The Comparative Method Essay, Research Paper

Sociologists have embraced what is known as the comparative method as the

most efficient way to expose taken-for-granted ‘truths’ or laws that people

have adopted. But what is this comparative method and how does it work?

Are there any advantages/disadvantages to exposing these false ‘truths’.

What forms or variations of the comparative method exist? In the pages to

follow I will attempt to give you some insight and understanding of what the

comparative method is, and how it works.

The comparative method, simply put, is the process of comparing two things

(in our case societies, or the people that make up society) and seeing if

the result of the comparison shows a difference between the two. The

comparative method attempts to dereify (the process of exposing

misinterpreted norms. Norms that society consider natural and inevitable

characteristics of human existence) reified (the human created norms or

‘truths’) beliefs.

Obviously there are various ways in which a nomi (a labeled, sometime

constructed, norm or truth) can be exposed. Which form of the comparative

method should one use however? The answer, whichever one applies to the

‘truth’ in question. For example, you certainly would not do a cross-gender

form of comparison if you wished to expose whether or not homosexuality has

always been feared and looked down upon by most people throughout history.

No, rather you would perform a historical comparison of two or more

different societies to see if these beliefs always existed, or, whether or

not this is a newly constructed belief.

Let’s look at little more closely at the above mentioned historical

comparison and see how the comparative method works with a specific example.

There is no question that in today’s western society there is a lot of fear

and trepidation towards people who are labeled ‘homosexual’. The question

we will attempt to answer however is whether or not it has always been like

this and is this a universal truth.

In ancient Greek societies people had a very different opinion of men that

slept with men. For example, it was considered quite an honor for a family

with a young boy under the age of 10, to be given the privilege on an older

man of high society taking their son into his house. The young boy would go

and live with this older man. The older man would have sex with the young

boy on a regular basis until the boy developed facial hair. It was not

until then that the boy was considered a man. Society thought that an older

mans, of great reputation, semen would help the boy develop into a fine

young man. Once the boy developed the facial hair, the sex between the two

would stop. The older man’s job was finished. Obviously this would be

considered an atrocious and disgusting act these days. The older man in

this case would certainly go to jail for the ‘crimes’ that he had committed.

However, in Ancient Greece this was not only considered perfectly normal,

but as I already stated, it was an honor and a gift that not every boy was

‘lucky’ enough to be given. Therefore, we can conclude from this comparison

that homophobia, as we know it, is not a natural truth, nor is it a

universal belief. Rather it is a socially constructed belief that many

people have taken for granted as an inevitable part of human existence.

It is important at this point to clarify something however. It is said

that the role of the sociologist is a descriptive one as opposed to a

prescriptive one. That is to say that the sociologist should describe the

various practices, customs and structures that exist in various societies

rather than suggest to people which one is actually the correct belief or

the ‘real’ truth.

Cross-gender comparisons is another commonly used comparison used to reveal

socially constructed truths. In Carol Gilligan’s book ‘In a different

voice’ we find a fine example of a cross-gender comparison. She states that

most people believe that the majority of people, both men and women, view

morale issues in the same way. However, through empirical data collection,

Carol Gilligan concludes that this is not most often the case. Rather, she

states that men tend to approach moral issues quite differently than women.

Where as men view morale issues with a "don’t interfere with my rights"

view, women focus more on the "responsibility" end of the morale involved.

Thus we can conclude, thanks to the comparative method, that the constructed

truth that all people view morale issues the same is not a correct one.

Another quick example of a cross-gender comparison would be that of the

house-wife. Still today most men view the role of the married woman as one

that involves being a house-wife, in the traditional sense of the term.

However, women today certainly would not view themselves in the same manner.

The data collected from a comparison such as this could help to dereify this

socially constructed truth.

Cross-class comparisons is also a comparison commonly used when attempting

to expose constructed truths between two classes. i.e. lower-class,

upper-class, middle-class. For an example I refer to my lecture notes. Our

professor gave us a fine example of a cross-class comparison involving his

own life. He was from a middle-class family and attended a public school

where he got involved with various kids from the middle and lower class. He

grew up in this type of environment and accepted it as the his life as the

way society was. To him, there was not another lifestyle. This was life.

