Beyond the Usual Suspects: New Research Themes in Comparative Public Policy

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Abstract

The principal paradox of comparative public policy has remained over the years: there is no clear and broadly shared definition of the field. This article engages with the debate about what comparative public policy is from a distinctive perspective. Drawing from a systematic analysis of published research articles that maps out the usual comparative suspects, we reflect on what comparative public policy does and does not do in terms of comparative scope and country range, and the extent to which the limitations in our comparative scope matter for cumulative knowledge, theory building and the consolidation of the field. We discuss different strategies to address the challenge of extending the range of comparative analysis.

Keyword: comparison, case selection, cumulative knowledge, public policy, theory building, institutionalization

Introduction - A call for comparative research that is truly comparative

Scholars in comparative politics or comparative public policy often start their first class by reminding students that comparison is an intuitive behavior and that students naturally compare prices at supermarkets or satisfaction with the teaching delivered by their professors. We then expound on the beauties and beasts of comparative research, making sure to emphasize the importance of case selection, data comparability and generalization of explanations. What we tend to speak about less in the classroom is the difficulty that we encounter - for some of us at least - in designing syllabi that include contributions from outside, or are about other than Western post-industrialized countries. We do not always expound on the challenges we face in transmitting knowledge about countries that lie outside our research comfort zone when asked by an increasingly global student population about countries we know little about. At one moment or another, most of the comparative public policy community in political science has hit what seems to be an (Western?) end of the comparative road: on the one hand, the community has accumulated an impressive amount of knowledge on a limited number of countries but, on the other hand, still has limited knowledge about an impressive number of countries. The question underpinning this situation is, simply, how truly comparative is the research in comparative public policy?

More than forty years ago, Rose (1972: 15) wrote that, “the policy studies approach poses a simple yet fundamental question: in what way, if any, do institutional differences affect choices between policy alternatives, the implementation of policies, or the effect of policies?” Since then, the field has extended comparative inquiry to governance networks, advocacy coalitions, policy agendas and regulatory styles, to name only a few. Comparative public policy has not, however, changed its core objective of moving beyond the peculiarities on one’s own national context (Rose 1972, Scharpf 1978, Heidenheimer 1985, Heclo 1988, Geva-May 2002). In response to what was perceived as an ethnocentric and parochial focus on domestic politics, comparative policy scholars started to look beyond national borders with the ultimate aim of achieving better theories about the policy process and/or better policies for the real world. The comparative motto was nicely summarized by Rose as "every country has problems, and each think that its problems are unique to its place and time. (…), However, problems that are unique to one country (…) are abnormal" (1991:3-4)

Since the 1970s, there has been much debate in the field about what comparative public policy is - or rather should be - and about the methodological divide in policy research (Rose 1972, Cyr & DeLeon 1975, Scharpf 1978, 2000, Feldman et al. 1978, Heidenheimer 1985, Heclo 1988, Rose 1991, Deleon and Resnick-Terry 1998, Hassenteufel 2005, Clark 2007, Gupta 2012, Engeli and Rothmayr 2014, Skogstad and White 2016). For some, the field is mostly constituted by its comparative method, and any type of comparison, whether across or within countries, qualifies for comparative policy studies. For others, it might be any policy research not covering one's country or political system. For yet others, critical case study qualifies as comparative research as long as it aims at a comparative purpose. Others limit comparative public policy to research that mobilizes theories of the policy process in order to distinguish the field from other subfields (comparative political economy, international relations, public administration), disciplines (economics and management) or even from applied policy sciences. Finally, for some, normative and prescriptive studies - as long as they apply some type of comparison - count as comparative public policy, while others see comparative public policy as an empirical scientific approach for theory building and inference-drawing.

In 1978, Feldman concluded that "while comparison is a useful method for the study of public policy, there is no field of comparative public policy" (Feldman et al. 1978: 298). Anderson (1975: 219) presented a more optimistic vision but also emphasized that comparative public policy is "a field that does not exist yet".[1] The paradox of

[1] Other fields in political science experience similar debates about fuzzy boundaries. The discussion about bridging and integrating various research traditions has made the definition of subfields more fluid. The research community has organized within the discipline of political science, with institutional representation (IPSA Research

comparative public policy within a political science perspective has remained over the years: there is no clear and widely accepted definition of the field, and there is no common framework or method (Marmor 2017: 321, 324). Nevertheless, political scientists around the world define their scholarly contribution as taking part in a conversation that they label “comparative public policy” despite the inherent difficulties encountered in adopting a comparative perspective on policy phenomena that are already complex to grasp in isolation.

