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INTRODUCING CROSS- CULTURAL RESEARCH

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IN THIS CHAPTER:

- The motivations of cross-cultural researchers
- Uniqueness vs. comparability: why comparison is possible
- Scientific methods used in cross-cultural research
- Basic concepts in cross-cultural research:
 - “Society” vs. “Culture”
 - Variables
- Basic assumptions behind cross-cultural research
- Deciding between types of comparison
- Advantages and disadvantages of different types of comparison

WHY CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH?

From the 1900s and into the present, anthropologists have spent considerable time living with and learning about the culture and social life of people all over the world. This enormous collection of descriptive information is critical to understanding different ways of life. However, cross-cultural researchers want to go beyond mere description of particular societies and cultures. We want to understand how and why societies and cultures differ or are similar to each other. To arrive at this kind of understanding, comparison is essential.



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Cross-culturalists do not deny the uniqueness of each culture; uniqueness and similarity are always present, simultaneously. Which you see depends on how you focus.

-Ember & Ember (2009)





Some believe that cultures are so unique and diverse that they cannot be meaningfully compared. Sometimes at the end of a talk I give, someone in the audience will ask, “How can you compare apples and oranges?”

Here are some of my common replies to point out similarities:

“Oh, I thought that applies and oranges are both fruit. And aren’t they both round?”

“Oh, I thought that they both contain fructose.”

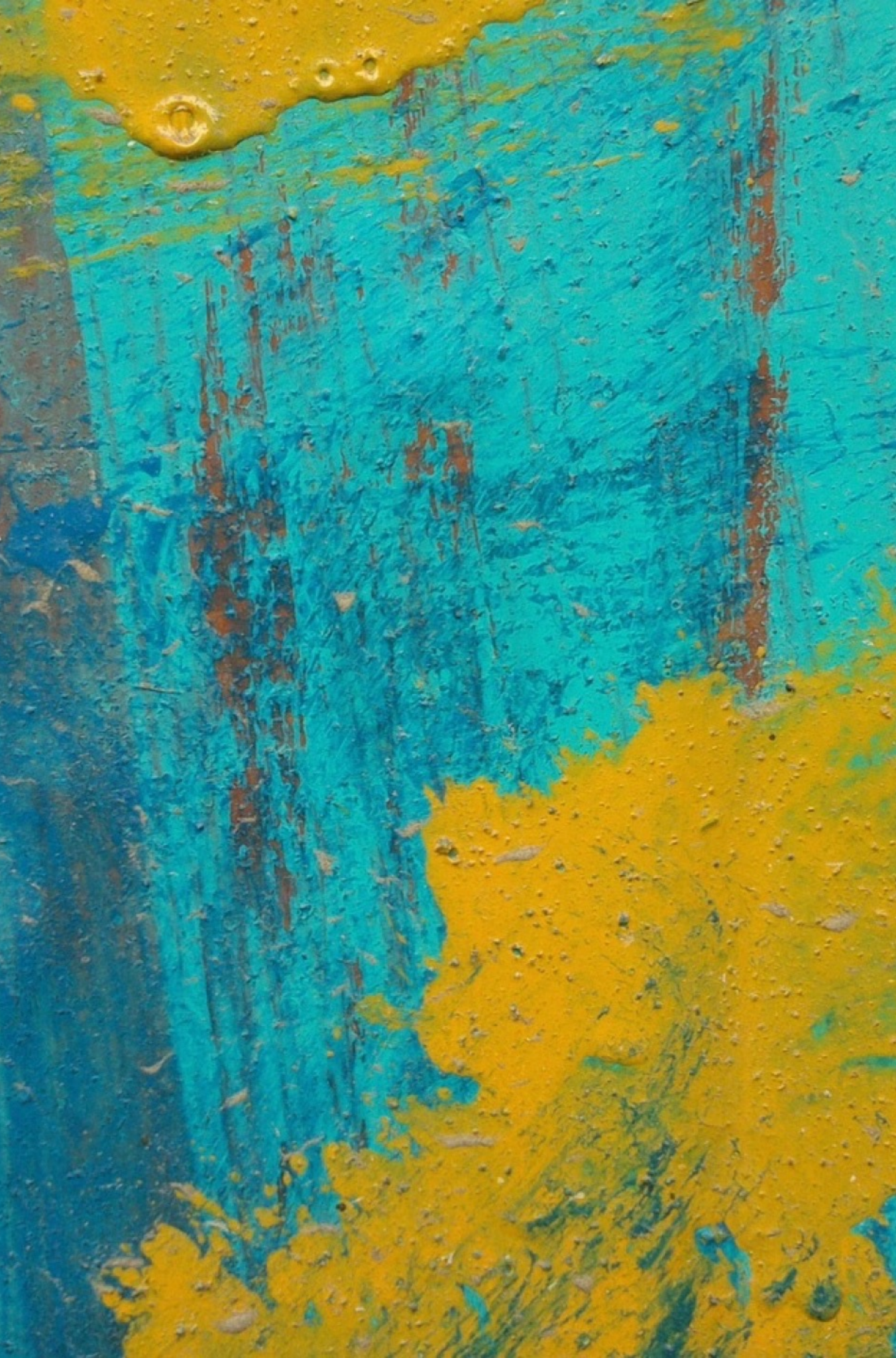
Or, “Don’t they both grow on trees?”

