

The Comparative MP and CS Project:  
Conceptual and Technical Problems  
S.J. Eldersveld

In 1969 a group of us in the Michigan Political Science department met to develop plans for implementing our interests in elite comparative research and secured a small "seed grant" of \$40,000 from the University's Ford grant for Comparative and International Studies. Those involved in the planning had previously done work in European countries (Britain, Italy, Sweden, Netherlands, France, Germany) as well as in India, Morocco, and Jamaica, and of course in the U.S. We developed a design for a comparative elite project envisaging interviews with top civil servants and legislative politicians, an inquiry focused on "elite political culture". We then secured a grant from the NSF for \$293,000 for a three year period. These funds were supplemented later by small grants from a variety of sources here and abroad, to meet extra coding and analysis costs.

From 1970 to 1973 we put our plans into effect in nine countries. We had to forego research in India where the study was considered too sensitive and American funding unacceptable. We completed the work in the following countries: France (Inglehart), Sweden (Anton), U.S. (Aberbach and Rockman), Britain, Italy, Germany (Putnam), Netherlands (Eldersveld), Jamaica (Singham), Morocco (Waterbury). In Morocco it was not possible to interview legislative politicians, but the civil servant interviews despite great problems of access were eventually concluded. Since 1973 the study has been done in Japan (Kubota) and Ireland (Sinnott). Difficulties developed in the inclusion of the Jamaican interviews with the rest of the study. Consequently in our comparative analysis we have utilized the data from the six European countries and the U.S.

The study design called for interviews with national level civil servants who manned offices, bureaus, or sections in ministries, departments, and boards in all policy areas except Foreign Affairs and Defense, and who had achieved a status or rank at the second and third levels below the Minister (or Secretary, in the American case). Whenever possible we also sought to interview a sample of "high fliers", variously identified but consisting essentially of "promising younger officials who might well become senior officials in ten years". (This was actually accomplished in only four countries: Britain, Netherlands, Germany, and Italy). The "legislative politician" sample was drawn from the universe of accessible members of the lower houses of Parliament (or Congress), stratified usually by party and age, with freshmen legislators usually excluded. We aimed in each country at 100 senior bureaucrats, 100 MPs, and where possible 25 "high fliers" in the bureaucracy.

Illustrations of the Bureaucratic Sample

	<u>Britain</u>	<u>Netherlands</u>	<u>Germany</u>
	Minister	Minister	Minister
	Permanent Undersecretary	Staat Secretaris	State Secretary
our elite sample	Deputy Secretary	Dir. Generaal	Min. Direktor
	Undersecretaries	Directeur	Min. Dirigent
	Junior	Civil	Servants

The interviews generated by this project in the seven primary countries varied in number somewhat, due to local conditions, accessibility, and dwindling finances. The final body of interviews we have for analysis is distributed as follows:

Total Interviews Completed

	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>Britain</u>	<u>Neths</u>	<u>Sweden</u>	<u>France</u>	<u>Germany</u>	<u>Italy</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Top CS	126	96	76	317	116	97	85	913
MPS	77	97	44	44	92	128	100	582
Junior CS		29	17			41	30	117
Totals	203	222	137	361	208	266	215	<u>1612</u>

The major effort, as one can see, was in the interviews with senior bureaucrats and MPS, with the former predominating in most countries (Germany and Italy the major exceptions).

The interviews were tape-recorded in all seven primary countries (not in Morocco or Jamaica). This was done with considerable success, despite misgivings of some at the outset of our research. The response rates for the project in the various countries attest to this success.

Response Rates

	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>Britain</u>	<u>Neths</u>	<u>Sweden</u>	<u>France</u>	<u>Germany</u>	<u>Italy</u>
Civil Servants	88%	91-100	95-98	88	85	88-98	78-97
MPS	70	68-81	85	88	70	79-82	56-61

Note: the two percentages for certain countries refer to the different rates for senior and junior elites

One can conclude that high rates of cooperation are possible in this type of elite survey.

