



# Concepts, context and discourse in a comparative case study

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This paper examines the methodological issues encountered in a comparative case study, which investigated how discourses shaped and legitimated policy maintenance and policy change in Germany before and after unification. The research strategy involved discourse analysis of party political and parliamentary documents, integrating detailed textual and contextual analysis of the institutional framework within which discourses were articulated. The paper examines the possibility of using comparative case studies to develop concepts, and reviews the relationship between concepts and context in qualitative comparative research. A critique is then offered of the process of analysis, ranging from the initial data analysis using NUD\*IST, to the re-contextualisation of the textual analysis, and the re-integration of context, theory and textual analysis in writing up the research.

## Introduction

This paper examines the methodological issues arising from the application of critical discourse analysis in a comparative case study. The research aimed to understand how discourses shaped and legitimized policy change and continuity in Germany before and after unification. As a result, two objectives were identified for the research: one empirical and the other theoretical. The policy areas examined were family and labour market policies. The consequent empirical objective was to identify the different ways in which appropriate roles for state, market and family were conceptualized in political and policy discussions and outputs over time. The theoretical aim was to delineate and explain the relationship between policy, politics and discourses in a particular time and place.

By examining the process of unification of two states over time, the importance of comparing changing contexts—political, social and economic—became apparent. The need arose to develop a methodologically defensible, and practically feasible, research strategy for identifying contexts that were directly related to the detailed textual analysis.

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The research strategy involved the analysis of political party and parliamentary documents relating to the two largest parties in Germany: the Christian Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Party, over a ten-year period. This textual analysis was then integrated with a contextual analysis of the institutional and socio-economic framework within which discourses were articulated. The paper offers a critique of the four stages of analysis used in the research: contextual analysis and its relationship to the development of concepts in the study; initial data analysis using computer software; the reassessment of context and discourse; and the integration of theory, context and discourse analysis in writing up the research. The discussion outlines the reasoning behind the strategy and evaluates its methodological and practical consequences for the research.

### **Case studies and concepts**

The research questions in the study focused on a concrete situation, delineated in terms of time and space, which as a singular example of social change is worthy of study in itself (Dogan and Pelassey 1990, Bradshaw and Wallace 1991: 155–157). The aim was to identify the ways in which state, market and family were conceptualized in German policy-making before and after unification. In addition, a case study offered the opportunity to conduct an in-depth examination of differences within Germany (Amenta 1991: 173–174). It allowed for the explicit exploration of inner-German differences in the symbolic construction of policy issues, whether in terms of region such as north/south, as well as the more obvious east/west, political affiliation, gender or citizenship status.

However, methodological difficulties with the role of theory arise in two broad areas of qualitative cross-national research, especially with regard to case studies. The first is a matter of principle: what role can and should theory have? The second is a matter of practice: how might concepts be applied?

Single-country studies aiming to make a theoretical contribution face the criticism that, in being only implicitly comparative (and sometimes not even that), they do not allow theoretical generalizations, or even theoretical conclusions, to be drawn (Kohn 1989, Nowak 1989: 37–39, Keman 1993: 54). Even qualitative researchers fall prey to the positivist emphasis on testing and generalizing theory. Skocpol (1984: 369–374) distinguishes between ‘interpretive’ and ‘analytic’ approaches to historical comparative research, where the former is concerned with understanding events and processes, and the latter with explaining their causal regularity. Skocpol argues that the interpretive approach suffers from a concern with detail and depth, and is unable to offer explanatory theories, which can, nonetheless, be developed within the analytic approach. She argues that theoretically rigorous explanations can only be developed through comparative research which identifies a series of necessary and sufficient causes for a particular event. Alternatively, Ragin (1987) adopts Boolean techniques to simplify, and thus make transferable, theoretical explanations of common events while apparently relating them to particular contexts. This was an attempt

to combine the theoretical rigour of large-scale studies with the sensitivity to context of small-N studies.

These approaches appear to be seduced by the chimera of objectivity, rigour and generalizability. Both set up a false dichotomy between contextualization and conceptualization in research, which they then 'overcome' by adopting their particular favoured techniques. Skocpol separates 'understanding' from 'explanation', when one actually presupposes the other. While Ragin (1989: 69–70) admires some aspects of the 'qualitative' or small-N approach, the implication of his method is that regular qualitative research can only describe, as it cannot explain, particular phenomena. And this is even translated into claims of greater 'rigour' for Boolean techniques (Griffen *et al.* 1991: 124–131, Wickham-Crowley 1991: 86–87).