Apples and oranges are obviously different in many ways, but even when we describe differences, we employ (or rely upon) comparison to characterize those differences. For example, we use agreed-upon color words to describe the differently-colored outsides and insides of apples and oranges. We can also use biological taxonomy to say that apples and oranges belong to different biological Orders, although they share the same higher-level Subclass.

Comparisons help us identify both similarities and differences. And even when we describe uniqueness, we are implicitly saying that something differs from all other cases we know about. Even uniqueness employs comparison.



We can focus on uniqueness of a culture if we choose, but we can also focus on similarities or differences. Comparison and uniqueness are not incomparable; they are just different ways of looking.



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“CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH” HAS BECOME A MUCH-USED PHRASE REFERRING TO MANY KINDS OF RESEARCH ABOUT TWO OR MORE CULTURES.

In this brief course, we refer to research using scientific methods that compares a sufficient number of cultures to test at least one hypothesis. The process includes:

1. Formulating a clear research question
2. Developing at least one hypothesis that is derived from theory
3. Designing measures for variables in that hypothesis
4. Measuring variables for an unbiased and representative sample
5. Testing and reporting the significance of results

Before we discuss the methods used in cross-cultural research, it is important that we understand some of the basic concepts and assumptions involved in this type of research.

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“SOCIETY” VS. “CULTURE”

Every group of people that lives together for some time develops some shared behaviors as well as some shared sets of attitudes, beliefs and values. Anthropologists may differ in how they define culture, but when we talk about “culture” in the context of cross-cultural research, we are referring to the culture that is shared by people in a society; that is, a group of people that live in a contiguous area and speak a language not understood by their neighbors.

Society refers to the group of people who share a culture. Keep in mind that any one anthropologist isn’t usually able to study a whole society nor all aspects of a culture. As anthropologist John Whiting remarked, “Anthropologists get to know the people near[est to] where they pitch their tent.” In other words, this is a question of research depth vs. research breadth. Anthropologists are really only able to gain deep understanding of a community or a small local area. Moreover, since cultures change, their knowledge is truly relative only to the snapshot of history in which their research was conducted. This point will be more important later when we discuss a time and place focus.

The background is a complex, abstract texture. It features a mix of vibrant blue, bright yellow, and hints of red. The colors are layered and streaked, giving it a sense of depth and movement, similar to a weathered surface or a close-up of a textured material like paint or stone. The lighting is uneven, with some areas appearing brighter than others, enhancing the tactile quality of the image.

VARIABLES

In my earlier anecdote, I described some dimensions along which apples and oranges could be compared. One dimension was the food category they belonged to (“fruit” being one of many categories); a second was basic shape, and a third was the color. A critical concept to understand is the concept of a **variable**. *A variable is a quality or quantity that varies along a specific dimension.* Variables need to be quite specific.

