

Comparative analysis for theory development: Reflections on a study of women’s empowerment*

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Abstract

Methodological texts about comparative work have focused overwhelmingly on controlled comparisons aimed at causal inference. To show the range of possible goals and approaches, this piece reflects on our own choices while studying the state and women’s empowerment in Norway, Japan, and the United States. We show how our research design evolved with our theoretical thinking, and explain that we did not select comparative “cases,” but rather diverse *contexts* with interesting variation in our main concept of interest. Finally, we discuss how we constructed multi-cultural research teams to take advantage of insider and outsider perspectives during fieldwork.

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1 Introduction

Comparison is, directly or indirectly, *the* defining characteristic of political science. Comparison enables us to discover what is unusual about any given individual, event, group, process, or context. Comparing sharpens our awareness of assumptions that underlie our theoretical thinking, makes it clearer how concepts should be defined and operationalized, and may change what questions we ask. How do we choose what to compare and how can we defend our decisions? As the introduction to this newsletter points out, methodological texts have focused overwhelmingly on designing controlled comparisons aimed at testing causal theories across a small number of cases. But comparative studies often have other goals, such as developing theoretical arguments, particularly so if they form part of a multi-method project. There is a discrepancy between the types of research designs scholars typically teach and the type of research they actually conduct.¹

In this piece, we respond to the editors' call for a clearer articulation of methodological choices related to comparative research designs by reflecting on our choices in an ongoing study of women's empowerment and what they may reveal about comparative work more generally. We begin by discussing how our project developed theoretically and how our research design changed in response. As our research moved from one stage to the next, new questions emerged, and different designs became more appropriate. In the current stage of our project, our aim is theory development rather than theory testing. Specifically, we want to gain a better understanding of the concept of "empowerment," including its nuances and boundaries, in different parts of the world. Consequently, we have conducted fieldwork in three countries: Norway, Japan, and the United States. These countries are not "cases"—understood as specific instances of a clearly defined class of events ([George and Bennett, 2005](#), p. 17)—but rather *contexts* where we find interesting variation in our concept of

¹See [George and Bennett \(2005, p. 10\)](#) on this point.

interest. Finally, we discuss how the cultural knowledge we need for qualitative fieldwork should guide, but not constrain, studies aimed at theory development. In our work, we have found that deliberately building a multi-cultural research team helps build local knowledge and leverage insider and outsider advantages across different contexts.

2 A study of “empowerment”

In one of our ongoing research projects we aim to understand more about the great variety of state-led efforts to “empower” women. Our goal is to identify mechanisms that can improve women’s lives and study their effects. As a result of our prior research, we were somewhat disenchanted with research focused on top-down laws and policies alone. Htun’s work on the rights revolution for women, for example, does not explicitly analyze whether policy changes to combat violence and harassment, reduce discrimination at work, promote equality in the family, or improve public support for caregiving actually produces changes on the ground (Htun and Weldon, 2018). Jensenius’ work on marginalized communities in India shows that, despite decades of quotas in politics, educational institutions, and jobs, and a slew of programs aimed at improving their socio-economic status, historically stigmatized groups are still disadvantaged both socially and economically (Jensenius, 2017). These combined experiences make it clear that participation in political parties and elected office, formal laws ensuring equal rights, and other state efforts to change entrenched social inequalities are not enough to deliver inclusion and justice to disadvantaged groups.

Existing research has shown that a principal driver of women’s empowerment has been their economic agency, which we understand as their disposition and capacity to make autonomous economic choices. Studies show that economic agency enables women to contest oppressive gender norms and change gender relations from the ground up. For example, women’s labor force participation increases their political participation, shifts the division

of labor in the household, and improves fertility rates in the Global North while reducing them in the Global South. Women who control property can exit, or threaten to exit, abusive relationships, and exert more control over institutions that shape gendered ideologies, such as schools, the media, and religious organizations (Agarwal, 1994; Hashemi et al., 1996; Hakim, 1996; Agarwal, 1997; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2008; Rosenbluth, 2006; Okin, 1989; Duflo, 2012; UN, 2015; Panda and Agarwal, 2005).

3 An evolving research design

To explore the associations between laws and women’s economic agency, we worked with the Women, Business, and the Law dataset developed by the World Bank (WB, 2013), which includes information about a large variety of legal provisions in 143 countries. Following the multi-dimensional approach to gender outlined in Htun and Weldon (2018), we developed indices on constraining and enabling laws, including restrictions on women’s legal capacity, discrimination in the workplace, and the extent to which the state promotes work-life balance (Htun et al., 2019). Using these indices, we explored the correlation between legislative choices and various macro-level indicators of women’s economic agency: access to bank accounts, participation in firm ownership, participation in the labor force, share of women workers in the informal sector, and the gender wage gap. This analysis revealed, not surprisingly, that countries with fewer restrictions on women’s legal capacity tend to have higher numbers of women with bank accounts, more firms where women participated as owners, and higher female labor force participation (Htun et al., 2019). However, the associations between our indicators of agency and laws regulating women’s work and publicly-paid parental leave are weaker. Moreover, the great variation in women’s agency among countries with similar legal environments makes it clear that laws tell only a small part of the story. A great deal of action shaping patterns of women’s agency takes place *within* countries, and is

hard to see when we conduct studies *across* countries. We needed to conduct within-country research to understand this variation better.

