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MacInnes, John

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

MacInnes, J. (2006). Category and comparison across what kind of frontier? In J. Harkness (Ed.), *Conducting cross-national and cross-cultural surveys : papers from the 2005 meeting of the international workshop on Comparative Survey Design and Implementation (CSDI)* (pp. 101-114). Mannheim: GESIS-ZUMA. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-49132-7>

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CATEGORY AND COMPARISON ACROSS WHAT KIND OF FRONTIER?¹

JOHN MACINNES

1 Category and Comparison

Both variables and the values they take can be thought of as categories. Comparison across categories (e.g. in the sense of comparing the proportion of cases within a category of a variable) is the basic building brick of any social science methodology, including so-called ‘qualitative’ ones. What tends to change is simply the nature of the categories and how information about them is collected (or how variables are measured). A category can be thought of as boundary drawn around a set of items possessing a common characteristic; e.g. human beings who are males, people born in 1956, natives of Aberdeen, the currently married, parents with one child, possessors of higher degrees, non-voters in the last election, part-time workers, people employed in the public sector, think of themselves as equally Scottish, British and European, residents of Spain, inhabitants of Barcelona. These dozen categories probably uniquely identify me. Unfortunately, even crudely understanding or modeling my attitudes or behaviour would require dozens more.

2 The Specificity of ‘Comparative’ Research

If we understand social science research in this way, then the only distinctive feature of ‘comparative’ research is that one of the boundaries used to circumscribe a category is the frontier of a state territory. This is rather idiosyncratic. It is not intuitively obvious why comparisons, say, across different government regions or nations *within* a state territory (including nations in which the language normally used changes, or government regions with different legal, health or education systems etc.) are qualitatively different to comparisons *between* states (including states joined by language, policy contexts or historical evolution – e.g. Ireland and the UK – or states that are together part of some higher level economic and political unit such as the European Union).

1 This article was produced as part of research financed by the Plan Nacional I+D+ and Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia (Spain) (Ref. SEJ 2005-03764/GEOG).

3 The Social Construction and Interpretation of Categories and the Inevitability of the ‘Emic’

All categories are socially constructed, (as opposed to that which they represent which may or may not also be so constructed). As such they are by definition open to diverse interpretation. Some, however, are more socially constructed than others, insofar as some can be readily connected to physical or social processes that operate independently of the observer or categoriser, while others cannot. There is no better example of the first than that cited with typical humour by the late Ian Craib (1998):

while I might conceive of my liver in all kinds of exotic ways, these can never change how it actually functions. However, as medical knowledge develops ever more sophisticated categories that enable it to ‘model’ my liver’s operation, doctors might well come to ‘understand’ it well enough to look after it, repair or even replace it.

Age in years last birthday is a fairly straightforward set of categories, about which it is fairly easy to establish shared and agreed meaning between researcher, the subjects of the research and the audience(s) for the research results (at least for those with some conception of calendrical time).

Conversely, other categories can, by definition, lie only in the eye of the beholder, whether or not the latter is aware of this, because their existence cannot be held to ‘objective’ empirical test. Gender identity, class or employment characteristics, for example, are likely to generate discussion about what categories might or might not be appropriate or even exist at all, and how they ought best to be defined and understood.

Linguistics, following Pike (1954) has a useful terminology for these two forms of category: the former are *etic* and the latter are *emic*. I think it is often useful to further divide the ‘emic’ category to specifically identify those categories that suffer not only disagreement about their definition, but whose very existence in the first place stems from the logical impossibility of defining them. (*Why* such categories might exist lies beyond the scope of this paper. Essentially the argument is that such categories allow people to simultaneously assert and deny category membership by discursively camouflaged shifts in definition. I have made such a case for the category ‘gender’ in MacInnes (1998b). Try, for example, defining ‘masculinity’. The category depends on a connexion to the category ‘male’ that must also be denied for the category to have any sense in the first place. Goffman gives a good example when discussing ‘masculinity’:

There is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and recent record in sports. (1963: 128)

Translating his argument into our terminology we could simply say that no American or any other male corresponds to the category 'masculine' as comprehensively defined.