Some of the following concepts are variables:

- Population density
- Biological genus
- Presence or absence of social classes
- Family organization

We will get into how to “measure” variables in Chapter 4.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND CROSS- CULTURAL RESEARCH



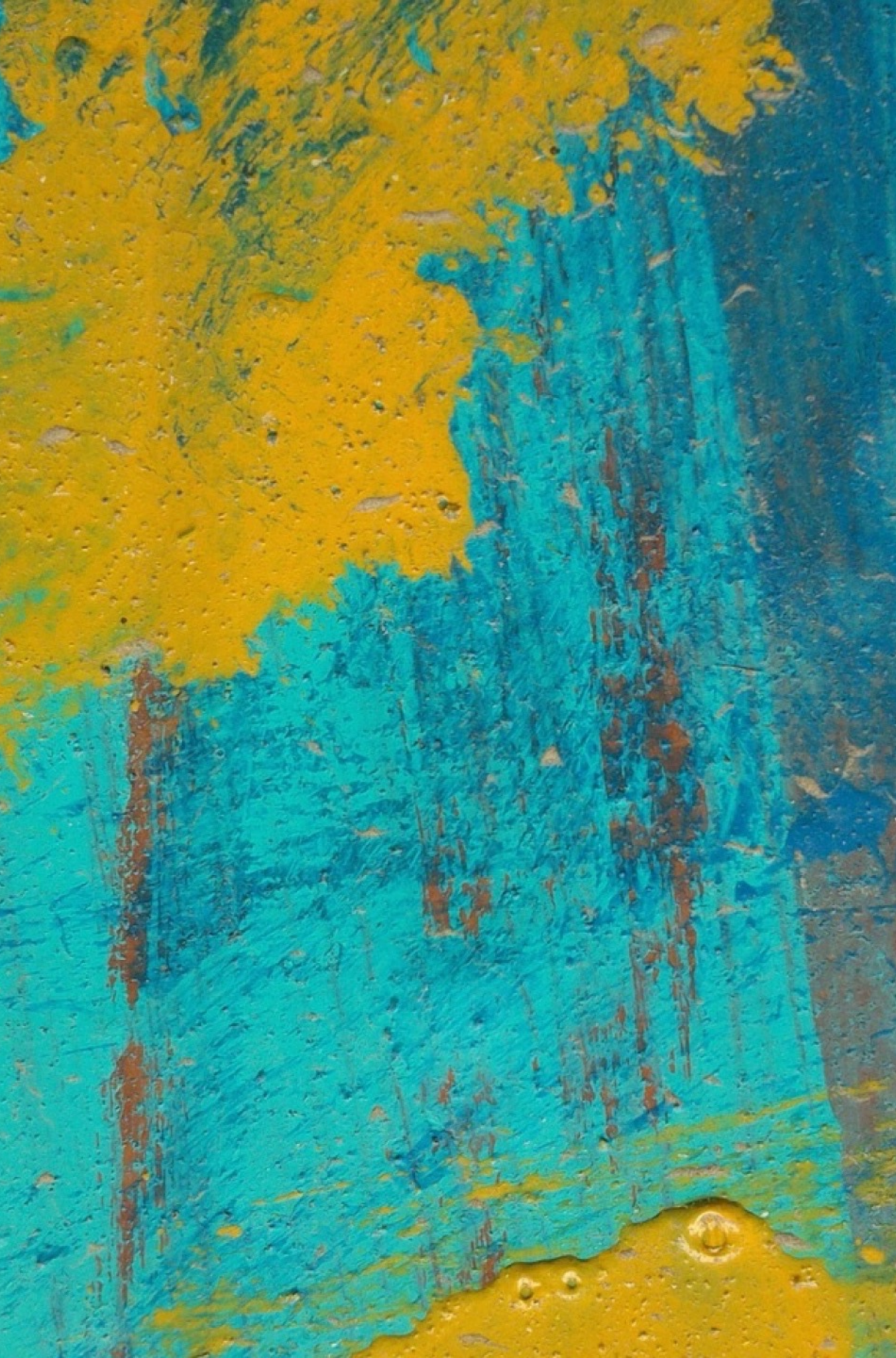
COMPARISON IS POSSIBLE BECAUSE PATTERNS CAN BE IDENTIFIED.

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To do cross-cultural research, you have to believe that there are patterns to be found. Without that belief, a researcher will not look...and without looking, patterns will not be found.