This article engages with the debate about what comparative public policy is from a political science perspective, but by taking a distinctive approach. Instead of discussing what comparison should be, we take stock of what comparison actually is by looking at the countries that have been studied or neglected in political science publications (Daalder 1987, Page 1990, Anckbar 1993, Hou et al. 2011). Drawing from an analysis of published research articles in three top-ranked policy journals in political science, we reflect on what comparative public policy does and does not do in terms of comparative scope and country range, and the extent to which the limitations in our comparative scope matter for cumulative knowledge, theory building and the consolidation of our field within political science. While the “Why” question should always drive empirical inquiry in comparative research, we should nevertheless not neglect the “What” question either. Our country-mapping points at one core limitation of current comparative public policy research in political science: the concentration of studies on the usual comparative suspects -- a limited number of countries in Western Europe and North America. Our purpose is not to blame the journals or our colleagues. We are more interested in stimulating a discussion about the implications for the field of this over-representation of countries and the under-representation of the rest of the world. To what extent does the fact that comparative public policy is not as comparative as one

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Committee 30 in Comparative Public Policy), institutional venues in major international conferences and the ICPA-Forum, the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, and major international (EU-funded) research. While we acknowledge that the policy scholarship is multidisciplinary, we concentrate our analysis here to the field of public policy within political science.

could wish matter for our capacity to better understand and explain public policy-related phenomena in political science? To what extent does it limit our capacity for cumulative knowledge and theory-building leading to generalization? What is the impact on the inclusiveness of the field?

Section 1 investigates the range and recurrence of countries included in research articles in *Governance*, *The Journal of European Public Policy* and *Policy Studies Journal* from 1997 and 2014, and discusses the implications of these limitations in the scope of countries studied for the future of the field. Section 2 reviews a number of strategies for moving beyond the usual comparative suspects in comparative research. We suggest facing the unfamiliar through collaborative research, investigating possibilities provided by Big Data, and increasing the sophistication of research design. We argue that pragmatic and logistical limits to more comparative public policy can be overcome, to a certain extent, through collaboration, and that technological and methodological developments will likely help us to move towards a broader collective comparative strategy. Yet, there is no magic elixir, and falling into technological utopianism would be short-sighted. Research interests, career requirements, existing scholarship, and publication venues shape comparative policy studies and how subsequent generations of scholars might conceive their comparative work. We therefore propose in this article to take a snapshot of what peer-reviewed articles signal to be the types of comparisons worthy of publication in top-ranked policy journals in political science. We hope to engage other political scientists in a conversation that reflects critically on our own comparative practice as policy scholars that is distinct from, but complementary to, the more common methodological debates about case selection.

Section 1 - How comparative is our comparative perspective?

We review a broad range of comparative perspectives in public policy analysis as they appear in published articles in top-ranked policy journals in political science. Our discussion starts with an analysis of the countries that appear in articles published in three leading public policy journals between 1997 and 2014: *Governance*, T*he Journal of*

European Public Policy, and *Policy Studies Journal*. We focus on research articles that adopt a comparative perspective, which we define generously as including any research articles that provide comparative insight at the spatial, sectoral or policy levels. As such, our definition of the diversity in comparative perspectives is more inclusive than the orthodox definition of the comparative method, or a rigid assessment of the comparative merit of research. As our argument focuses on the country range that feeds the cumulative knowledge process, we include all articles that adopt any one among the range of various comparative perspectives. The analysis of three mainstream public policy journals ranked in political science does have its limit in terms of covering what some scholars would see as a multidisciplinary field, but it is nevertheless a clear indicator of the choices political scientists and journal editors make in publishing comparative policy research in the discipline.

Journal selection

While our analysis cannot account for all relevant scholarship in comparative public policy, it provides important insights about the subfield's representation in the key political science journals. This article does not attempt to causally relate or explain the evolution of the discipline. We use the country mapping as a starting point to reflect on the use and pitfalls of the comparative perspective in public policy research, as reflected in the wider (parent) discipline of political science. Other relevant points of reference exist in the relevant scholarship, such as books and area-specialized journals. Because the article focuses on comparative public policy within the discipline of political science, we selected the three top-ranked generalist journals in public policy that figure in the ISI Journal Citation Reports Ranking for political science and among the top-10 positions of ISI Ranking for public administration. [2]

The journals under review cover a broad range of areas and welcome comparative approaches explicitly in their mission statements. That said, as Richardson (2007: 16)

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[2] With the exclusion of *Regulation & Governance*.

thoughtfully phrases it, “with all journals there is a degree of path dependency, not least because over time, a journal creates a distinctive customer base and it is risky to move too far from what has proved successful in the past”. While sharing a common interest in publishing research of comparative relevance, our journal selection also captures relevant variations in comparative trends within the global public policy research community.. *Governance* was founded by B. Guy Peters and Colin Campbell and is affiliated with the Research Committee Structure & Organisation of Government of the International Political Science Association; its first issue appeared in January 1988. *The Journal of European Public Policy* was founded by Jeremy Richardson together with Robert Lindley; its first issue appeared in June 1994. *Policy Studies Journa*l was founded by Stuart Nagel; its first issue appeared in Autumn 1971. In 2003, *Policy Studies Journal* was re-designed and stated its interest in “international studies” in 2003 (Rich 2003: vii); Hans Jenkins-Smith became Lead Editor in 2004. The journal is nowadays affiliated to the Public Policy Section of the American Political Science Association and the Policy Studies Organization. In other words, we have selected these three journals precisely because variations in comparative scope and range were to be expected as they relate to different research communities.