A prime example of this second type of emic category is that of 'nation'. Academic observers are happy to admit (whether or not they think that 'nations' exist) that no comprehensive definition of the category is possible. Not only is there routine disagreement about what might constitute the boundaries of a particular or any nation, but also about what class of phenomena nations are, or indeed whether they 'exist' at all. The existence of the category thus serves less to classify objects, than to obscure the fact that they *cannot* be classified. As we shall see, this can lead both survey researchers and others into trouble if they then attempt to use these pseudo categories in the normal way. I shall argue below that the concept of a 'society' empirically bounded by a state frontier, is very close to, if not synonymous with, such a category of 'nation'.

4 Shared Understanding of Categories

A common problem in all social research is that different 'categories' of respondents may have systematically distinct understandings of the meaning of the 'categories' that we wish to use in researching them. Unless we can control this we will not be able to separate out the effects of variation in respondent interpretation of the categories used in the questions we ask, and variation in the substantive answers they give. However, although this is a problem routinely raised when conducting research using respondents from different states, frequently speaking different languages (so that a lot of effort goes into accurate translation across languages for example) it is present in research of any kind, because it arises from the nature of *any* respondent variation, not just variation in the language respondents speak. We might expect men and women, or the currently employed and others, or old and young to also to have distinct understandings of categories which vary systematically with these characteristics. The difficulty of controlling adequately for this is usually the rationale for ethnographic or more 'qualitative' approaches in the first place. Such approaches cannot 'solve' this problem, but they should make us more alert to issues of the variable interpretation of meaning in *any* context, not only those routinely understood as 'comparative' in the sense of comparisons between states.

5 States as Etic Categories

The specific methodological issue faced by comparative research is therefore the nature of the state frontier as a category and ways it might be interpreted. State frontiers are a resolutely 'etic' category in the sense that states jealously guard their territorial sovereignty over even quite useless bits of land. For example Spain and Morocco recently engaged in belligerent confrontation over a tiny Mediterranean island inhabited by a few goats.

Crossing state boundaries formally requires passports and visas. The writ of state specific law stops abruptly at the frontier and so on. Trying to convince an immigration official that the frontier they police lies only in their imagination, is open to diverse interpretations or is a matter for discussion would be a fruitless task.

However state frontiers are emic in the sense that as a result of wars, revolutions or other political change, they shift and develop over time. Indeed the category of 'sovereign state territory' itself is thoroughly modern, superseding the parcelisation of sovereignty by status and spatially overlapping jurisdictions characteristic of previous ages (see e.g. Anderson, B., 1992; Anderson, P., 1978; Billig, 1995; Bloch, 1939). States are hardly less mortal than human beings, witness the map of virtually any area of the world save North and South America over the last half century or so. This does raise, however, the question of what constitutes a 'state', or what our basic units of analysis in comparative research comprise. What fifteen years ago were the units of Czechoslovakia, the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic are now The Czech and Slovak Republics and the united Germany. If it makes sense to continue to treat former East and West Germany as separate units of analysis, would it not, with appropriate hindsight, have been equally logical to do the same with what were to become the Czech and Slovak republics? Would it make similar sense to do so with the warring remnants of the former Republic of Yugoslavia? Should we anticipate potential future developments and insist that Scotland, Euskadi, Catalonia, Quebec and Flanders are similarly always analysed separately? But why stop there? Closer scrutiny will reveal literally hundreds of separatist movements within modern 'established' states, some with real chance of political success, some the cherished vision of a handful of cranks.