But we can use more than belief to justify this premise. We now have hundreds, perhaps thousands of cross-cultural studies that have identified many types of patterns ranging from the commonness of certain types of behaviors (such as the near-universality of marriage or romantic love) to traits that predict other traits (such as the high likelihood that state societies will have social classes).





ALL GENERALIZATIONS REQUIRE TESTING, NO MATTER HOW PLAUSIBLE.

The scientific method requires us to try to show ourselves to be wrong in our assumptions. This means that we can't just assume that something is correct because it is plausible or because we read it while perusing the ethnographies on our bookshelves. We are committed to a systematic approach; that is, using logically- and scientifically-based testing to verify whether our plausible assumptions hold up under tough scrutiny.

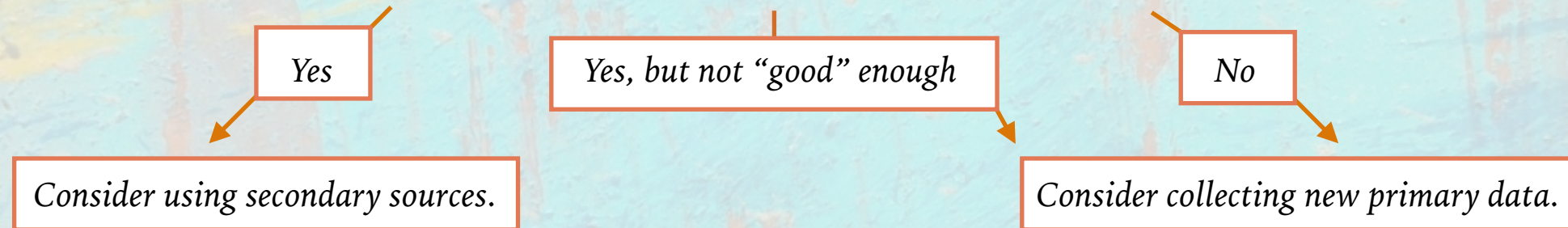
IF A THEORY OR HYPOTHESIS HAS MERIT, THE FOLLOWING SHOULD BE TRUE:

1. What we presume to be a cause should at minimum predict the presumed effect **significantly** for the same time and place. This would be described as a **synchronic** association.
 - a. A **synchronic** (*syn-* or “same”, *chron-* “time”) association means the data for a given case pertains to just one time period. These can be thought of as “ethnographic snapshots.” A **diachronic** (*di-* or “across”, *chron-* or “time”) association involves data from two or more time periods.
 - b. In social science, the convention is that to call a result “**significant**” it must be likely to occur by chance less than 5 times out of 100 ($<.05$). We will discuss this concept more in a later section.
2. The precise dates chosen for the time foci should not matter. Some cases in your sample might have time foci in the 1800s, others in the late 1900s. The important thing is that *within* each case the data adheres to one time focus.
3. To verify a relationship further, presumed causes should precede presumed effects.

DECIDING BETWEEN TYPES OF COMPARISONS

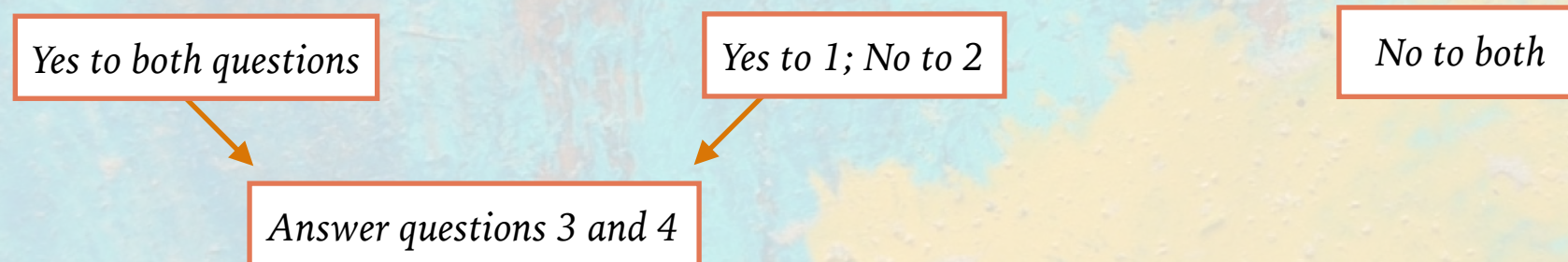
Step 1: Answer the following question:

Do existing sources contain the data needed to answer your research question?