Taking the stock of comparative perspectives in publications

The country mapping presented below focused on standard research articles that apply a comparative perspective (across country, sectors, and/or policies). Between 1997 and 2014 across the three journals in our sample, 634 research articles featured comparative insight with available information on the number and identification of countries discussed in the article. Table 1 reveals a significant increase in the number of articles adopting a comparative perspective over time across the three journals, with the largest share in absolute terms for *The Journal of European Public Policy,* which publishes a higher number of issues (10) per year than *Governance* (4) and *Policy Studies Journal* (4).[3]

Table 1: Distribution of the research articles in the sample (N)

	Governance	***JEPP***	***PSJ***
1997-2002	35	52	51
2003-2008	59	88	69
2009-2014	68	138	74

Mapping the comparative suspects

Figure 1 maps the country count across our sample of research articles for the three journals from 1997 to 2014 (up to 24 countries) altogether.[4] The picture is one with which public policy scholars are quite familiar, what we term the "usual comparative suspects." Out of 195 United Nations Member States and Permanent Observers, only a limited number have been intensively studied in these generalist public policy journals over the last 20 years.[5]

Figure 1: Country-mapping of country mentions across world region (1997-2014)

[3] The analysis covers research articles only. Any other types of articles or contributions are excluded. The introduction and conclusion of symposia and special issues are also excluded when they could be identified as such from their titles. Articles proposing a temporal comparison are excluded from our analysis, critical case studies are included as long as they are situated in a comparative puzzle. A number of articles did not provide information about the number of countries and/or the countries themselves, and they are excluded from this analysis.

[4] The countries were coded up to a maximum of 24 countries. The articles that include more than 24 countries were coded as large-N studies and the countries investigated in these do not appear in the country mapping. Articles including comparison with international organizations are excluded from the country mapping; articles including comparison with/about the European Union are excluded from the map.

[5] This concentration of a limited number of countries in our sample of research articles is in line with qualitative and quantitative assessments of other subfields of the discipline at other times (see for instance: Urwin and Eliassen 1975, Daalder 1987, Page 1990, Rose 1991, Anckbar 1993, Hou et al. 2011).

Insert Figure 1 about here

With the exception of Australia, most of the countries that appear in the articles which mention 24 countries or less are located in Europe and North America. The United States appears in 38% of these articles, followed by the United Kingdom (24%)[6] and Germany (24%), France (20%), the Netherlands (17%), Denmark (16%) and Sweden (15%), Italy (14%), the European Union (EU) (13%). The breakdown by journal emphasizes the centrality of Western Europe in *The European Journal of Public Policy* (44% of the papers from *The Journal of European Public Policy* sample mention the UK, 42% Germany, and 36% France), of the US in *Policy Studies Journal* (85% of the papers from the *Policy Studies Journal* sample) and in a much less preeminent way *Governance* (29% of the papers from the *Governance* sample) (*Table 2*).

Table 2: Top-10 countries across journals, in %

Governance		***JEPP***		***PSJ***	
USA	29	UK	44	USA	85
Germany	22	Germany	42	Canada	14
UK	22	France	36	Germany	4
France	21	Netherlands	30	Sweden	4
Canada	18	Denmark	28	Netherlands	4
Australia	16	Sweden	26	UK	4
Denmark	14	Italy	26	France	3
Sweden	14	EU	25	Ireland	3
Netherlands	13	Spain	21	Japan	3
Italy	12	Austria/ Ireland	21	Australia/ Mexico/ Austria/ Denmark	2
N (articles)	153	N (articles)	255	N (articles)	188

N (articles): total number of articles with 24 countries or less.

[6] Articles investigating England, Norther Ireland, Scotland or Wales - separately or jointly - are coded as "UK" for the purpose of the mapping exercise. Other reconciliations include for example, West and East Germany classified as Germany, Czechoslovakia classified as Czech Republic.

While the journals differ somewhat in the specific set of countries that appear the most frequently in their articles, they nevertheless share a very similar feature: an over-representation of Western post-industrialized countries.[7] This corresponds with a striking pattern across our sample of articles: the countries that are rarely mentioned or even never included in the publications -- Africa, Asia, Central/Latin America. In Africa, Kenya, South Africa and Morocco are ahead of the pack with respectively 5, 5 and 3 appearances while Japan (35), South Korea and China (9) lead for Asia. Apart from the USA, Canada (67 appearances) is well ahead of Mexico (9), Brazil (6) and Argentina (5) for the Americas. The situation is somewhat brighter for Central and Eastern Europe. Member state of the EU receive their share of attention; they cannot be treated as "exotic cases" anymore. Riding on the 2004-enlargement wave and the related access to EU research funding, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic appear, for example, in 5% to 6% of the articles. However, Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Ukraine, and even Croatia or Romania have barely attracted any comparative attention over the last 20 years.