Several events occurred and because of these events our professor was moved,

by his parents, to a private school. This private school and the ‘new’

society that accompanied it resulted in a form of culture shock for him.

All of a sudden he was placed in a new world, a world that he never even

knew existed. As you can see, our professor socially constructed the view

that society was like the one that he lived in when he went to his public

school, hung around with middle and lower-class friends, and did what middle

and lower-class kids did. When he was afforded the chance to compare that

type of lifestyle to one of the upper-class he dereified his constructed

view and his eyes opened to a new reality and a new view of the way society was.

Another major comparative form is that of the cross-generational. This one

is fairly straight forward. The name basically says it all. In fact, it’s

much like the historical comparison method but on a much smaller scale. I

believe that in order for it to be termed cross-generational, the

generations that are being analyzed have to be living at the same time.

Otherwise it becomes a historical comparison. Karen Anderson gives an

example of a cross-generational comparison in her book Sociology : A

Critical Introduction (1996, pg. 12).

"Canadians pride themselves on their tolerance and lack of prejudice. But

we do not need to look very far into our history to find examples of

taken-for-granted understandings that have led to discriminatory and

prejudicial treatment. Some segments of the population have been

classified as undesirable and thus as unwanted or undeserving outsiders…"

Anderson is pointing out that the constructed view in Canada is that we

pride ourselves on the fact that we have very little prejudice in Canada.

She goes on to point out that this is not at all the case. She gives the

example of Canada’s history of immigration. She discusses the fact that a

lot of Chinese people were allowed to immigrate to Canada, much to the

dismay of current residents and already established European immigrants,

during the time when the transcontinental railroad was being built. Sir

John A. Macdonald was the Prime Minister at this time and defended his

reputation by telling the people of Canada, who were very disturbed by his

actions, that the Chinese immigrants would live in Western Canada just

temporarily. To reassure the people further Macdonald said "…no fear of a

permanent degradation of the country by a mongrel race". This would be

considered horrific these days. Most Canadians would not even realize that

their country was very closed to the idea of the immigration of certain

types of people. The social idea that Canada is, and always have been, a

very tolerant country is exposed as a false, constructed truth through this

cross-generational comparison.

Finally we come to the last major comparative form. That of the

cross-cultural. Cross-cultural comparison consists of comparing two

societies or cultures in an attempt to reveal and expose some socially

constructed ‘truths’ in order to prove that they are not universal but

rather they are relative to each society.

There are literally thousands of differences between almost every culture

that people would be surely shocked to learn of. For the next example I

will show how the cross-cultural comparative method dereifies some of the

constructed so-called universal-truths that people in our society may have.

India differs in it’s customs considerably from that of Canada or Northern

America. For example, in Western Civilization families sit together when

they attend church, in India this is not acceptable at all. Men and women

must sit on opposite sides of the church. Men and women in India for the

most part will not eat together, whereas in Western civilization it is a

common practice and is actually looked upon as a good time for a little

family bonding. In India it is considered rude to eat with both hands at

the table. The right had is solely used for eating and the left for

drinking. Obviously we have a completely different practice in Western

society. Another shock that a Westerner might face if he/she were to travel

to India would be the fact that it is still considered a major social

impropriety for a man to even touch a woman in public. In North America

public displays of affection can been seen everywhere. . (Stott, John.

Down To Earth. 1980. Pg. 12-15)

These are all prime examples of Western universal truths that are exposed

when compared to another culture.

One of the major benefits for exposing these truths through the comparative

method is the fact that dereifying accepted truths leads to a decrease in

ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the act of interpreting all societies

through one’s own cultural lenses and believing that there idea of truths

are the only correct ones. This could lead to the imposing of one’s own

beliefs onto other societies.In other words, comparing, exposing, and

dereifying helps educate and eliminate ignorance when it comes to social

‘truths’. However, there is a danger to exposing social constructs. It

could lead to one taking on the perceptive of a radical relativist (all

truths are correct) or a nihilistic view (the belief that all truths are

relative and therefore there are no truths). Obviously this is a very

negative, and possibly a destructive, way of thinking.

As you can see, the comparative method is an essential part of a

sociologists practice. Without it there would be a lot of confusion and

misunderstanding between people and societies. Hopefully I have shown by

example the various forms of the comparative method and how each of them

applies to society and how they attempt to expose falsities.