If state frontiers shift across space (often dragging refugees in their wake) so does what they contain change over time. Ought we to treat as continuous and obvious categories, for example, the states of central and Eastern Europe before and after the revolutions of 1989? After Ceausescu's murder, Rumania became a different 'place' in a very real sense, without its geographical location changing a centimetre. How substantial does 'regime change' have to be to establish the existence of a different unit? Comparative analysis would be in trouble if we insisted that we treated states as distinct units each time their government changed. It might be equally misleading, however, to insist on territorial continuity in the face of dramatic political or social shifts. On election night in the UK in May 1997, more than one observer argued that the results were the poorest for the Conservative Party since the election of 1832. In strictly arithmetical terms this may have been the case, but could such a comparison have any worth, given that almost every aspect of political life bar the name of the party had been profoundly transformed in the intervening 165 years?

6 States, Societies and Wishful (Emic) Sociological Thinking

Thus, while at any one point in time almost all state frontiers are etic (in the sense that it is not difficult to establish 'objective' agreement about where they lie, or about the status of competing claims about where they ought to lie, so that categorisation of survey respondents to different state territories is straightforward) social scientists have an unwelcome habit of imposing a series of rather emic interpretations of their significance. The most important of these, and one which lies behind the specific problem identified above of category permanence, is the idea, rarely made explicit, but relentlessly followed, that a state is in some sense a self contained 'society', such that comparing respondents in different states allows us to compare different 'societies'.

7 Society as a Category Without Boundaries

By logical definition, society is not a category and has no 'boundaries', spatial or temporal, as 'society' is, at heart, the process of crossing them. Society is inexorably incontinent and promiscuous. Since the invention of a robust oral tradition or the invention of writing the living have been able to communicate with those long dead, or those so geographically remote or simply numerous that they might never meet them face-to-face. In contrast to its mortal human members each anchored in a mortal physical body that can only ever be in one place at a time (even university professors), 'society' is infinite. It is essentially, as Benedict Anderson has put it (1991) an 'imagined' community.

That is not to say that all social relations are equal, or that everyone is connected to everyone who has ever lived. Social relations, face-to-face, or face to paper, screen or loud-speaker, cluster and concentrate in time and space. However, the problem comes when we imagine that this cluster and concentration is so great that it neatly corresponds to state boundaries, each relatively hermetic, so that we can therefore make straightforward comparisons across 'societies' plural, as if these were sensible categories.

States are increasingly 'porous', as illustrated by their ever more energetic but largely unsuccessful attempts to control cross-frontier migration. (Anyone doubting this should compare US expenditure on policing the Mexican border with figures for the numbers crossing it). Visual, aural, oral and bodily communication (books, letters, television, films, radio, newspapers, internet, telephony, private and public transport) are ever faster, cheaper and accessible and not only pay ever less attention to state boundaries, but even escape what control states bother to muster altogether (the internet). State intellectual autarky is theoretically possible (Myanmar, North Korea) but comes at the enormous cost of virtually renouncing any economic or social development. In Europe state interference with such communication

risks courting derision (e.g. ‘Spycatcher’ in the UK) and almost certainly guarantees maximum coverage for the ideas they might attempt to suppress. This is not to deny that, for example, globalised communications corporations such as the Murdoch empire do not shape or even control the news agenda. However any such control hardly coincides with state boundaries. Politicians court Murdoch, not *vice versa*. Economic markets, never totally ‘national’ are now more than ever global. Ideas have always crossed state frontiers, as in the case of the major religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Judaism, or Islam.

This requires us to distinguish common sense notions of ‘society’ from scientific ones. The former virtually aligns societies, *plural*, with states. A scientific one would recognise that ‘society’, *singular*, has, always been spatially and temporally incontinent. In a sense we all inhabit distinct ‘societies’ and levels of sociation with concentric boundaries. State frontiers *may* be a significant or relevant boundary within this system, but only one among many.

