

Possibilities for cross-national comparisons

- There is huge potential across a wide range of subject areas: e.g. incomes, labo(u)r markets, health, and so on ...
- But you need to be clear about why you want to make them; what they can and can't deliver



- Some cautionary remarks from D. Evil Sadvocate
- Some more practical remarks

What do cross-national comparisons add?

From yardsticks and league tables (relatively easy) to better understanding of processes and policies (hard):

1 Yardsticks

- “Hey, we’re different!” Additional perspectives alerting to contrasts in outcomes and institutions, universal versus national issues, ...
- Examples:
 - from Atkinson, Rainwater, Smeeding *Income Distribution in OECD Countries*; Hamermesh work timing papers; ...
 - to not-very-useful ‘league table’ papers (Anon.)

Value-added (continued)

2 Understanding processes and policies

- Rationale: another country adds additional (exogenous) policy and institutional variation
- But difficult to identify their effects from data
 - policy parameters not in the data (or hard to match in). Cf. US national data sets with 50 states providing variation
 - many other things also differ cross-nationally (culture and attitudes, society, behaviour?), and hard to measure
- Always need good and detailed accompanying ‘story’ (‘rhetoric’ in McCloskey’s sense)
 - reference to ‘welfare state regimes’ often yields little new!
- Often easier if focus on smaller number of countries (which? AUS/NZ similar culture, different policies?)
- Diffs-in-diffs to control for national fixed effects?

Harmonised data

Yes, of course, but which approach?

- “Data driven”: lots of variables, and for lots of (European) countries
 - ECHP, CHER (formerly PACO)
- “Research driven”: narrower range of variables and for fewer countries
 - CNEF (PSID, GSOEP, BHPS, SLID): general panels
 - HRS (US) and ELSA (GB): panels about older persons
- Easier for a newbie panel to attach to CNEF-type (more focussed, smaller scale, easier to fund), and would be welcomed!

Cross-national links in personnel

- Forge links between survey producers
 - work together towards data harmonisation
- Forge links between researchers
 - share specialist knowledge about one's own country cross-nationally
- Attendance at each other's user/research conferences
 - BHPS and GSOEP alternate years; HILDA too, but how?
- Establish ad hoc forums, e.g. panel research workshop at Ann Arbor, Oct. 2001, but fund how?
- People will happily visit Australia if they get their costs covered? So maybe real issues are about \$/£/€
- Establish a Fellowship scheme? (You to us | us to you)
 - Avoid funding less valuable short flying visits to Oz; get clear research proposal in advance; ...

Challenges, etc.

- Provide cross-section and longitudinal weights
- Provide imputations for item nonresponse (with flags)
- Provide data files for all main software packages
- Add value:
 - user-friendly versions of complex files e.g. histories
 - derived variables, e.g. estimate direct taxes and thence disposable income
 - cross-nationally comparable variables (e.g. CNEF)
 - geocoded data (e.g. local labour market conditions, etc.)
- Increase the user-base (= constituency of supporters)
 - empirical researchers
 - research students
 - undergraduates (data sets for teaching?)

Challenges, etc., continued

- Be responsive to user base (but not driven by them e.g. pressured into ‘early release’ versions of data)
 - user forums & conferences; ‘one minute’ competitions
- Run training courses, especially on management of data files and matching (not only analysis techniques)
- Ensure that methodological work gets done (despite pressures for substantive)
- Ensure have many and good ‘instruments’ for modelling – data about respondents’ parents, family structure in childhood, labour market entry, and so on.
- Reduce dependence on government department funding for survey itself
 - political winds may change; their emphasis often short-term