Investigating the correspondence between the countries selected in the studies and the countries where the authors are institutionally located reveals the pivotal importance of geography. In line with Page's findings for comparative politics (1990), there is a significant relationship between the location of the author's academic institution and the countries that are included in the articles that cover up to 10 countries across our sample (*Table 3*).

Table 3: Correspondence between author(s)' countries and countries mentioned in the articles, in %

[7] The point is not to contest the validity of studying the usual comparative suspects. Most of the usual comparative suspects are heavy-weights on a number of comparative dimensions. Post-industrialized states are likely to be more complex in their organizational and policy structures. There is no doubt that these are fascinating cases for comparative research. Our article is more interested in the imbalance in the country range.

	Overall			***Governance***			***JEPP***			***PSJ***		
	97-02	**03-08**	**09-14**	**97-02**	**03-08**	**09-14**	**97-02**	**03-08**	**09-14**	**97-02**	**03-08**	**09-14**
Perfect Match	26	34	27	14	27	19	4	6	7	57	76	72
Partial Match	2	6	8	3	10	7	4	2	9	0	7	7
Match & More	25	18	14	34	20	15	23	25	16	22	7	8
Mismatch	28	16	19	37	24	35	33	20	18	16	4	6
Other	20	26	33	11	19	24	37	47	50	6	4	7
N	138	215	278	35	59	68	52	88	138	51	68	72

Perfect Match: perfect correspondence between author(s)'s country range and empirical country range
Partial Match: partial correspondence between author(s)'s country range and empirical country range
Match & more: all the author(s)'s countries are represented in the study with additional countries
Mismatch: no correspondence between author(s)'s country range and empirical country range

Overall, a significant share of the articles covers the same countries as those in which the authors work ("Perfect Match": between 26% of the articles for 1997-2002, 34% for 2003-2008, and 27% for 2009-2014). [8] Another notable group covers the author(s)'s countries of work in addition to other countries ("Match & More"); its proportional share seems to have reduced over time from 25% of the articles for the 1997-2002 period to 14% for the 2009-2014 period. At the end of the day, only a minority of authors have published studies that do not include their "home country" (down from

[8] The « Other » category includes articles with authors located at the European University Institute or Central European University, articles on the EU by scholars based outside Europe, articles including more than 10 countries in the study and articles for which no information was provided about the author(s)' location. Articles authored by scholars not affiliated to an academic institution have been removed from this analysis.

28% of the papers in 1997-2002 to 19% in 2009-2014) and the relative size of this group is shrinking ("Mismatch").[9]

There are obvious explanations of this gap in country range. First, pragmatic and logistical reasons are likely to substantially shape research designs (Rose 1972, 1991, Heidenheimer 1995, Hassenteufel 2005, Gerring 2008). Digitization of a vast corpus of policy-relevant information, together with online interviews and surveys, have made comparative desk research more efficient. The internationalization of the student population has also increased the availability of specialized language skills. Nevertheless, research often still requires fieldwork and/or familiarity with foreign languages. In addition of the perennial issue of funding availability, doing fieldwork in a country of which one does not speak the language remains challenging, even though English has become the *lingua franca* in many cases. Interviews, policy documents, and parliamentary debates require a command of the native language to grasp the subtleties that are often at the core of policy making.

The spectrum of challenges is also large regarding logistics. They span the non-accessibility/non-existence of documentation and archives, to attitudes of governmental officials towards research. Access to public officials for interviews and research can be highly variable from one government to another. In the context of authoritarian regimes, or during democratic transitions and political crises, physical integrity might also be threatened[10] and reliable data may be simply non-existent. A second set of reasons is related to career progression and publication strategy. A strategic case selection may influence the ability to contribute to national and international academic communities. For example, the evolution of the academic job market indicates that

[9] There are a number of variations across journals. The correspondence between author(s)'s countries and countries of study is, overall, the highest for *Policy Studies Journal* and the lowest for *The European Journal of Public Policy*. This variation is in line with the greater number of countries that are studied in the journal.

[10] The abduction, torture, and murder of Giulio Regeni, a PhD student at the University of Cambridge who was studying trade unions in Egypt , will always remind us that social science fieldwork can be dangerous.

there are waves of recruitment preferences that may not favour candidates not working on the usual comparative suspects. Once in an academic position, building up a professional reputation and research networks can be facilitated by the organized division of labor in comparative research (Caporaso 2000). In the higher education contexts where academics have to demonstrate the value and impact of their work in a tangible way, working on a combination of usual comparative suspects, or on their own country, may be an efficient strategy. In addition, the path-dependency effect pointed out by Richardson (2007) may well work both ways. Prospective authors potentially base their article submission strategies on assumptions regarding journal's country range or preferred research methods, and journals struggle to find reviewers with adequate expertise on countries that have not been recently covered by the journal. Publishers also have a tendency to favour manuscripts that appeal to large academic library markets, and these markets tend to coincide with the usual comparative suspects. In a similar vein, papers on the usual comparative suspects may find their way to conference programs if the country selection fits with a larger number of proposals.