Finally, once we make the mistake of assuming that distinct states are separate ‘societies’ there is another conceptual cliff off which some ‘comparative’ researchers willingly leap. Lacking either a time machine or reliable longitudinal data, it is tempting to assume that comparisons made across such individual societies at the same or similar points in time can reveal societies, plural, at different stages of evolution along a common historical path of ‘Society’ singular, such that we can read off longitudinal conclusions from transversal comparisons. This basic error is rampant in contemporary social science and I myself have made it many times (e.g. MacInnes 1998b).

The seventeenth century ‘patriarchalist’ Sir Robert Filmer was a supporter of the ‘Divine Right of Kings’ and political opponent of Hobbes. In the course of attacking what he correctly saw to be the mischievously radical and democratic implications of Hobbes’ ideas about *Leviathan* and self interest, he used an astute perception of the difference between a stock and a flow to lampoon the idea that ‘rights’ could ever be ‘natural’. Socially constructed, as opposed to divinely inspired, ‘rights’, identities or social statuses were inherently transversal in character, in contrast to the inherently longitudinal character of generational reproduction:

But where there is an equality by nature, there can be no superior power. There every infant at the hour it is born in, hath a like interest with the greatest and wisest man in the world. Mankind is like the sea, ever ebbing or flowing, every minute one is born another dies. Those that are the people this minute, are not the people the next minute. In every instant and point of time there is a variation. No one time can be indifferent for all mankind to assemble. (Filmer, 1991 [1680]: 142)

Modern social science threw out a rather valuable longitudinal baby with the ancienne regime bathwater when it adopted an implicit model of ‘society’ as an essentially transversal structure. Such a vision might have been required by democratic theory in search of

an 'indifferent' time for mankind to exercise its newly imagined rights, and it may have been profoundly strengthened by the nationalist imagination of societies (plural) moving up and down calendrical empty homogenous time (Anderson, 1991), but it is a simplification of the nature of society with various unfortunate results.

8 State Boundaries as a Proxy for Other Categories

Equating state boundaries with societies is not the only problematic interpretation of their meaning and significance. They are also routinely assumed to correspond, more or less, with such categories as: 'language'; 'nation'; 'norms', 'values'; 'laws'; 'political system'; 'shared history'; 'territory'; 'population'; 'people'; 'country'; 'race'; 'ethnie' and 'society'. There is a further, especially prestigious member of this list: 'culture'. Comparative social scientists ought to shun this concept wherever possible. It risks becoming an analytic dustbin into which we empty all variance that we cannot understand, or wish to save the effort of analysing, whether across space or time. It is a category that saves us the bother of thinking, but at the risk of condemning our analyses, no matter how advanced in other ways, to unwittingly reproduce banalities. These are deliberately strong words. As an instructive preliminary mental exercise, consider what, if anything, is *not* part of culture? Can we seriously pretend to undertake cross-'everything' analyses?

Some of the items in the above list, *some* of the time, in some places, correspond roughly with state boundaries. Much of the time none of them do. Nor is this simply a question of messiness at the margin: a handful of German speakers in France, stateless 'nations' within Spain or the UK, administrative decentralisation in federal or quasi-federal states, quaint historical detritus of old empires such as Gibraltar or the Spanish cities in Morocco; fiscal 'shelters' like Andorra or Monaco, or micro states like Luxembourg, and so on. Rather it returns us to the more fundamental question of what we think 'society' is, and thus the nature of our 'units' of analysis. Giving these units different pseudonyms does not solve the problem of what we in fact imagine them to comprise.

States manage their constituent populations. Regardless of their internal social, cultural, political or economic heterogeneity or complexity, from the perspective of the state and its need to secure legitimacy, collect taxes or provide services (health, education, security) this population constitutes a conceptually coherent unit of analysis or 'category'. There are some contexts in which such a category is also a relevant one for social researchers, e.g. policy analysis, or any analyses where some variable of interest corresponds with the boundary of the state. But just because states (or supra state bodies) fund most research, this should not lead us to assume any identity between their practical objectives and our analytical ones.

