

Logic of Cross-Cultural Comparisons: Review

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Overview

- Basic Assumptions
- History
- Types of Cross-Cultural Comparisons
- Decisions about Type of Comparison

Basic Assumptions

ASSUMPTION 1:

COMPARISON IS POSSIBLE BECAUSE PATTERNS CAN BE IDENTIFIED

- To do cross-cultural research, you have to believe that there are patterns to be found. Without that belief, a researcher will not look...
- If you want to learn more about patterns already found see the database [Explaining Human Culture](#) summarizing over 1,100 cross-cultural studies.

ASSUMPTION 2:

ALL GENERALIZATIONS REQUIRE SYSTEMATIC TESTING, NO MATTER HOW PLAUSIBLE THEY SEEM

ASSUMPTION 3:

IF A THEORY OR HYPOTHESIS HAS MERIT, THE PRESUMED CAUSES AND EFFECTS SHOULD BE SIGNIFICANTLY ASSOCIATED SYNCHRONICALLY

- If all the variables in a hypothesis are measured for more or less the same time period **for each society**, the independent and dependent variables should be significantly associated.
- Note the caveat “for each society.” This is because different societies are studied at different time periods
 - this means that most societies will have different focal time frames.
 - Think of these time frames or “ethnographic presents” as “cultural snapshots” of a particular point in time and space.

- We consider this a synchronic comparison if the variables are all measured for each case in the same frame.

Brief History

The first formal cross-cultural study was published in 1889 by Edward B. Tylor. At the end of his presented talk Francis Galton questioned the independence of Tylor’s cases (his critique became known as “Galton’s Problem”) and some have suggested that his criticism held back cross-cultural research for many decades. In any case, a major boost to cross-cultural research came from the creation of an organized body of ethnographic information at Yale’s interdisciplinary *Institute of Human Relations* established in 1929.

- The intellectual impetus primarily came from George Peter Murdock, who was part of the Yale Institute of Human Relations (IHR)
- Murdock persuaded IHR that if you want to understand human behavior, you need to look at humans in all their variety
- The organized information system they developed was originally called the Cross-Cultural Survey (started in 1935)
- In 1949, the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) spun off as a inter-university membership organization to promote the Cross-Cultural Survey on a broader scale. The collection of ethnography became known colloquially as the “HRAF files.”

There is little doubt that the emergence of the “HRAF files” greatly facilitated cross-cultural research. See Figure 1. And in 2021 we have already found 43 studies which is well beyond the average of about 20 per year from 2015-2020.

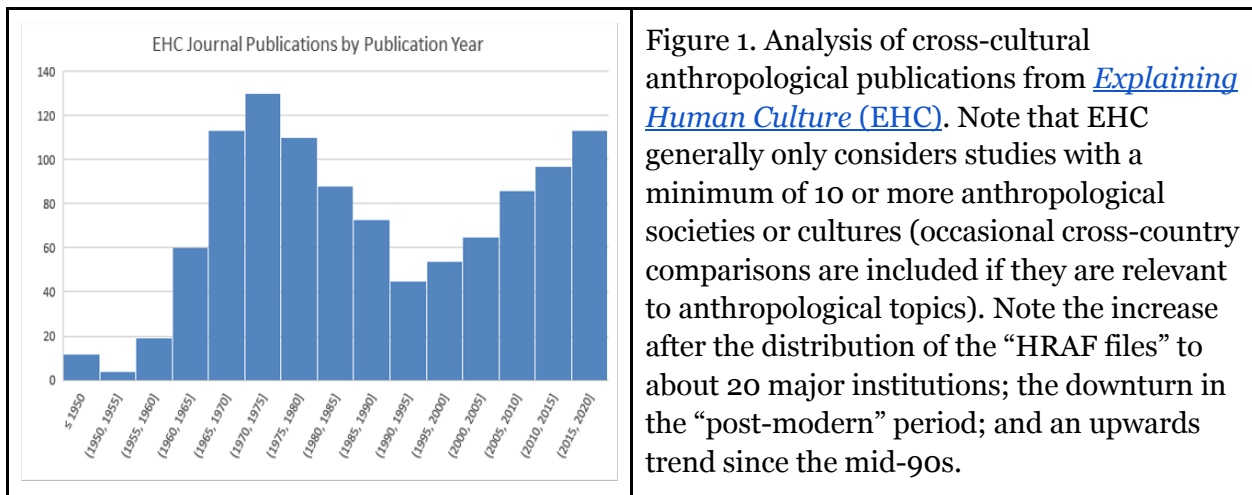
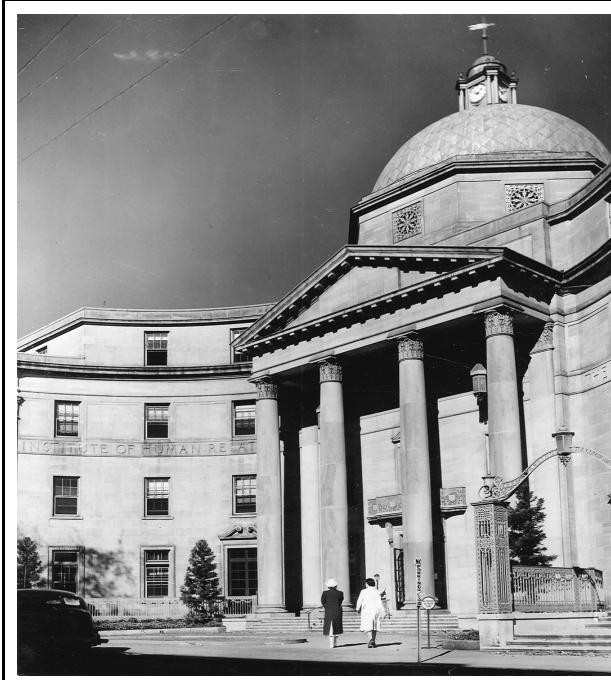


