a comparative framework

The intention is to operationalise your concepts but since concepts are subjective, mental images that cannot be measured, it is necessary to first identify indicators (a set of criteria that reflect the concept) that are then transformed into variables (measurable 'things' that operationalise the original concepts).

Concept → Indicator → Variable

Concept: Social exclusion

Potential **Indicator**

- Participation in (local) decision-making processes

Potential **Variable**

- Number of active voters
- Number of residents in local committees
- Number of ethnic minorities in parent-teacher associations
- ...

Concept: Effectiveness (e.g., of a local integration project)

Potential **Indicators**

- Level of participation by local residents
- Changes in the physical neighbourhood environment
- Changed relations between residents
- Changed levels of street violence
- ...

Potential **Variables**