In themselves, both the techniques are useful, and can lead to illuminating, even groundbreaking conceptual insights. However, Ragin and Skocpol deal with 'causally focused' research objectives, where the aim was to establish a particular set of variables to explain a singular event. In research that aims to delineate and explain a series of social relationships, as in the present case, an alternative view of the role of theory might be applied. As the methodological premise of most qualitative research is to develop theoretical perspectives from the particular and the concrete, then theoretical validity should be open primarily to the test of applicability, rather than that of generalizability.

Small-N studies can benefit from the engagement with different contexts, which facilitates the conceptualization of core common features of a particular process, experience or event, without any loss of rigour (Rueschemeyer 1991: 32). One of the advantages of qualitative cross-national research is that the development of such conceptualizations is deeply embedded in the context from which they arose, and thus is concretely linked to particular times and places (Ragin 1989: 69–70, Bradshaw and Wallace 1991: 162). Indeed, the exploratory nature of the present theoretical approach also lent itself to a case study. Before the research commenced, a bundle of possible conceptualizations of symbolic power, discourse, and their possible role in policy-making had been identified. The aim was to work these ideas through the data analysis to refine them, or to examine if a reconceptualization was required. While it is more usual to test existing theories in single-country studies (Amenta 1991: 173–174), the development of a finely honed theoretical framework, or conceptualization of an issue is equally well suited to cross-national case study research (Griffin *et al.* 1991: 112).

Nonetheless, regarding the practical development and application of concepts, additional issues arise. The development of concepts is complex, requiring imagination and sensitivity in qualitative research in general, and more particularly if a grounded theory or an exploratory approach is taken. In cross-national research, these difficulties are often compounded by the 'non-translatibility' or non-transferability of concepts. Both of these have been discussed elsewhere (Pitrou 1994, Jobert 1996, Rainbird 1996, Hantrais in this volume), and it only needs to be emphasized here that linguistic and conceptual clarity is of crucial importance to the qualitative

comparativist. It is particularly important if a balance is to be struck between adopting concepts which 'travel' (Rose 1991), and avoiding 'conceptual straining' (Sartori 1973: 184), whereby concepts become so general as to be impossible to apply. Qualitative research has the potential to explore the varying meanings of concepts in different national contexts as part of its comparison. Indeed, using empirical research to break down the concept of care, law, or welfare and to explore the meaning of its (different) components in different locations has theoretical and empirical value in itself (Ferrari 1990: 75).

### **Contexts and concepts**

In comparing the two German states prior to unification, and in providing a context to the documentary analysis which focused on the post-unification state, no attempt at 'functional equivalence' was made. To have done so would have blurred the striking differences between the states which shaped the process of unification after 1990 (Teune 1990: 54). It was precisely by marking out the theoretical and empirical differences between the political, economic and social structures of the states, that post-unification developments in both parts of the country could be analysed.

The first context to be examined was that of the politics and policy-making in both Germanies. Conducted through a conventional literature review and from previous research, the two German polities were 'segmented' (Dogan and Pelassey 1990) according to four features of their political systems. In this case, the constitutions, the structure of political parties, policy-making procedures, and central-local relations in the two states were compared. Additional analysis was undertaken on national and *Land* electoral results (pre-1990 for West Germany only) over the ten-year period. The latter were designed to clarify the political context to policy debates. A three-way scheme was adopted to identify the politico-economic context to the study. The 'free' market was contrasted with the command economy; corporatism with the co-option of trade unions; and the 'social market economy' with the 'unity of economic and social policy'. Secondary data on family composition, as well as employment and unemployment rates were analysed, in order to compare trends in East and West Germany over time, as well as to identify gender differences in each region. Policy expenditures, such as those relating to active and passive labour market policies, and also the profile of active labour market scheme participants were analysed, providing a context of policy outcomes over the period. The latter was designed to assist in the identification of any disjuncture between policy and political discourses, and their respective policy outputs.