Figure 1. Analysis of cross-cultural anthropological publications from [Explaining Human Culture \(EHC\)](#). Note that EHC generally only considers studies with a minimum of 10 or more anthropological societies or cultures (occasional cross-country comparisons are included if they are relevant to anthropological topics). Note the increase after the distribution of the “HRAF files” to about 20 major institutions; the downturn in the “post-modern” period; and an upwards trend since the mid-90s.



An historical photo showing the name of the Institute of Human Relations. The other side of the building is part of Yale's School of Medicine.

Types of Cross-Cultural Comparisons

Dimensions of Variation:

- Geographic scope
- Primary vs. secondary data
- Synchronic vs. diachronic
- Unit of analysis (community, society, country; occasionally individuals)
- Size of sample

We concentrate in this Institute on the studies employing scientific methods primarily conducted using anthropological data (mostly ethnographic data); the most common cross-cultural studies in anthropology are **worldwide synchronic comparisons using secondary data from societies** (each usually with a specific time/place focus) with sample sizes ranging from 30 or so up.

What do scientific approaches involve?

1. Formulating a clear research question (preferably a one sentence question)
2. Developing at least one hypothesis to test
3. Designing measures for the variables in the hypothesis
4. Measuring variables for a non-biased, preferably a representative sample of societies or cultures

5. Testing the results statistically

Geographic Scope

Worldwide vs. Within Region Comparisons

The earliest cross-cultural comparisons using ethnographic data were worldwide comparisons--the aim was to test theories about human behavior using the widest possible gamut of described cultures and societies. (In contrast, most systematic social science research has been conducted in complex societies like the United States.)

While hypothetically a comparative approach is central to the goals of anthropology, many anthropologists are more comfortable with generalizing from single well-studied populations (consider the emphasis on the San as a prototype of hunter-gatherers) or small scale comparisons of two cases. The irony is that many ethnographers express the belief that their own ethnography is excellent, but question the ethnographic work of others (Ember 1986). This is often given as a reason not to do broad comparisons.

Burton and White (1991) suggested that regional comparisons appeal to more anthropologists because most are regional specialists and are interested in regional processes. There are different types of regional comparisons often conducted for different purposes.

- Continuous area comparisons
 - Early comparisons were largely limited to classifying societies, studying regional histories, identifying culture areas or culture clusters to get at culture similarities. Examples:
 - Driver et al. (1972) used hierarchical clustering to classify 273 North American societies into 35 clusters. Then they compared their statistical classification with other culture area classifications by Kroeber, Murdock, Driver and Voegelin and Voegelin's language classification
 - Jorgensen (1980) examined 441 traits on 172 societies in Western North American native groups; using multidimensional scaling and hierarchical clustering to classify societies into regions (e.g., Pueblos, Great Basin)
 - Such comparisons usually use a large number of culture traits across different domains. (These were often material traits and often quite specific traits, e.g., drumming on a plank at a girl's puberty ceremony.)
 - Controlled comparisons. Eggan (1954) advocated small-scale controlled comparisons in a narrow region to control on history and ecology (analogous to control by elimination in research design).
- Non-continuous sample
 - Test hypotheses to explain a culture trait that is common in a region. Examples:
 - The practice of female genital modification (Ericksen [1989] and Ross et al. (2016). Sampled one case from each African cluster.