A third set of reasons lies in expectations of scientific research that make comparativists think twice before venturing into unknown territory. Comparative research demands a high level of empirical rigor and *explanatory accuracy* (Caporaso 2000: 699). As Schmitter (2009) emphasizes, "comparative research will continue for the foreseeable future to bear major responsibility for the objective description of processes and events in 'other people's countries' (…)". In addition, case selection often needs to be informed instead of random in comparative public policy (Gerring 2008). One common way to do so is to rely on existing scholarship and on available comparative data. If one plays it by the comparative book, the more research that is produced on the usual comparative suspects, the more we will reproduce research on the usual comparative suspects.

What are the implications of the over-representation of the usual comparative suspects?

The point is not to blame the journals -- their de facto regional concentration is also fed by the size and activities of their national/regional communities. After all, *The European*

Journal of Public Policy states clearly its European focus in its scope and aims. The *Policy Studies Journal* is the flagship journal of the vibrant Public Policy Section of the American Political Science Association and the Policy Studies Organization, and publishes a higher number of articles featuring comparison across sectors and/or policies and programs. *Governance*'s affiliation to a Research Committee of the International Political Science Association is reflected in its greater diversity of countries. Nor is the point to blame the authors of the research articles in our sample. Needless to say, we plead guilty to the charge of studying the usual comparative suspects. In our own research, we have extensively investigated countries in which we have studied and/or worked and their close neighbors.

In our view, this mapping exercise is more telling about what we, as comparative public policy scholars in political science, omit doing, than what we actually do. We acknowledge that there is no vital necessity to study every single country in the world in an equal fashion, and that case selection in comparative research shall foremost be driven by the "Why" question. Our mapping exercise should stimulate a discussion about the implications of this over-representation of the usual comparative suspects and the under-representation of the rest. To what extent does the fact that the comparative public policy sub-field in political science is not actually that comparative matter in our (in)capacity to better understand and explain public policy-related phenomena? To what extent does it limit our capacity for cumulative knowledge and theory-building, leading to generalization in political science? What is the impact on the inclusiveness of the field?

The first potential implication has been largely discussed in the scholarship. The over-representation of the usual comparative suspects is potentially detrimental to theory building and generalization. Moving beyond our research comfort zone is challenging. Nevertheless, as Rose puts it (2004: xii): "Although the difficulties of applying lessons are numerous, the costs of ignorance are substantial too." Theory building needs as much corroboration as it needs contradiction and nuances, if not more. Testing our arguments across different policy contexts is likely to improve explanatory power, particularly in the 21th century context where democratic transitions (and reversals!), policy transfer and diffusion, the impact of the international level on domestic policy making, and the transformation of party systems and labor relations have induced deep changes in national policy environments. For example, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up new cases for comparative policy research, and a growing number of comparative studies include a sample of Central and Eastern European countries. Those cases, however, sometimes seem to be used almost interchangeably. While the communist legacy remains relevant, contemporary Central and Eastern European countries are more than their legacies. Their similarities and differences need to be taken into account in case selection. How do our policy theories in political science travel to developing countries and authoritarian regimes? Are public policies as pivotal in transitioning regimes as they are in Western Europe and North America? These are questions that cannot be easily answered with case selections drawing among the pool of the usual comparative suspects.[11] The second implication is in a similar vein. For those who aim at contributing to better policy making, diversity in policy context, processes, and instrument mix is key for providing policy makers and advocacy groups with accurate and robust comparative knowledge (Rose 1995).

The last two implications are related to de facto exclusiveness of the field. The student population has largely internationalized over the last decade. While the maleness of curricula has received an increasing (but still too scarce) attention in recent years, diversity with respect to the regional focus of research has yet to be assessed. At a time where transferrable and intercultural skills are becoming expected outputs of higher education, any potential parochialism in public policy syllabi might discourage students to engage and pursue further studies in comparative public policy. Finally, the fourth potential implication is related to the exclusiveness of the profession. By maintaining our country focus on a limited number of cases which are mostly located in Europe and

[11] See for instance the discussion by Chau and Yu (2011) on the ethnocentric bias in the comparative study of social welfare.