Step 2: To decide between a regional or a worldwide comparison, answer the following questions:

1. Is understanding a region your main research interest?
2. Is the knowledge of the region more important than the possible generalizability of the results?



3. If you are planning to look for an association, does each variable of interest vary within the region?
4. If each variable varies within the region, are there sufficient number of cases across the range of variation?

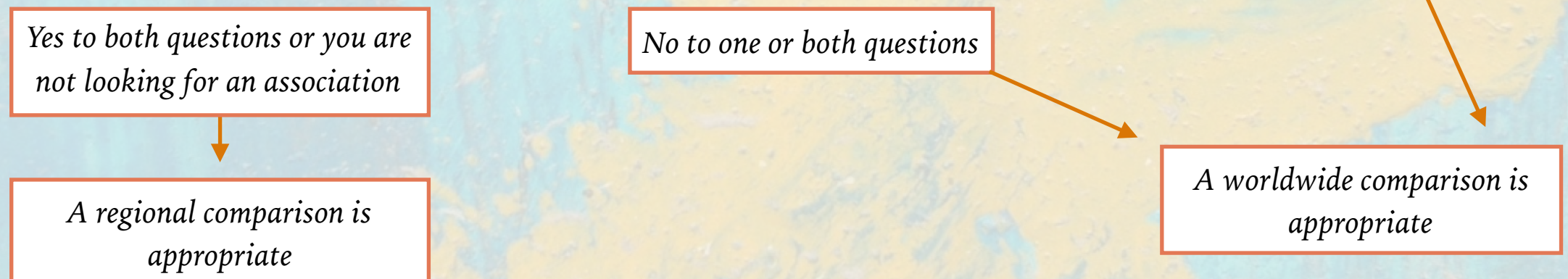


Table 1: Things to consider in choosing your type of comparison

Worldwide cross-cultural comparison	Within-region comparison	Cross-country comparison
Results are probably applicable to most (if not all) regions and types of societies.	Results may or may not be applicable to other regions; acceptable if region is the main interest.	Results may or may not be applicable to the ethnographic record.
Maximizes variation in the variables of interest. (Variation is necessary to see a relationship between variables.)	A limited amount of variation makes relationships difficult to discern.	A limited amount of variation makes relationships difficult to discern.
If hypotheses are not confirmed, limited knowledge of individual societies may mean that test results might be difficult to explain.	More detailed knowledge of a specific region helps in revising a hypothesis when initial results are unsuccessful.	If hypotheses are not confirmed, limited knowledge of individual countries means that test results will be hard to explain.

SUMMARY

- Cross-cultural researchers want to understand **how and why societies and cultures differ or are similar**.
- Comparison is essential to the enterprise, but some believe that cultures differ so widely that comparison is not meaningful.
- **Cross-cultural researchers do not deny uniqueness**; they just focus on dimensions of variation that can be compared.
- **Scientific approaches in cross-cultural research** involve:
 - Formulating a clear research question
 - Developing at least one hypothesis to test
 - Designing measures for the variables in the hypothesis
 - Measuring variables for a representative sample
 - Testing the significance of results
- Some **basic assumptions** are:
 - That comparison is possible because there are patterns to be found
 - All generalizations require testing, no matter how plausible
 - A presumed cause should minimally precede the presumed effects in whatever time period the variables are measured
- **Different types of comparison have advantages and disadvantages**:
 - Worldwide comparisons maximize variation and have the widest generalizability, but researchers will not have as much in-depth knowledge about individual cases
 - Regional comparisons may lack sufficient variation in the variables of interest and may not be applicable to other regions; but regional experts usually have more detailed knowledge of the cultures in the study
 - Cross-country comparisons may not be applicable to the ethnographic record, but they may have more applicability to contemporary life

REFERENCES

Ember, Carol R. and Melvin Ember. 2009. *Cross-Cultural Research Methods*, 2nd edition. AltaMira/Roman & Littlefield.

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