	Controlled Comparisons	Broader Regional	Worldwide
Generalizability of findings	Very limited	limited to region	Best , although may lack sufficient number of very complex societies
Knowledge and familiarity of cultural linkages, languages, history	high --controls to a major degree on shared history and ecology (analogous to control by elimination)	moderate --can potentially provide information about relationships with neighboring societies, history, language, linkages between groups	Not as likely
Maximizing variation in variables	Could be very limited	Depends on trait, but could be limited Some phenomena are regional (e.g., female circumcision, female-husband marriage) and a regional comparison may make sense	Best

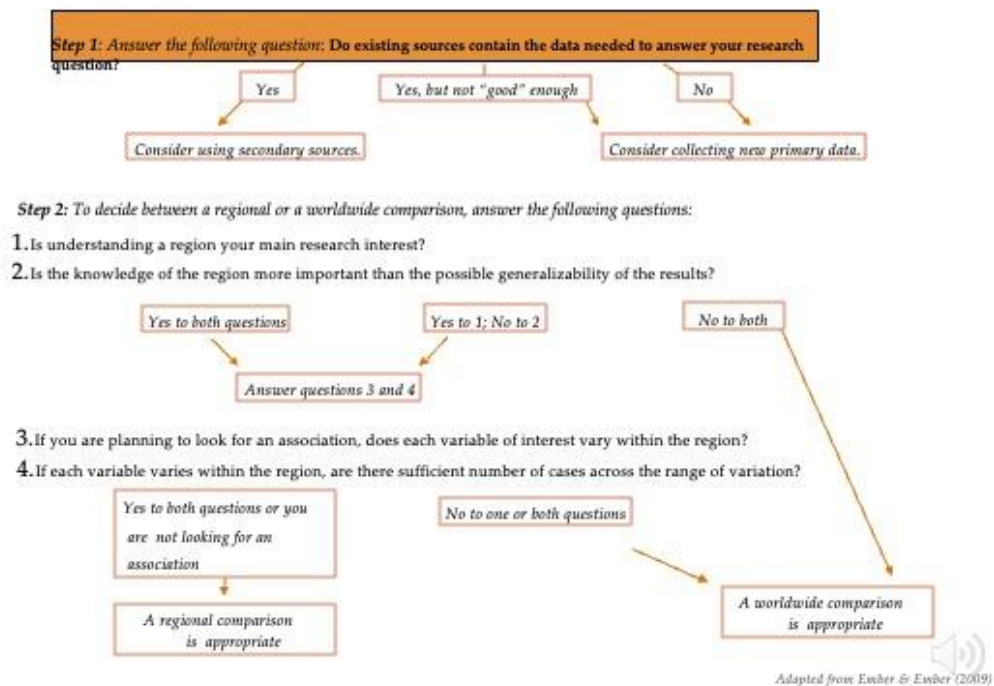
Primary versus secondary data comparisons

As Figure 1 conveys, the choice of secondary or primary data is fundamentally dependent on your research question and whether there is available data on the area of interest to you. Early comparativists, such as John and Beatrice Whiting, made the decision to systematically collect behavior observations of children because such information was generally lacking. Hence, the projects such as the Six Cultures Project (Whiting, Beatrice B. ed. 1963; B.B. Whiting and J. W. M. Whiting. 1975) and the Munroe's four culture comparisons (R. L. Munroe et al. 2000). Robert Edgerton made the decision to try to measure personality as part of a broader ecological project to compare pastoralists and farmers in each of four cultures (Edgerton 1971; Goldschmidt 1965).

For earlier reviews of primary field comparisons see Johnson (1991) on regional field research projects, Munroe and Munroe (1991a, 1991b).

Given the great expense of having one researcher or a new team travel to multiple places, new strategies have developed. Perhaps the most important is conducting **collaborative research** which capitalizes on already established research sites. We will hear more about this strategy from Alexandra Brewis and Amber Wutich.

DECIDING BETWEEN TYPES OF COMPARISONS



Diachronic vs. Synchronic Comparisons

If we want to test theories about causes or consequences, then diachronic ("through time") tests become much more important because they may allow us to see if a change in the presumed cause variable precedes the presumed effect.

However, diachronic comparisons are more costly in time and money

- Data will be harder to obtain for multiple time periods and therefore will take much longer to collect and process the data
- Archaeology is more suitable to such analyses as archaeologists routinely try to collect data over time
- This is where country samples may provide advantages since most countries usually have their own written histories and archives.

For these reasons, we recommend that synchronic comparisons be conducted first to eliminate theories that are not likely plausible candidates to be tested further.

General Reading

Chapter 1 of Ember and Ember, *Cross-Cultural Research Methods*, 2nd ed. 2009

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