North America, do we contribute to keeping a growing community of scholars from Central and Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa at the (generalist) door of comparative public policy within the political science community? It may be harder to get conference papers and articles accepted in generalist conferences and journals in political science, harder to network and get on the boards of international research collaborations, when major conferences are located in expensive places that may require visas.[12] In response, there has been a proliferation of specialized journals that contribute to the multiplication of reference points. Furthermore, when commenting on the internationalization of submissions to *Comparative Political Studies*, Caporaso (2008: 404) pointed out that "part of this change is technological (e-mail submissions), but part is also due to a broadening of the field of comparative politics. It is a healthy sign that not only do we study different parts of the world when we do comparative politics but that the *we* in question reside in different locales. That can only broaden our vision and make the field of comparative politics truly comparative". Technology has made the circulation of scholarship easier, but it will not make up for the exclusiveness of the field as long as we keep treating our usual comparative suspects as the Hollywood stars of political science.

Section 2 The future of comparison: going beyond the usual comparative suspects

In this second part, we adopt a more forward-looking perspective. We propose a number of strategies to address this challenge in the discipline. Our propositions are not exhaustive, neither are they feasible in every research context. They are meant as opportunities to explore new avenues for comparative public policy within political science. Our focus is pragmatic, given the various constraints on designing and publishing comparative research.

We propose three avenues for enhancing cumulative knowledge and theory building and the generalization of results through a comparative perspective. Some suggestions

[12] These barriers add up to the increasing inequality of university infrastructures and research support.

may be more relevant for small-N rather than larger-N studies, but we believe that they all address the issue of the over-representation of a small number of countries in comparative public policy research within political science. A first simple solution consists in going beyond the familiar and explore the unfamiliar, i.e. choosing countries that are less studied and compare them with countries that we know well (Wong 2014). A second way to respond might be by turning to big data where country-related factors may have less impact on the research findings, a solution favored by techno-optimists, but that also comes with different challenges (Danaher et al. 2017: 8). A third option is to adopt compound or embedded research designs which avoid some of the difficulties that arise from working on less familiar and documented cases, and do not require big data. Again, such designs come with a number of challenges, in particular with respect to the comparison of policy sectors.

The challenge of unfamiliar cases

Let us assume for the purpose of this article that the researcher is free of the pragmatic and logistical considerations discussed above and hence able to add unfamiliar cases, or alternatively to switch completely to unfamiliar cases. As Wong argues (2014), there are two opposite pitfalls in comparing beyond our familiar cases: thinking that cases are so different that they are not comparable and hence abandon comparison altogether, or leaving the unfamiliarity unproblematized and falling into a *naïve transplantation* trap (Marmor 2017: 314).[13] On the theoretical level, the problem of concept stretching has been widely discussed (Sartori 1970) and the risk of imposing western perspectives on non-western countries is regularly addressed. Also, challenges arise if one thinks about the democratic function of public policy (Lasswell 1970). Public policy analysis was developed to support democratic development, and comparative public policy assumes this function through lesson-drawing across borders (Geva-May 2002). In non-

[13] Other disciplines such as economics, development studies and sociology have proved to be more inclined to studying public policies outside the post-industrialized world. There is nevertheless a lack of shared attempts at cumulative knowledge and theory building which remain shaped by disciplinary lenses and practices.

democratic societies, limitations are difficult to surmount. From a methodological point of view, different cultural contexts pose numerous challenges not only to field research but also to standardized instruments such as questionnaires. The reliability of governmental data and other data is also a frequent preoccupation.

How then should we go about to go beyond the familiar cases, despite the challenges and material constraints? We argue that meaningful research collaboration might be a promising avenue to enlarge the type of cases we compare. The old norm for academic promotion was single-authored publications. The new norm could be to value collaborations that allow us to go beyond the usual suspects in comparative policy analysis. Obviously, large collaborative research does not happen in a vacuum (Baumgartner 2016). Four factors are central: (1) funding support, (2) intellectual curiosity and theoretical openness, (3) commitment to build up measurement systems that will travel comparatively while remaining reliable and, last but not least, (4) willingness to belong to a comparative community that speaks the same conceptual language even when it is for expressing contrasted views on public policy. The Comparative Agendas Project is one of many examples of successful large-scale collaborative research which has resulted not only in a large number of open access and comparable datasets on policy agendas, but has also in a significant comparative contribution to the scholarship on issue attention and agenda setting that takes into account the diversity of national contexts (Baumgartner et al. 2018). As Baumgartner (2016: 63-64) puts it, the Comparative Agendas Project has created an *infrastructure* for comparative research that will enable new research on policy agendas and help integrate new research teams (and hence new countries) into the Comparative Agendas community. Multiple funding streams were there to support the development of the Comparative Agendas Project and built an online platform enhancing user-friendly tools to investigate agendas in comparative fashion. But cash should not be king in comparative research. While some of the Comparative Agenda Project teams had substantial funding to support their coding endeavors, other teams barely had more than their free time and commitment. What has made the Comparative Agendas Project successful in its comparative enterprise is also the dedication of an increasing number of scholars to adjust, revise and continuously adapt the coding scheme to enhance comparative depth and breadth and develop a shared measurement system instead of drifting off into country-specific issues (John 2016). As such, the Comparative Agendas Project offers both a data infrastructure and an intellectual infrastructure for comparative research that transcends national peculiarities.