The interview covered the respondents' social backgrounds and career patterns in great detail, but the major emphasis was subjective. We assessed administrators' and congressmen's perceptions of how the policy-making process operates and their evaluations of their own and other actors' roles in the policy process. We especially wanted to obtain an understanding of how administrators and elected leaders view one another; whether the interactions among them occur in an atmosphere of trust and cooperation or of hostility and suspicion. We were interested in elite responses to issues relating to political representation, interest articulation, and citizen involvement. Special attention was given to the actual and proper roles of constituencies in policy making and the necessity, prospects and problems of increasing popular control over the activities of government. Respondents were asked to discuss the character of the nation's political parties, the proper role of the government in social and economic affairs and, more generally, the nature of conflict and consensus in politics and society. Finally, we were interested in respondents' aspirations for the country's future and what their notions were about how best to achieve their goals for the future.

Our basic assumption is that the political attitudes, values, and beliefs of bureaucrats and politicians are important determinants of the ways in which governments respond to social change and to the pressures brought to bear on them by groups in society. A study of these attitudes can tell us something about the nature of relationships between members of the governmental elite, about certain aspects of the decision-making process, about how elites analyze policy problems, and about the preferences, hopes and plans of those in key positions. We recognize, of course, that without knowledge of the "environmental situations in which actors find themselves, (knowledge of) the psychological predispositions they bring to those situations" is not enough to predict discrete behaviors, especially choices of particular policies. Since our research stresses the views of a cross-section of bureaucrats and politicians, our familiarity with the environmental factors affecting behavior is rather sketchy, at best, i.e., our knowledge of particular factors and situations is limited. We see elite political beliefs as important parameters in the behavioral equation--setting limits, defining the legitimate and the illegitimate, directing inquiry and thought, influencing the interpretation of events, guiding the definition of problems and the response to them.<sup>1</sup>

The special features of this comparative project should be underlined. Common agreement on a basic research plan was developed by a team of scholars, each with an interest in one country, all of them located at one university. All of these scholars had prior experience and had done previous research in their countries of interest, and had established contacts with academic colleagues in those countries with whom they intended to consult, if not collaborate. They agreed on a set of theoretical objectives and then adopted a core questionnaire implementing those objectives. They agreed to administer the absolutely indispensable parts of

<sup>1</sup>These two paragraphs are taken from the article by Aberbach, Chesney and Rockman, cited later.

that questionnaire in each country. The elite sample was to be as equivalent as possible. The interviews were to be conducted by mature and carefully trained interviewers, and tape recorded. Then, typescripts were to be prepared, a common codebook developed, and comparable coding procedures were to be employed, if feasible in terms of manpower and funding. It was further planned to consult regularly so that communication about field experiences could be shared. Finally, we aimed at completion of the interviews in a telescoped time period. In its conception, then, the group sought to maximize the possibilities of comparability. It was the strategy of a team of researchers working together closely on one campus and committed to the same theoretical goals using equivalent if not identical research techniques in countries with whose politics they were quite familiar. Fred Frey once suggested this model in comparative work:

"Probably the ideal method of developing an effective interrogative strategy for a cross national research project would be to assemble a group of perfectly trained scholars representing all of the nations included in the study, have them come to a full understanding of the purposes of the research, the concepts and hypotheses to be investigated, the main research techniques to be used and the resources at hand, and tell them to return to their nations and proceed."<sup>1</sup>

Although one may doubt that the "perfectly trained" scholar is found anywhere, this model approximates our strategy. The major difference is that we all were trained in one culture, then were exposed to our new cultures, reassembled in the U.S. to plan research, and then dispersed to the field. This difference may indeed have influenced the theoretical approach of the study.

In evaluating the success of our work today, four years after the completion of the interviewing, many facets could be discussed -- conceptual and theoretical on the one hand, and methodological and technical on the other. Two special papers dealing with particular methodological aspects of the work have been completed prior to this conference. They are:

1. Joel D. Aberbach, James D. Chesney and Bert A. Rockman, "Exploring Elite Political Attitudes: Some Methodological Lessons", *Political Methodology*, II (winter, 1975) 2-27.
2. Bert A. Rockman, "Studying Elite Political Culture: Problems in Design and Interpretation", (unpublished)

These papers discuss in detail the problems in the use of our type of open-ended interviews, the interview situation, gaining access, coding procedures and coder reliability, as well as the problems of operationalizing concepts and drawing inferences at the macro level from micro-level data. I will not dwell on these matters in greater detail here, even though

<sup>1</sup>"Cross Cultural Survey Research in Political Science", in The Methodology of Comparative Research, ed. by R.T. Holt and J.E. Turner (New York, Free Press, 1970), pp. 173-294.

the research experiences on the basis of which these papers were written were confined to the U.S. Generally I would say that those of us who worked in other cultures are in accord with the observations found in those papers.

