

## ASR Publishes the Latest International and Comparative Sociological Studies

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In a recent [Footnotes essay](#) (December 2005), I noted the growth in multimethod research articles published in the *American Sociological Review* (ASR), ASA's flagship scholarly journal. Many authors have creatively combined the richness of in-depth interviews with the generalizability of survey data to provide a compelling analysis of their topic. In this present article, I describe a complementary trend, namely, the rapid growth of international and comparative studies. While the multi-method approach flourishes on intimate knowledge put in a broader social context, the international style highlights the broad variety of social arrangements across countries. More than one-third of the papers published in *ASR* over the last three years have had an international dimension. This trend coincides with ASA's internationalization efforts to expand globally through a variety of outlets.

### Beyond the United States

Several *ASR* studies focus on countries other than the United States. While this research sometimes involves an implicit comparison with the United States, as is the case with James Raymo and Miho Iwasawa's (2005) study of women's education and marriage patterns in Japan, more often such studies simply seek to understand social patterns in a faraway setting. For example, Hayagreeva Rao and his colleagues (2005) studied the rise of eclectic cuisine in France, while Kim Korinek and her coauthors (2005) studied the role of social networks in urban settlement patterns in Thailand.

A second approach uses international data to place the United States in a comparative perspective. Thus, Robert Andersen and his colleagues (2006) show that recent trends in U.S. civic participation diverge from those in several other advanced industrial countries. Similarly, Lars Osberg and Timothy Smeeding (2006) revisit the question of American exceptionalism in their analysis of beliefs about inequality in the United States and 26 other countries. These studies remind us that patterns and explanations developed to explain the American experience do not always hold in other settings.

### Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal

A third approach tries to explain variation across a set of countries. International comparative research designs can be divided into cross-sectional studies and longitudinal ones. Cross-sectional research often draws on recently developed international databases, such as the World Values Survey, the Eurobarometer Survey, and the Luxembourg Income Study. Country-level measures—the level of democracy, educational levels of the populace, or the level of economic development—often are employed in conjunction with individual-level variables in a multi-level analysis. Hadas Mandel and Moshe Semyonov (2005) conducted this style of research when they examined public policies and the gender gap in wages in 20 countries.

Longitudinal studies are even more ambitious. These studies not only compare countries but also seek to explain changes over time. For example, Pamela Paxton and her research team explain variation in women's political representation in 150 countries over the period 1893-2003. In an especially ambitious case of developing an original data set, Andreas Wimmer and Brian Min (2006) created a data set to examine the causes of war over the last 200 years.

Studies of international dynamics represent a final approach. Whereas comparative studies juxtapose two or more countries to find commonalities and differences, a focus on global interaction seeks to identify the dynamic processes that produce commonalities and divergences across countries. For example, David Brady and his co-authors (2005) examined whether the economic pressures of globalization were undermining the generosity of European welfare states. In another case, Evan Schofer and John Meyer (2005) sought to explain the worldwide diffusion of higher education over the course of the 20th century. As countries continue to grow ever more tightly interconnected, globalizing processes will be increasingly central for understanding economics, culture, institutions and politics.

## Challenges of International Research

International research has its own set of challenges. It is difficult to develop truly comparable measures. The more countries covered and the longer the time period, the greater the challenge of performing comparative research. The sample of countries is often restricted by data availability in ways that limit theoretical inferences. Political boundaries have changed in certain regions and periods of time. International studies are often weak in the very ways that multimethod studies are strong, namely they tend to be conducted at a considerable distance from individual experience and attempt to answer theoretical questions of an abstract nature. Successful research in this area, as in all others, requires skill and insight, not just a large database.

I end my term as editor of the *American Sociological Review* deeply impressed by the quality and breadth of research in our field. No single method or approach currently available or on the horizon is likely to fully encompass the complexity of

social life. But our studies are rapidly becoming richer and more sophisticated by using a range of methods, samples, and comparisons, shedding light on many fascinating and important aspects of our social world. Our discipline's embrace of diverse approaches to analyzing social life leaves me optimistic about sociology's ability to illuminate our ever-changing social world.

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