Our cross-country work thus led us toward a different line of investigation, focused on understanding more about the effects of legal changes and policy interventions on gender norms, and women and men’s behavior within countries. We have separate sub-projects looking at how Mexico’s laws to guarantee women a life free from violence influence experiences of violence, perceptions of violence, and women’s likelihood of reporting violent episodes to public authorities ([Htun and Jensenius, 2018](#)); how mandatory, universal sexual misconduct training at the University of New Mexico shapes rape myths, gender stereotypes, conceptions of assault and harassment, and willingness to report violations among students ([Htun et al., 2018](#)); and about how political change in Burma affects attitudes and practices on gender and women’s agency (Htun and Jensenius, in progress). These projects are all multi-method studies within countries, and do not involve an explicit comparison across these countries. However, the insights we gain from each of these studies are contributing to overall theoretical thinking about how people’s awareness of their “right to have rights” gradually takes hold and compels changes in social relations.

As our theoretical thinking developed through these different studies, we began to consider the implications of our story about the importance of individual agency. If having access to more resources implies that women have greater agency, and the process of gaining agency is empowerment, what happens when women—or a significant share of women—reach the endpoint of having access to a lot of resources? Does this mean they are empowered? The experience of rich countries today shows that even when liberal laws and access to resources bring about considerable economic agency, there are still many challenges. Across the Global North, there is considerable inequality among women: many on the lower end of the distribution of income and wealth are locked in a struggle to provide for themselves and their families. However, women with considerable economic agency also suffer, from sexual

harassment and abuse, less pay for the same work, biased and discriminatory treatment, and trouble juggling the demands of family and care work. Moreover, there are many ideas of what an “empowered” life looks like.

These experiences raise the questions: what is empowerment? Is the dual-income household with co-participation in care work an ideal model of social life? And if not, why do we care about legal reform, political participation, social mobilization, and other mechanisms to promote it? Our own confusion—even after many years of research on the topic—led us to decide that we want to do more work on the concept of empowerment, what it means in different contexts, and how these different ideas animate the ways that states and societies put empowerment into practice. In other words, although our overarching research interest is to study the effects of different state interventions, this particular part of our research aims to understand more about variation in the *meaning* of empowerment, since these different meanings may shape state interventions and their effects.

4 Comparing to explore the boundaries of a concept

To explore differences in the meaning of women’s empowerment—which may matter for the main causal patterns we are interested in—we chose a comparative approach. We decided to take a deeper look at three wealthy countries that have few formal restrictions on women’s legal capacity and little state-sanctioned discrimination in the workplace, as well as some degree of public support for parenting, but seemingly different discourses about empowerment: Norway, Japan, and the United States.

Each country holds a particular appeal. Following much of the gender and politics literature, Htun had long seen Norway as the “paradise” of gender and social equality, due to its extensive social provision, relatively high degree of class equality, and the widespread commitment of virtually all political actors to gender justice. The United States is compelling

due to its many puzzles and contradictions, including a stratification of gender equality by class groups (Putnam, 2016; Esping-Andersen, 2009) and inconsistent progress toward gender justice by issue area (Htun and Weldon, 2018). Japan stands out among the rich countries for its seemingly conservative approach and outcomes: a history of official, enforced maternalism, relatively low labor force participation, low fertility, few women in positions of power, and exclusion of women from imperial succession (Estévez-Abe, 2013; Htun et al., 2017).

Some people may say our study resembles a controlled comparison of similarly-placed countries that differ in their state approach to empowerment. However, we did not choose to study these three countries because we wanted to make a causal argument about the effects of one state’s approach compared to the others’. Nor do we believe they are similar in all other ways besides their legal approach to the empowerment of women.

Following the framework of Gerring (2017, p. 41), the “case-selection strategy” that most resembles our approach is analysis of a set of cases that are diverse with respect to their “descriptive features,” in order to make primarily descriptive inferences. However, the “cases” in our study are not units from a well-defined universe of a class of events. We picked them because they offer us vastly different *contexts* that furnish insights into women’s empowerment. Our goal is theory development, not “description.” Further, we did not choose our diverse contexts on the basis of values on a single descriptive feature. Our prior knowledge of the many characteristics of these countries made us think that they would provide us with interesting stories about the content and boundaries of the empowerment concept. As such, our choices fit somewhat uneasily within common frameworks describing different types of “case selection.”