Scaling up: the potential of big data

The digital age, governmental initiatives for open data, and increasing government interest in complementing survey data with administrative data have increased expectations for greater government transparency and data access. This could feed the increase in quantitative comparative studies that has taken place in policy research over the last few decades. With comparable data across a large number of countries, large-N analysis overcomes the specificities of the individual cases, and can at the same time include cases that are less known. Among the advantages that have been stressed in the scholarship, there are the diversity of the data, the synergies for interdisciplinary collaborations and the possibility to zoom in and analyze subgroups for which there were not enough data in the past (Venturini et al. 2017). However, as Breunig and Ahlquist argue (2014: 127) “the ….. analyst need to be mindful of the origin of data and the incentives of their creators…” and this applies to big data as well (Jerven 2013, Lippert 2016).

Beyond the potential for large-N studies to transcend contextual specificities, there is the argument that big data has the potential to transform the social sciences and enhance policy analysis more generally towards a “data-intensive” track (González-Bailón 2013, Blum et al. 2014: 38). Some predict that data comparability, availability and reliability issues will fade away altogether as data mining and use of administrative data, web scraping and crowdsourcing become common tools in social science research (see Danaher et al. 2017). For example, one can scrape social media data from around the world, draw on behaviourally relevant census data, geo-spatial data or even health/DNA characteristics, and even ask web communities to provide services such a questionnaire translation. These new types of data sources are sometimes combined with conventional sources for public policy analysis, or even as substitutes for some neglected sectors such as gender equality. Applications of big data in comparative policy analysis are starting to be published (Jasanoff 2017). Transport, health, environment, urban and local service development, and education are among the policy sectors that have attracted interest, using big data. However, if big data represents a promising avenue for research, it carries challenges that should not be disregarded.

First, big data does not make social and political inequalities or levels of democratization, disappear (for an overview see Danaher et al. 2016). As technology and digital access are still unequally distributed, big data may limit the potential for increasing country diversification. This may have an impact on the quality and availability of the data. Digital data might also reflect inequalities in digital usage/knowledge and the exclusion of those who are not conversant with information technology. For example, some political regimes tightly regulate internet traffic and access to certain data. Big data also raises legal questions about data and privacy protection. Optimism regarding the greater availability of data, hence, needs careful analysis of the purposes for which the data have been created, as well as the quality of the data.

A second point is who has the control over the research design. Codes and algorithms that are used to generate and analyze big data are not necessarily crafted by the research scholars themselves. If we want to understand algorithmic governance, we have to investigate the choices that coders, administrations and companies make in constructing and using algorithms. This is not entirely different from the issues scholars encounter with the standardization of public data. A similar challenge applies to governmental initiatives for open data. If we want to understand and analyze the extent to which such initiatives contribute to improving data availability and use for policy research, we must understand the socio-technological environment that surrounds such initiatives. No matter whether we scale up the data collection, the challenges of grasping policy environment, conceptualizing and measuring policies remain. “Data are not created free from theory” and even for big data, the “theory” may not always be crafted by researchers themselves.

The potential of compound designs

A classic challenge of comparative public policy analysis is combining in-depth case analysis with generalizability. Progress has been made through the development of process-tracing, configurational comparative methods, mixed-method and nested designs (Tarrow 2010; Lieberman 2005), and by adopting research designs that multiply cases through within-case studies, as proposed for example by Levi-Faur (2004, 2006). The latter approach directly addresses the challenge of case selection and definition and is therefore of special interest for our discussion. This compound research design strategy (Levi-Faur 2004, 2006) starts with the assumption that there are four main levels of comparison in policy analysis – national, sectoral, international and longitudinal. Levi-Faur proposes to select cases to enhance variations on at least two of the four levels, and to systematically test hypotheses iteratively across levels. Compound research design preserves the richness of qualitative analysis while strengthening the capacity for generalization. Gaining comparative leverage through adding sector comparison is a methodologically interesting solution to strengthen theory testing, and encourages the study of unfamiliar countries once the methodology has been mastered. The challenges for selecting and comparing policy sectors, however, resemble the ones discussed for countries above.