Concepts were explored and challenged in two ways in the research. The first related to the theoretical concerns. The detailed analysis of documents revealed that the impact and role of particular constructions could be separated into three types of discourse. Thus, in meeting the theoretical aim of the research, the 'strained concept' of discourse was interrogated and broken down into three types, each of which had a different relationship with politics and policy-making in Germany at this

time. The second way was by making concepts such as family, employment, market and state the subject of research, a task for which the techniques of critical discourse analysis were eminently suited. By comparing the meanings conveyed in such concepts between parties, and between East and West German politicians and political groups over time, the analysis facilitated an insight into the political weight and meaning attached to these concepts.

### **Initial data analysis**

The fieldwork was conducted over a period of nine months in Germany, time which was also used to access supplementary German literature on the policy area. In addition to documentary analysis, 'information' interviews were conducted with members of parties, to assist in contextualising the discourse analysis.

Data analysis began in earnest after the end of the fieldwork. This was unsatisfactory for two reasons. The first is that a single visit (if long) did not allow the researcher to 'go back and check' on finer details, although long experience of documentary research meant that the need to do this only arose on one or two occasions. More significantly, the process of analysis required a mental shift back to the context of the country being studied, whereas discussion with colleagues and friends, and daily immersion in the culture and politics during fieldwork had prompted many of the most useful insights into the data. The complexities of the insider/outsider relationship have been little discussed in the literature on cross-national research, and unfortunately there is no space to discuss them here. Important exceptions include Soydan (1996), who argues that an intimate knowledge of the countries being studied is essential, and Chamberlayne and King (1996), who suggest that access to a combination of insider and outsider understandings of the subject and countries may produce the most useful insights into data. Suffice it to say that, even in a study which used data already at two removes from the researcher (as a non-national or resident, and using data produced for other purposes), an intimate knowledge of the countries being studied was invaluable. This was much more difficult, although not impossible, to recapture following departure from Germany. Both these practical difficulties were partially addressed by use of the Internet, newspapers, and continuing e-mail discussions with colleagues, as well as the presence of a trusty research diary.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of distance and outsidership, coding was facilitated by the use of computer software. Faced with six box files of documents from which to elicit changes, over a ten-year period, on two related policy areas from two parties, and their affiliated groups, the software made the exercise of coding infinitely more practicable. Coding was both descriptive (source, date, type of document) and analytical, and was conducted prior to translation.

The program used was NUD\*IST (version 4), which, like other qualitative data analysis programmes, is not ideally suited to documentary analysis, although it does make limited provision for it. Each document was

skim-read to identify the appropriate division into sections, and these sections were numbered on the document itself to ensure a seamless reference system between the coding and the original document. The coding system was developed according to the ways in which relevant concepts, ideas, policies and events were articulated. Broad subject codes (for example 'state-market relations', or 'employment') acted as titles, or subject headings which subsumed the analytic codes relating to these themes.

The analytic codes were subdivided (and sometimes moved and merged) in order to identify the different ways in which they were discussed and constructed. Thus, under 'employment', one code on deregulation of working time might be justified by the need for labour market flexibility, and another for the same deregulation by the need to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life.

The hierarchical tree structure of the program created some difficulties in analysis, as did the coding of documents that were external to (i.e. not loaded into and an integral part of) the programme. One of the advantages of computer software is the automatic updating of existing coding in texts when codes are separated or merged. As the documents were not loaded within the programme, this was not possible for the research in hand. Whenever a code was altered, the document sections already coded had to be re-examined to ascertain if the new code was appropriate. This laborious process led to a rather less 'playful' approach to coding than might, otherwise, have been the case. Indeed, the significance of a particular construction might only become clear when it appeared in several documents, which would again entail a return to the documents in order to recode them according to the adjusted codes. This constraint resulted in a tactical decision to reduce the load of coding work by limiting the types of document to be coded. The implications of this decision for consequent analysis are difficult to assess, although a survey of remaining types of document did not indicate any major coding omissions.

