

## *Short Paper*

# Comparison in Sociology

Sandro Serpa<sup>1,2,3\*</sup> & Daniela Soares<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of the Azores, Portugal

<sup>2</sup> Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences, CICS.UAc/CICS.NOVA.UAc

<sup>3</sup> Interdisciplinary Centre for Childhood and Adolescence, NICA-UAc

<sup>4</sup> Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences, CICS.NOVA

\* Sandro Serpa, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of the Azores, Portugal

Received: February 7, 2020      Accepted: February 15, 2020      Online Published: February 22, 2020

doi:10.22158/elsr.v1n1p1

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v1n1p1>

### ***Abstract***

*The relationship between comparison and sociology is a fundamental motive when deepening the forms of sociological research. This paper aims to contribute to the analysis of the importance of comparison, in several possible forms, in the creation and consolidation of sociological knowledge. To accomplish this goal, a documental collection and analysis of manuscripts deemed essential was carried out based on the snowball system, in which the reading of manuscripts referred to other manuscripts that, by their mobilization, seemed crucial on this topic. It is concluded that comparison is a process that is always present and it is essential in sociology, although sometimes in a more explicit way, and other times in a more implicit way.*

### ***Keywords***

*sociology, comparison, sociological analysis, comparative sociology, social sciences, scientific knowledge*

### **1. Introduction**

The process of comparison in sociology is a fundamental reason when deepening the forms of sociological research. According to Derivry (1990), “The comparison is *a fortiori* the universal stance of all scientific knowledge” (p. 45).

Sociology can be considered, for the purposes of this text, as “a scientific discipline that perceives in its specific way the social reality, producing plural theoretical topics, formulating research problems within the context of these topics, and developing methodical strategies that guide empirical research” (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017, p. 1), based on the key classical rule defined by Émile Durkheim in 1895—to

explain the social by the social (Durkheim, 1982; Aron, 1994; Cruz, 1989; Paiva, 2014). As an example of the importance of this founding rule of sociology, Charles Wright Mills (2000) sustains that “abstracted empiricists are systematically a-historical and non-comparative; they deal with small-scale areas and they incline to psychologism” (p. 138), as “the attempt to explain social phenomena in terms of facts and theories about the make-up of individuals” (p. 67).

This paper aims to contribute to the analysis of the importance of comparison, in various possible forms, in the creation of sociological knowledge. To accomplish this goal, a documental collection and analysis of manuscripts deemed essential was carried out based on the snowball system, in which the reading of manuscripts referred to other manuscripts that, by their mobilization, seemed crucial on this topic.

## **2. Comparison in Sociological Research**

For Derivry (1990), comparison as a method results from a cognitive process through which one seeks to understand a phenomenon by analyzing and confronting different situations where it is recorded, and Sociology, like the other social sciences, has a comparative dimension, both at a theoretical and an empirical level (Mills, 2000).

Durkheim (1982) maintained that when the production of facts that are generated spontaneously is alien to the observer’s intervention, we are faced with the use of the direct experimentation method or the comparative method, as opposed to situations in which phenomena are artificially produced by the observer. In this case, we are dealing with the experimentation method. The author also mentions that Sociology seeks to explain phenomena through the effects of causality, and since social phenomena eliminate any form of control by the researcher, the comparative method remains the most appropriate method for Sociology (Durkheim, 1982).

According to Derivry (1990), the comparison in sociological research can take on two forms: a) comparison of concrete situations in different spaces and/or times; and b) comparison with a theoretical model. These two possibilities will be analyzed below.

### *2.1 Comparison of Concrete Situations in Different Spaces and/or Times*

Malcolm (2015), analyzing the role of comparison in sociological analysis of sports history, offers an excellent synthesis of the potential of this comparison of concrete situations in different spaces and/or times. Building on Durkheim’s proposal, the author argues that the comparison could take on three types: intra-societal, inter-societal or cross-species, emphasizing the importance that, whenever possible, this comparison should cover a wider scale to enhance its heuristic capacity.

Malcolm (2015) concludes that Sociology seeks to explain phenomena through the effects of causality, and since social phenomena eliminate any form of control by the researcher, the comparative method remains the most appropriate for Sociology. However, it is essential for Sociology not to lose a historical orientation (Charrad, 2006; Ferreira & Serpa, 2019), as well as a fruitful relationship of dialogue between scientific disciplines. Serpa, Ferreira, and Santos (2017) advocate that “Our goal

should be the synthesis of understanding of higher and lower levels of generality and fundamental to this is the extensive use of comparison” (p. 1811).

Specifically regarding the relationship between Sociology and History, the sociological analysis seeks to point out the uniformities and repetitions of social phenomena, as well as the verified correlations, whereas historical analysis aims to gather relevant information that enables the understanding of a specific event that is unique and unrepeatably. Ferrarotti (1986, cit. in Ferreira & Serpa, 2019) contends that:

The sociological analysis would aim, through the verification of the hypotheses, to identify in social phenomena what is uniform and repeatable, to identify the existence of certain correlations between two series of phenomena. In turn, the historical analysis would aim to accrue, by examining sources and document reconstruction, significant data that allows the understanding of a specific, unique and unrepeatably event (p. 113).

In a synthesis, Mills (2000) claims that “we must study the available range of social structures, including the historical as well as the contemporary. If we do not take into account the range, which does not of course mean all existing cases, our statements cannot be empirically adequate. [...] Comparative study and historical study are very deeply involved with each other” (p. 147, p. 150).

## *2.2 Comparison to a Theoretical Model*

The comparison can also be made through the confrontation with a theoretical model, such as the ideal type proposed by Max Weber in 1904 (Serpa, 2018; Swedberg, 2017) that is still mobilized today in social sciences, although sometimes not in a systematic way (Oliverio, 2020; Swedberg, 2017).