There is a strong tendency to study public policy by investigating policy sectors, i.e., subsystems of policy-making. Much less discussed is the question of what drives our interest in specific policy sectors, and how to choose which sectors to compare. We are likely to select policy sectors that are perceived as salient, in which important resources are invested, and that are regularly high on the political and media agenda. As argued for the country selection, there might also be an effect of the existing literature on studying the same policy sectors. Previous research influences our choices because we want to contribute to specific scholarly debates. At the same time, scholars intend to contribute to solving policy problems, or at least to contribute to generating knowledge that might be useful for addressing specific policy problems. By developing special knowledge and expertise on specific policy sectors, scholars respond to research incentives regarding the advantages of in-depth knowledge. Sticking to the same sector (or sectors) builds finely grained knowledge about policies, debates, stakeholders, etc. As is the case for country specialists, policy sector specialists build a reputation that allows them to participate in public debates as experts. Their accumulated knowledge allows them contribute to the problem-solving side – an aspect that has become highly valued in academia in order to increase impact and visibility of university research in competition for government funding and visibility. The sector specialization is reflected in the ever-growing quantity and diversity of specialized journals which attracts a multidisciplinary community built around specific problems. Multidisciplinarity strengthens the relevance of policy analysis for advice. While it does not hinder theory building, it does not facilitate it either. Given that the field of comparative public policy has no shared theoretical core, theoretical frameworks are multiplied. Finally, an additional challenge in selecting sectors is interdependence: we are generally assuming independence. , i.e. that they do not mutually influence each other. For example, if we study policy change we assume that changes in one sector are not linked to changes in the other sector. But that is an assumption that more often than not does not really hold up closer scrutiny. Research shows that there is interdependence, a phenomenon that has been studied more intensely over the last decades by looking at transfer, diffusion and convergence (Braun and Gilardi 2006; Knill 2005).

To sum up, compound research designs, as promising they sound on paper, have to overcome practical as well as methodological challenges in the selection of policy sectors as an additional dimension of comparison. The salience of issues, the interest of contributing as an expert to policy solutions, career considerations such as building a reputation and being part of networks, all hamper our capacity and willingness to leave the beaten track and venture into unfamiliar sectors.

Conclusion

This contribution engaged the three of us in a reflection on our own practice as scholars to repeatedly compare the familiar cases. Our training, institutional affiliations, and language skills have allowed us to publish on cases such as Canada, the USA, the UK, France and Germany that are at the center of comparisons in the three journals that we have analyzed. Our discussion is therefore also directly addressed at ourselves as political scientists taking part in demarcating what is worthwhile publishing in comparative public policy in leading journals in the field. Our country-mapping shows that there is a concentration on a limited number of countries, while others are barely mentioned. We argue that there are four major implications of the over-representation of the usual comparative suspects. It hinders our capacity for cumulative knowledge, theory building and generalization; it limits our ability to contribute to better policies; it sends the wrong signal to our students and early-career scholars about what is worth studying; and it makes entry into the field more challenging for scholars from less studied countries. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the challenge of going beyond the usual comparative suspects. We listed various factors that discourage exploring unknown territory. The choices we make in selecting some countries and neglecting others is not only the result of methodological and pragmatic considerations. It is also closely linked to who we are and the networks we are part of, i.e., where we live, with whom we exchange about research, what journals we read, what we consider worthwhile investigating, and what we perceive as important issues. Institutions that structure our careers do not necessarily reward risk-taking, and path-dependency describes well the mechanism that lead us to deepen our knowledge about familiar cases instead of adventuring into less known territories – at least for those among us who do small and medium N-research or mixed-method approaches, and who are interested in theory building as well as providing knowledge for policy-making.

The revived interest in comparative public policy (Brans and Pattyn 2017) is unlikely to fade rapidly. However, there are centrifugal forces pulling the field in very different directions. Sectoral, regional and methodological specialization, and theory building vs. policy analysis as advice, are dividing the field in sub-communities. Also, the classical approach of small N-comparison that has often been a core element of the field is losing its prominent place. In such a challenging context, projects for cumulative theory building -- whether for academic publications or policy advice -- remain central to keeping our field working together. In fact, among the strategies we discussed to enlarge the spectrum of countries and cases, collaboration has the most promise for achieving that objective, at least in the short run. We specifically mentioned the Comparative Agendas Project, but there are many other similar research collaborations in comparative public policy. From a methodological point of view, scaling up the N on a smaller scale seems to us a promising way to go: mixed-method designs, compound research designs, QCA and also large-N studies are capable of including a broader range of cases in our studies, while providing in-depth knowledge on them.

Comparative public policy remains an evolving field, negotiating boundaries with other subfields in political science and other disciplines, including geographical and topical boundaries with international political economy, comparative politics or development studies. This is not a feature unique to our field: boundaries of various subfields and entire disciplines are constantly debated, adjusted and redefined, but it remains nevertheless a challenge for cumulative knowledge building. The fluid boundaries and various definitions of what constitutes comparative public policy are also a challenge for discussing and analyzing the subfield. Over the last two decades, the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* has played an important role in building a global community of comparative public policy scholarship, by fostering collaborations, interdisciplinary research and dialogue between practitioners and academics in a number of disciplines. It has also contributed to open up the field to new cases beyond the usual suspects. However, our analysis shows that political scientists, who succeed in publishing their comparative policy work in top ranked journals, tend to repeatedly study the same countries. Being aware of this syndrome and discussing the incentives and constraints that structure our research choices and careers, provides a good starting point for consciously seeking and building opportunities to enlarge the spectrum of countries covered and to strengthen not just theory-building, but also policy-relevant knowledge beyond the usual suspects.

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