Comparative Methods

October 2017

RDS-AF

Outline

- Where does this fit in?
- What is the comparative method?
- When is it used?
- Practitioner's Guide to Implementation
- Threats to Consider
- Conclusion

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- If the research question demands an **explanation** of a phenomenon involving two similar units which differ in some respect, then the comparative method is a method you should consider using to answer the question

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- *Descriptive Inference* - Roughly, what the observed tells us about the unobserved

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- Formally, we use the comparative method when we want to explain **variation** *within* or *across* **units**

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    - Iraq and Syria
    - Former Soviet States

Two Common Methods

- **Mill's Method of Difference** - Compare two or more cases that are identical in every respect other than the hypothesized cause (X) and the observed effect (Y). The logic is: if the cases under comparison are identical in every other way other than the hypothesized cause, then the cause is most likely responsible for the difference in the effect.

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- **Mill's Method of Agreement** - Compare two or more cases that are identical in terms of the hypothesized cause (X) and the observed effect (Y), but differ along every other factor (Z). The logic is: if two cases under comparison are different in every way other than the hypothesized cause, then the cause is most likely responsible for the observed effect.

Two Common Methods

Mill's Method of Difference or Most Similar Systems Design:

Case	X	Z	Z	Y
A	1	1	0	1
B	0	1	0	0

Table: Mill's Method of Difference

Mill's Method of Agreement or Most Different Systems Design:

Case	X	Z	Z	Y
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Explaining the Variables

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- Y represents the outcome variable or the phenomenon we are seeking to explain

Mill's Method of Difference

Practitioner's Guide: Mill's Method of Difference

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- Step 5: Identify the first case based on your substantive knowledge and your tentative explanation

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- Example: Democratic breakdown and survival in Latin American states (Mainwaring and Perez-Liñan)

Case	Policy Preferences (X)	GDP (Z)	Political System (Z)	Breakdown (Y)
Chile	Radical	Moderate	Presidential	Breakdown

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Repeating the Process: Mill's Method of Agreement

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France 1789	Yes	Yes	Yes	Revolt

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- **External Validity** - The results apply to other cases beyond the scope of the study

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- You or your customer want to know more than just what happened

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- Statistics are the standard for showcasing the effect of one variable on another (causal *inference*)
- However, the methods and techniques outlined here are a great start for beginners and will put you on the right track toward careful research