About the ideal-type as research strategy (Paiva, 2014; Aron, 1989; Bhambra, 2016), as a specific type of comparison (for an excellent discussion, see Swedberg, 2017), Schnapper (2000) maintains that it is “A simplified and schematic framework of the object of research, with which systematic observation of the real [...] must be confronted” (p. 30), by a typological analysis through the “stylization or accentuation of essential features [...], [which] allows for the synthesis of research acquisitions in order to extract the fundamental characteristics or to elaborate an abstract model with which the ducts can be compared” (p. 35). According to Oliverio (2020), the use of the ideal type, “Conceived as a non-normative form of conceptualization finalized to simplify and reduce external social world complexity, [...] allows the organization of an increasing knowledge acquaintance” (p. 1). The author further argues that “Ideal types are in practice pure constructs of causal relations that the researcher conceives as objectively probable and causally adequate on the strength of his/her nomological knowledge, while assuming an ‘active’ role in the rational interpretative process” (Oliverio, 2020, p. 3). As indicated by Swedberg (2017), it is necessary to make a comparison between the ideal type and the phenomenon under analysis. This means putting the ideal type and reality face to face. If the differences between the two are significant, the ideal type must be adjusted or, as Weber reiterates, these differences must be explained.

In summary, in this situation, the comparison is made between the ideal type as an ideal construction through the delimitation of a set of extreme characteristics and the empirical information obtained from the reality actually observed (Oliverio, 2020), taking into consideration that “there is the need to select some specific dimensions of the object, with relevance and rigorous justification, being careful to neither over-simplify reality, nor bring complexity to it, to the point that this concept becomes unintelligible and without heuristic ability” (Serpa, 2018, p. 1).

### 3. Conclusion

Considering what has been put forth in this article, the comparison is, then, crucial to sociological knowledge (Budiana, Otsuka, & Yoshihara, 2019; Guclu, 2019; Spohn, 2017). Following Durkheim (1982), “Comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts” (p. 158).

In conclusion, the comparison is a process that is continuously present in Sociology, even if in Sociology it is not possible to bring about situations to be compared. Furthermore, this process is essential, although sometimes in a more explicit way and other times in a more implicit way. This is the only way to shape the sociological imagination: “The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions” (Mills, 2000, p. 5).

### Funding

University of the Azores, Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences—CICS.UAc/CICS.NOVA.UAc, UID/SOC/04647/2019, with the financial support of FCT/MEC through national funds and, when applicable, co-financed by FEDER under the PT2020 Partnership Agreement.

### Acknowledgements

The authors thank the comments and suggestion by the anonymous reviewers.

### References

- Aron, R. (1994). *As etapas do pensamento sociológico* [The stages of the sociological thought]. Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote.
- Bhambra, G. K. (2016). Comparative historical sociology and the State: Problems of method. *Cultural Sociology*, 10(3), 335-351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975516639085>
- Budiana, I. M., Otsuka, A., & Yoshihara, N. (2019). A preliminary assessment of Chonaikai and Banjar from the perspectives of the Comparative Sociology on the community. *Udayana Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (UJoSSH)*, 3(1), 40. <https://doi.org/10.24843/UJoSSH.2019.v03.i01.p07>

- Charrad, M. M. (2006). Waves of Comparative and Historical Sociology. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 47(5), 351-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715206068617>
- Cruz, M. B. (1989). *Teorias sociológicas. Os fundadores e os clássicos* [Sociological theories. The founders and the classics]. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- Derivry, D. (1990). Comparativo (método) [Comparative (method)]. In R. Boudon, P. Besnard, & M. Cherkaoui (Eds.), *Dicionário de Sociologia* [Dictionary of Sociology] (pp. 44-46). Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote.
- Durkheim, É. (1982). *The rules of sociological method*. New York: Free Press. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-16939-9>
- Ferreira, C. M., & Serpa, S. (2019). Dialogues between Sociology and History. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 8(6), 112. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v8n6p112>
- Ferreira, C., & Serpa, S. (2017). Challenges in the teaching of Sociology in higher education. Contributions to a discussion. *Societies*, 7(4), 30. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc7040030>
- Guclu, I. (2019). Social change and development: A critical comparison of classical with contemporary sociological theory. *Studies in Asian Social Science*, 6(2), 66. <https://doi.org/10.5430/sass.v6n2p66>
- Malcolm, D. (2015). Durkheim and sociological method: Historical Sociology, Sports History, and the role of comparison. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32(15), 1808-1812. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2015.1108968>
- Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oliverio, A. (2020). The importance of models in Sociology: The example of Max Weber. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 10(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2020.101001>
- Paiva, A. (2014). *Pensamento sociológico. Uma introdução didática às teorias clássicas* [Sociological thought. A didactic introduction to classical theories]. Lisboa: PACTOR—Edições de Ciências Sociais, Forenses e da Educação.
- Schnapper, D. (2000). *A compreensão sociológica. Como fazer análise tipológica* [Sociological understanding. How to do typological analysis]. Lisboa: Gradiva.
- Serpa, S. (2018). Ideal type in sociological research. *Sociology International Journal*, 2(5). <https://doi.org/10.15406/sij.2018.02.00075>
- Serpa, S., Ferreira, C. M., & Santos, A. I. (2017). Fostering interdisciplinarity: Implications for social sciences. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 5(12), 44. <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v5i12.2775>
- Spohn, W. (2017). Historical and Comparative Sociology in a globalizing world. *Historická Sociologie*, 1, 9-27. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363525.2017.50>
- Swedberg, R. (2017). How to use Max Weber's ideal type in sociological analysis. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 18(3), 181-196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X17743643>