9 Reciprocal Failures of Imagination

At the heart of these issues lie two complementary errors in the way we sociologically imagine the nature of our respondents. The first, rather well known one, is the over-socialised conception of the individual made famous by Dennis Wrong over forty years ago (Wrong 1960). In such a vision, the respondent is little more than a cypher for the 'society' (aka population bounded by a state frontier) that the social survey seeks to describe. There is more to individuals than variance that the perfect survey would capture perfectly.

However, I think a rather greater problem facing comparative research, especially in the wake of that celebration of limitless subjectivity known as the 'cultural turn', is what we might call the over-individualised conception of society. The best succinct critique of this has come from a social psychologist. Although in the following excerpt Billig (1995) is discussing the concept of 'identity', his analysis applies perfectly to the argument I am putting forward here about 'society':

The problem starts when one expects to find 'identity' within the body or mind of the individual. This is to look in the wrong place for the operation of identity. ... To have a national identity is to have a way of talking about nationhood. ... only if people believe that they have national identities, will such homelands, and the world of national homelands, be reproduced. ... Nor is national identity to be explored by taking a scale from the psychological library of tests and administering it to a suitable populations. ... National identities are forms of social life, rather than internal psychological states; as such, they are ideological creations, caught up in the historical processes of nationhood.

10 Conflating State Boundaries and Society: (1) Britishness

On 11 March we interrupted our seminar in Madrid to stand for some minutes silence in homage to those massacred on their way to work by the terrorist bombs one year before. No less than one third of those murdered by these bombs were not Spanish nationals. One of the first acts of the government after the tragedy was to confer on them posthumously what they might well have struggled in vain to achieve while alive: Spanish citizenship. The government probably had other than purely altruistic motives for doing so: it made it much easier in the days that followed to speak as if everyone involved in the massacre were in some sense Spanish, the target had been Spain and the Spanish people and that these were also the appropriate object of 'international' solidarity and sympathy. It facilitated the government's role in joining in the public mourning for, and representation of, those victims it might previously have pursued as illegal immigrants. Those massacred on the Madrid commuter trains were certainly all 'Spanish' in the sense that on that fateful day they were in the Spanish state: just as we are today. However to transform them into

symbols of a category 'Spain', as both the bombers and the government did, is to oversimplify a more complex reality. Yet this is precisely the oversimplification we make if we treat respondents in a 'comparative' survey as simple 'representatives' of the 'societies' in which they find themselves. While writing up this paper for publication, bombs exploded in London, murdering a similarly diverse group of Londoners. The alleged suicide bombers, were, conversely, all 'British'. But apart from their place of birth, or rights to a passport, what is the specifically 'British' society that we might think of these bombers as pertaining to?

Senior and experienced politicians in Britain, who might be expected to know better, seem condemned to respond to an irresistible urge to pontificate about Britishness, Englishness and national identity. However this predilection is rather relevant for our purposes as it not only poses the question 'What is Britain?' (or generically 'what *is* a society or the content of a state boundary?') but is also open to some empirical scrutiny as we have extensive survey evidence about what people who happen to be located within the UK state boundary think of Britain and whether they see themselves as 'British'.

Talking about Britishness and (in earlier times) Englishness is an old habit that long predates John Major's risible efforts to crib George Orwell. Speaking to the Annual Dinner of the Royal Society of St George in 1924, Stanley Baldwin spoke of the 'Imperishable scent of old England' and three-quarters of a century after the majority of England's population lived in towns, waxed lyrical about 'the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been seen in England since England was a land, and may be seen in England long after the Empire has perished and every works in England has ceased to function, for centuries the one eternal sight of England' (Baldwin, 1926). Some civil servant might have told the poor Prime Minister about tractors. More recently the late Robin Cook championed Chicken Tikka as the imperishable scent of multicultural Britain, and Gordon Brown, in his prudent way, declared that the essence of Britishness was that it has no essence, being 'multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-national ... the United Kingdom has always been a country of different nations and thus of plural identities – a Welshman can be Welsh and British just as a Cornishman or woman is Cornish, English and British – and may be Muslim, Pakistani or Afro Caribbean, Cornish, English and British...'. This did not stop him proceeding to give a single definition to precisely that Britishness that he had just asserted could only be plural and diverse! (Brown, 1999; 2004).