Since our goal is theory development, we look for interesting variation to inform our theoretical thinking. Each context we study in this project has helped to bring out particular and unique features of the others, while revealing connections within contexts we thought

we already knew well. By conducting fieldwork in each context, we have gained a better sense of the nature and degree of social contestation over women’s empowerment. We have seen how gender, class, and race equality relate to one another in different ways. We have learned that people’s views on women’s empowerment are connected to their views of the good life, as well as how they evaluate the proper role of the state in citizen’s lives and as a mechanism for social coordination. We have traced the connection between government goals vis--vis women’s liberation and other state priorities, and observed how these goals sometimes compete and sometimes complement each other. In addition, the fieldwork has alerted us to our own cultural biases related to women, gender, the state, and the economy (more on this below).

5 Multi-cultural research teams and collaborative field-work

[Koivu and Hinze \(2017\)](#) emphasize the lack of attention, in methods texts, to the “human element” of selecting what to study based on a researcher’s prior knowledge and skill-set. They point out that people see personal reasons for making a selection as almost unprofessional. When it comes to developing a research design to develop theory that takes into account variation in cultural meaning, the opposite is true. How can someone with no prior knowledge of a context conduct fieldwork there and say something important and persuasive?

At the same time, there is great learning in being exposed to new ideas and important advantages to having an outsider’s perspective. We consciously designed our study to maximize our insider and outsider advantages. In the United States, we focused on New Mexico where Htun has spent much of her life. Jensenius has spent considerable time in the US, but is quite unfamiliar with the New Mexico context, and her accent makes it evident that she is a foreigner. In Norway, we worked in Oslo which was a new context for Htun but where

Jensenius grew up. In Tokyo, Jensenius was clearly an outsider, Htun was somewhat more acculturated due to a one-year fellowship in 2006-2007, and we recruited a PhD student from Tokyo, Melanie Sayuri Dominguez, as a collaborator.

By conducting fieldwork collaboratively, we could leverage both an insider and an outsider advantage in real time. As insiders, we had easier access to sources, command of the native language, and greater understanding of subtle cultural cues. As outsiders, we were able to pose out-of-the-box questions and notice patterns and particularities that an insider rarely thinks of.

Including both insider and outsider perspectives on the same team, at the same time, allowed us to push farther in interviews and in participant-observation situations than we would have been able to do on our own. It allowed us to achieve a level of intimacy with our research subjects while also drawing out the narratives people commonly save to explain themselves to dissimilar others.

What is more, this research technique helped us become more aware of and challenge some of our own cultural biases that shape our research. We were, for instance, fascinated to discover the extent to which Norwegians (including Jensenius) take the role of the state for granted when it comes to solving collective action problems and structuring people's lives. Htun, while enamored with the generous welfare policies for working parents, reacted intuitively with more skepticism to the ways in which the state's one-size-fits-all policy solutions limit individual choice.

Meanwhile, Jensenius questioned the ideal of a leaning-in form of feminism that Htun takes more for granted, as well as the dichotomous choice—between career and care work—many women face. For Jensenius, an ideal of “empowerment” that implies outsourcing care work to other women, such as low-income immigrant women, seemed unattractive and unjust.

6 Concluding thoughts

When scholars decide what to study for comparative analyses, they should make choices according to their particular research goals. Since the publication of *Designing Social Inquiry* in 1994 (King et al., 1994), much of the research design advice taught to graduate student as part of their methodological training has presumed that their general goal is to test theories about a causal relationship among variables. However, most empirical studies involving the in-depth comparison of a few cases or contexts have the goal of theory development. And theory development consists of many different stages and parts, including building intuition and contextual knowledge, conceptualizing and operationalizing key variables, exploring causal mechanisms, scope conditions of arguments, gaining insight from deviant cases, and so on.

When the goal of comparison is theory development, scholars do not have to stick to only one set of units to compare in a single research project. Different parts of the theory development exercise might call for the comparison of different things. For example, even if one's overarching goal is to develop a causal argument, this does not mean that the selection of what to study in a qualitative part of the study should be designed as a quasi-experiment. Rather, one should aim to find interesting variation that may further the particular goal for that part of the project. Especially in multi-method projects, it is common for the different parts of the study to play different roles, and it is ok that they are designed differently.

What is more, the research design can and should evolve with the theoretical thinking. If your theoretical thinking changes, so should your research design. George and Bennett (2005, p. 73) note that one might need “some iteration” in the process of designing and implementing qualitative research. This is an under-statement. Very often, researchers start out with a research design based on their theoretical priors, but as they start conducting their work, their understanding of key concepts, important variables, and even what the research question should be, changes. It is important to start out with a plan and to provide

a sensible justification for that plan, but it is also fine to modify that plan as one learns more. Whereas a static research design makes sense for some forms of theory testing—the extreme case being pre-registration of data collection and analysis plans for experiments—this would stifle the intellectual contributions from a project focused primarily on theory development.

Scholars don't need to know everything about their theory in advance. It can be rigorous, transparent, and scientific to learn as you go along. Comparative work helps open your mind and extend your horizons. Let its insights enrich your theory.

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