Some observations on the technical obstacles to the implementation of our comparative team strategy may yet be useful, in addition to these papers, as a basis for discussing alternative approaches in comparative studies.

1. Securing identical elite samples was more difficult than we thought. Although we wanted career civil servants this was not entirely feasible in the U.S., where the identification of administrators at the departmental level resulted in the selection and interviewing of 61 "political executives", as well as 65 supergrade career executives'. Further, in Sweden two types of top-level career civil servants had to be included -- the "ministerial civil servants" with a policy role and the civil servants with independent boards who have much less of a policy role. These distinctions in the sample turned out to be critical for our analysis. Finally, it turned out to be operationally impossible in certain countries to identify "high fliers" in the bureaucracy (particularly in the U.S!)

2. Despite all our efforts at coordinating questionnaire construction we "missed the boat" in certain respects. This was particularly true in the use of close-ended questions. We did find, contrary to what some other scholars had contended, that one can use such questions effectively in elite research. Most of us included a set of 30 agree-disagree items, as well as other forms which the respondents were asked to fill in (related particularly to their contact patterns and power perceptions). Yet because of a breakdown in communication with two of our research teams the agree-disagree items were not used at all in 2 countries, hindering somewhat our analysis later. There were other examples of missed opportunities, because the theoretical importance of a particular question was not appreciated. One cannot emphasize too much the need to secure complete understanding on the specific elements of the questionnaire.

3. We underestimated seriously the cost of the project generally and the coding costs particularly. The entire coding component of the project had been unrealistically conceived, including the costs of typescripts, of coding from typescripts, of double coding, of development of a coding book, of updating the coding book as coding proceeded, of securing linguistically competent coders either in the field or in Ann Arbor, of determining inter-coder reliability. We estimated a per interview coding cost of \$15 - 20 initially. We calculate that the real cost was \$40, not including the development of a comparative code book. This latter project took several investigators working with country teams of coders about 18 months. The project suffered even though we were able in the late stages of the project to get additional funds after much entreaty with the University of Michigan and other sources (other than the NSF who refused to add to their original commitment). For certain countries the

anticipated shortage of funds meant fewer interviews and the development of an alternative strategy to double coding.

4. Comparable coding conventions were not always utilized despite all our efforts. A good deal of this is due to the breakdown in communication related to the situs and timing of coding. When we came to analysis we would discover that coding categories simply differed. For example, instead of MPS being coded as seeing other actors "more than once a week", "weekly", "less than weekly but regularly", "seldom", "never -- they might be coded", "very often", "often", "seldom or never". Perhaps our style of cooperation and standardization on coding was more loose than it should have been.

5. The timing difficulties faced in the project might occasion some concern although I don't think we are basically worried. The Italian interviews, for example, were done in 1970-71 at the height of the government crisis when there was no effective Cabinet. The Dutch interviews were done in early 1973 when negotiations were going on for many months over the creation of a new Cabinet. Further, sometimes the MP interviews had to be completed a year later than the bureaucratic interviews. Conceivably, idiosyncratic time-related factors and circumstances may have affected interviewing relationship and responses. Our position on this, however, is that the questions we were asking were not essentially focused on or relevant to immediate and particularized conditions or problems but more with the roles and processes of politics generally. We, therefore, feel these timing differences did not seriously compromise the comparability of our project's results.

Obviously there are many other aspects of our comparative work to discuss, not the least of which perhaps is the selection of the countries themselves. Our strategy was obviously to opt for a "somewhat similar-somewhat different-Western systems analysis" with the hope of eventually doing the research in nonwestern societies. While finding many cross systemic uniformities, the differences we have found within these Western systems have certainly kept us occupied and perhaps partially validate the use of such a strategy.

In the analysis of our data we have already prepared about 15 papers, some of which have been published. Two books based on these elite data for individual countries are now being concluded (Sweden and Netherlands). We are hoping to publish the Comparative Elites book in late 1978 or in 1979.