### **Contextualising the analysis**

The software was particularly useful in returning to the contextualization of the research. The search tools of the programme facilitated an analysis not only of common or unusual combinations of codes, but also of change over time and the assessment of the different impacts of institutional and socio-demographic factors. In addition, it was possible to identify those constructions of policy problems and solutions that were disputed within and between the parties. In terms of the comparison, the software tools made document sections or particular constructions that focused on East Germany only, or which were articulated by actors or groups associated with the former GDR, readily identifiable. Very few focused on West Germany as a separate entity, which was developed into a minor research finding of itself. By coding document types, it was also possible to assess how different audiences

(internal to the party, to particular constituencies, or to an international audience) affected the articulation of discourses. The numerous and straightforward mechanisms for searching the coding in the software facilitated the identification of unusual party documents and times of debates within the parties. The mass of data was transformed into a tractable object of interrogation, as the software provided easy access to overarching patterns (and vital exceptions to them) in data relating to the East/West comparison as well as to the comparison over time (Seidel 1991: 114). The 'playfulness' and experimentation with data, missing from the second stage of the research, returned. 'Memos' on the coding facilitated reflections on the relationship of context and data (Richards and Richards 1991: 45–46), as well as 'auditing' the coding itself, which proved crucial in keeping track of the data and its conceptualization at different stages of the project (Fielding and Lee 1998: 104–106).

As a result, the structure of the contextual analysis was altered. The structures of political parties were analysed with central/local relations, and legislative procedures were considered in conjunction with the place of the constitution. This not only sharpened the focus of the analysis, but also assisted in making sense of the data and understanding the transformation of politics and policies in both East and West Germany.

The second advantage of the flexibility of software was in developing theoretical ideas, offering 'fluidity of text indexing and lightness in exploration of growing theory, and the facility to move between conceptual exploration and the words it is about' (Richards and Richards 1991: 52). The process of analysing changing constructions revealed a series of relationships between different types of discourses, politics and policy-making, which were constantly tested against one another, with new codes being developed by searches which looked for particular patterns in the data.

### **Integrating theory, context and discourse**

As a result of the recontextualization of the research, a multilayered schema of contexts and analysis could be formulated, representing a response to the theoretical and the empirical aims of the research. The aim when writing up the research was to make explicit the process of contextualization as an integral part of the empirical and theoretical analysis.

The analysis of the constitutional contexts (political and economic) was combined with analysis of one of the identified types of discourse, which itself acted as a context to the other types. Conceptually identified as 'consensus structural' discourses, they were shared between the two parties, and were central to the construction of the united Germany's political and economic regime as distinctly West German. The opposing elements associated with the identity of either party, or stream within a party, were identified as 'competitive structural' discourses. This procedure illustrated the theoretical argument, indicating the presence, and interaction, of institutional and discursive contexts to policy debates and outputs. Thus, two types of discourse could be conceptualized as contexts

themselves, interacting with the conventional institutional and socio-economic contexts to form a backdrop against which policies were debated and formulated. Having established these interacting contexts in a broad-brush way, the study then went on to present the interaction of these discursive and institutional contexts with policy-making in more fine-grained detail. This procedure fleshed out the theoretical framework derived from the analysis, facilitated by the move from the general (institutional) context, to the detail of the discourse analysis (the two types of 'structural' discourse), to the interaction of both in the production of policy debates and outputs over time.

The process of writing-up required above-average effort in order to capture the complexity of the relationships being examined, while not drowning the analysis in an artificially complicated structure. Yet, despite the extra effort it entailed, it appears warranted, insofar as the methodological premises of the case study required a transparent integration of theory, context and analysis.

### **Concluding reflections**

In evaluating the research strategy for this study, the lessons learned can be divided into the practical and the methodological. Regarding the use of software, there is no doubt that, as a tool for the researcher, it was useful, although care is needed to assess why and how it will add to, or ease, analysis. 'Leaping in' is most likely to lead to unhelpful coding, and reams of computer printout that mean nothing. The contextualization and theorization of the analysis relied on careful and thorough initial coding, and judicious analytical use of the software's tireless searches, not to mention numerous scrawled diagrams and pictures. Nonetheless, adopted as a tool for analysis, it elicited a more reliable view of all the data than could have been achieved with paper and pen alone, and was particularly useful for making consistent comparison of data. Regarding the fieldwork, it is clear that consideration needs to be given to insider/outsider relationships in qualitative comparative research, and that comparative documentary research is much enriched by interviews and an intimacy with the language and social, political and economic environment of the countries being studied.

In terms of methodological issues, it is to be hoped that this case study may stand as a small testament to the possibility for theoretical development based on single-country studies, and also for the value of explicitly analysing context as part of both the theoretical and empirical analysis in comparative qualitative studies.

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