I am sure you will have guessed by now where I am going. How is it that normally dexterous (at least with words) politicians are reduced to this sort of nonsense when talking about something that they ought to know about, given that they are supposed to run it? How might comparative analysts be expected to fare better? The answer of course, is to

drop that assumption that the etic 'UK state frontier' contains an emic 'Britain' or 'British society' populated by a universe of 'British' prospective survey respondents each carrying around a 'British' set of substantive values or way of understanding categories in their heads. National descriptors are an excellent example of our second type of emic category: the logically impossible one defying coherent definition. They exist to legitimate the existing territorial division of state sovereignties in the world (by implying that a society circumscribed by each border is a distinct 'assembly of mankind' in Filmer's terms which, sharing certain 'values', inhabits a distinctive state).

Indeed, we have good reason to think that in many contexts many may not think of themselves as British at all. Our evidence on this is also a good example of the way respondent understanding of categories is about much more than issues of translation across different languages. The UK Labour Force Survey (LFS) asks a number of questions about national and ethnic identity. The fact that it is a large scale quarterly survey allows us to merge the results of several successive waves (we would not imagine that respondent's ethnic or national identities are liable to change over the course of a few months) to produce a sample size large enough to allow us to investigate the differences between relatively small 'minority ethnic' groups. In what follows I use the results from 16 successive quarters from 2000 to 2004. I have excluded Northern Ireland (in some senses the most interesting part of the UK for such an exercise) since, following the census, the LFS uses different 'ethnic' categories there.

The LFS asks people what they think of as their 'national identity'. We might imagine that most would answer 'British'. If we break this down by ethnic group we find that those most likely to give this answer are those who were themselves born, or whose parents were born, in *Pakistan*. 'White' British, being rather more likely to choose the term English, are actually the least likely to say they are British. We can alter these results dramatically by simply posing the question a different way. If we present 'British' as an ethnic rather than national category, and ask which *ethnic* group people belong to, we find that almost all 'whites' except those born overseas, now *do* report thinking of themselves as British. We can get still different results by asking about birthplace and about 'nationality'. Table 2 summarises these results. Further analysis, not shown here, suggests that different types of respondent interpret questions about their Britishness quite differently. Some take such questions as being about their sense of Britishness *versus* their sense of Englishness, Scottishness or other such concentric spatial identities. Meanwhile, others, especially those not born in the UK, or belonging to minority 'ethnic' groups, interpret it as a question about their *nationality* in the sense of rights to possession of a UK Passport. That is to say, within the same language (English) and same state boundary (the UK) different kinds of respondent interpret the meaning of the categories in the same question in different ways.

Table 1 Proportion reporting British National Identity by ethnic group

	%	N
Pakistani	69.4	447
Bangladeshi	67.0	176
Black Caribbean	66.4	440
Indian	65.0	758
Other Black	61.5	39
White and Asian	56.5	69
Other Mixed	48.9	45
White and Black Caribbean	48.3	89
White and Black African	45.2	31
Chinese	40.9	154
Other Asian	39.7	224
Black African	38.4	359
British	36.9	40396
Other	30.6	333
Other White	10.2	1747

Source: LFS 2000Q1 – 2004Q1. Excl. Northern Ireland. Ns are weighted

Most concern about ‘comparative’ research centres on how respondents in different ‘national’ (in fact state) contexts will interpret questions differently. This is a problem for all research, comparative or not, since it seems clear that respondents of different kinds within a state may also routinely understand questions in systematically different ways. Rather than simply being a question of proficient language translation (though this is absolutely necessary too) it is a question of supplementing quantitative work with careful enough ethnographic or qualitative research to alert us to social variation within as well as between states and the range of interpretations respondents might bring to the categories used in the questions we ask.

Table 2 'Britishness': Birthplace by nationality by national identity by ethnicity (000's)

Birthplace	Nationality	National Identity	Ethnic Group		Total
			Other	British	
Elsewhere	Other	Other	1912	141	2053
		British	183	88	271
	British	Other	363	343	706
		British	981	641	1622
Britain	Other	Other	153	511	664
		British	10	106	116
	British	Other	715	24329	25044
		British	770	14072	14842
Total			5087	40231	45318

Source: LFS 2000Q1 – 2004Q1. Excl. Northern Ireland. Ns are weighted

11 Conflating State Boundaries and Society: (2) Variety Within States

Political parties often do not operate across the whole of a state territory but represent regional or peripheral-national interests specific to a sub state area. Failure to account for this properly can lead to misleading results. The following example is from Hakim (2003: 195-6):

A strong regional identity does not necessarily inform voting behaviour. The question asking about people's vote in the 1996 elections listed a large number of nationalist regional parties, but only 8% of respondents (9% after excluding refusals) voted for them. Minority party voters are found in all age groups.

Surprisingly, there is no association between education and political ideology in Spain, in the younger and older generations, among men and women. The least-educated groups are just as likely to be left-wing as the university graduates. The Political ideology and nationalism have no impact at all on ideal family model. ... political ideology has some impact on work orientations (Table 7.4). Supporters of the two main political parties are undifferentiated, with work centrality high among men and low among women, as usual. However, work centrality rises sharply among women and falls sharply among men who vote for the minority parties...

This analysis would be fine, were it not for two things. First, only a small percentage of Spain's population can vote for these minority parties as they are spatially concentrated.

Where they do operate they often command a majority or near majority of votes, as in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Navarre and the Canaries. Indeed in Catalonia the only 'state wide' party that receives votes is the Partido Popular (PP) but with a very low share – around 10-15%. Second, the characteristics of these parties and their electorate is totally heterogeneous. The UPN is a right wing regionalist party that is effectively the PP in Navarre. Herri Batasuna (now illegal) was the political wing of ETA. To analyse them together is hardly sensible. Taking account of this in the analysis would alter Hakim's mistaken results.

12 Some Brief Conclusions

Theory is all very well but what methodological implications flow from this argument? First, we ought to question the distinctiveness of what is currently thought of as 'comparative' research. All research is comparative, and quantitative research that is not alert to how different kinds of respondent (however defined) might understand the same question in systematically different ways is unlikely to produce robust results. Understanding questions is more than a matter of language comprehension. We should be prepared to address 'non' comparative research in just as critical a spirit, for it logically follows that all such research must fall foul of the problems discussed above insofar as it restricts itself, without sufficiently clear and established cause, to the study of social relations within a particular state frontier. 'National' research that does not look beyond state frontiers in the course of its analysis must become steadily more anachronistic in an ever more globalised world.

Second, we ought to question the assumption that state boundaries accurately circumscribe other aspects of social relations that we might want to compare. In particular, it is highly unlikely that they bound empirically distinct and comparable self-contained 'societies' whose functioning we might wish to compare. This implies that the kind of comparisons we might wish to make should be made as specifically as possible: for example referring to particular institutions and seeking to identify the practical spatial boundary of their remit rather than assuming that this stops at the state frontier. One way of improving the 'comparability' of research across boundaries is to marry qualitative and quantitative research more effectively, such that the former provides us both with 'categories' whose symbolic content either remains constant across boundaries or changes systematically in known and predictable ways, and with better knowledge of the diverse and overlapping social boundaries, in addition to state frontiers, that our fieldwork will cross.

Third we should be extremely cautious about treating respondents from different states as representing homogeneous 'values' or 'cultures' that are assumed to typify these states. Fourth, we should use words like 'culture' with care, and drop them where we cannot specify more accurately what we mean by such a catch-all terminology.

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