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Survey Research and Sensitivity to Context: The MYPLACE Project and Its Case Study Approach

Gary Pollock

Introduction

Why did MYPLACE use a case study methodology when this approach is unable to generalise to a national context? This chapter introduces findings from the MYPLACE survey by detailing the survey methodology; in particular, by providing a rationale for a targeted case study approach. Epistemologically, the project is premised on the assumption that our knowledge of the social world is dependent on theoretical understandings of the social structures that shape it and the interpretations human agents have of it. The multi-faceted nature of social science—studying people, their beliefs, experiences and actions—must be rooted within the context of these beliefs, experiences and actions. However, the complexity involved in doing justice to a fully contextualised analysis of people in society is immense, given the importance of different spheres of context. Historical, temporal, spatial, cultural and economic contexts all come

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to bear on every social act. Rendering this complexity intelligible is an important aspect of the social scientist's work and it has an impact on the ways in which we choose how to explore specific questions. The design of a research project is central to its ability to achieve its aims and objectives. The MYPLACE design flowed out of its central research question: How is young people's social participation shaped by the shadows of totalitarianism and populism in Europe?

The research design for the MYPLACE project was multi-method precisely because we believed that broad questions about political and civic engagement and attitudes could only be adequately studied using a range of historico-culturally contextualised empirical tools. It was important to measure attitudes and behaviour, and to understand the context within which young people held their views and lived their (political) lives. As such, there was a need to use a representative survey not only to generate a large body of high-quality data to provide an in-depth account of individuals, but also to undertake follow-up interviews in order to deepen our understanding in relation to a sub-sample from the survey. The geographical focus was deliberately narrow to ensure that the different empirical techniques employed truly complemented each other and allowed for local context to be fully articulated in the analysis. The close correspondence between the survey and the follow-up interviews provided more fully rounded and in-depth accounts of young people's political engagement in each of the research locations.

Finding answers to this research question involved the combined efforts of a range of methods including historical and ethnographic interviews and surveys. Survey methodology is, perhaps, best-developed in terms of the extent to which a given sample can be taken to represent a wider population, given that it can deploy estimates of precision that are mathematically informed. There exists a vast literature on sampling theory and, assuming that accepted procedures are followed, one can state with a known level of precision how representative results are and, therefore, how far they can be generalised. It is not that other methodologies are unconcerned with representativeness and generalisation; rather, it is that they do not look to mathematical justifications. Often, there is a divide which separates sample survey methodology and those techniques which are not able to use 'confidence intervals' to assess the likelihood of a 'type 1 error' (incorrectly rejecting a true null

hypothesis—a ‘false positive’) and, instead, focus on the meanings and understandings of those being studied. It is, therefore, easy to see that the language used within each method becomes so different that the tendency for them not to come together is understandable.

In the early years of social science, the location-specific case study method was routinely deployed—for example, by Booth, Rowntree in the UK and the Chicago School in the USA. Locality has been described as a ‘key variable’ in social research (Filkin and Weir 1972) such that the choice is perhaps not between a case *or* variable approach but, rather, an approach that incorporates case elements, by design, into a variable analysis. Abbott (1992, 1995) has long been a strong proponent of the ‘case’ approach to sociology, asserting that patterns among cases are of relevance and interest. By contrast, surveys are seen as holding the ‘variable’ approach to be the appropriate way to understand (and often to model) sets of relationships between variables. Is there perhaps a false dichotomy between case and variable? It is not clear that we need to prioritise one over the other. Indeed, Abbott’s case-oriented approach has been instrumental in a new wave of survey analysts searching for patterns in longitudinal data. Similarly, the wide use of multi-level modelling demonstrates further that structures (akin to cases) within data sets are increasingly regarded as central to understanding variable-based models (Byrne 2009). It can, therefore, be argued that deploying a questionnaire survey within a case study design is sociological methodology *par excellence*. This chapter discusses the methodological considerations for questionnaire surveys when used in conjunction with a case study methodology.

Survey Methodology

The advantages of questionnaire surveys are typically argued to be that they:

1. can generate a large amount of data relatively quickly and cost effectively;
2. provide valid and reliable data;
3. can be used to generalise to a wider population;
4. benefit from development work in previous surveys;
5. facilitate comparisons between different locations (regions/countries).

Questionnaire surveys are, however, often criticised for:

1. being able to measure phenomena without understanding them;
2. focusing on the reliability of data more than its validity;
3. positivism—that the data is presented as factual and uncontested;
4. reducing and oversimplifying social and attitudinal complexity (to numbers);
5. failing to deal with the context of social formations.

Representation and Generalisation

The two central aims of a sample survey are to produce substantive estimates that adequately represent a well-defined population from which the sample was drawn. The main target of the analysis is to draw a substantive inference from the sample survey to a wider population. As such, the primary purpose of a research design is to ensure that the survey contains the questions that will deliver the data which is required and that there is a correspondence between the sample and the population of interest. The importance of defining the population of interest should not, therefore, be underestimated. While there can be technical limitations in relation to the availability of an adequate list from which a sample can be drawn, of greater importance is to work out the social, demographic and geographical boundaries which delineate the population of interest. In addition, the ambition of the project is a factor; the motivation for undertaking the project in the first place, and the extent to which the research design has the capacity to deliver the ambition.

Geography, Nation and Survey Samples

Comparative research recognises the structuring importance of specific key variables. People are socially and spatially clustered and these clusters contain important information—context, the knowledge of which underpins all attempts to understand the people within. In geographical terms—from locale, to district, to region, to country and beyond—these clusters operate at different levels. Each level contains its own unique

context. Each individual carries with them the effects of living on a particular street, in a certain town, in a specific country. We understand our lives through the lens of our social and physical surroundings, from the most immediate and closest, to the more distant but yet still important.

Cross-national comparative research is suggestive of the nation as the comparative unit of analysis. The European Social Survey (ESS), in particular, has shown that this approach can work. It is possible to undertake a questionnaire-based survey in a large number of countries and produce a body of national comparisons on a range of issues. National similarities and differences become apparent. Nation-by-nation bar charts are commonplace; a series of charts of national performance on, for example, voting propensity, ideological attitudes, measures of wellbeing and so forth. High-level comparisons of this sort give glimpses of difference and similarity but they raise further questions about the extent to which we could characterise a whole nation using an averaged measure of anything. We know that averages are, by definition, ways of summarising a (potentially) diverse distribution to make analysis easier. We also know that in doing so we sacrifice the rich heterogeneity of a distribution, where there are often patterns and clusters, the explanations for which lie in socio-demographic factors, some of which are associated with space.

In national sample surveys, respondents are often dispersed over a wide and diverse area, particularly in large countries. While national representativeness is achieved, 'averaged' data is arguably used at the expense of important local context. Even in smaller countries, there is often geographically related diversity, which is better captured in tightly defined locations. For example, in the MYPLACE survey both Estonia and Latvia have significant sub-populations who are ethnically Russian and highly concentrated in specific regions.

Why Not Use a Nationally Representative Sample Survey?

National sample surveys were not required in order to fulfil the objectives of MYPLACE as we were not seeking to provide a series of national averages. We did not want to present a league table of countries

on a range of factors, however interesting this may have been. National samples would, in many countries, have actually undermined our objectives, given that we were interested in micro psycho-social issues relating to the motivations for activism and, in particular, the factors which associate with radical and populist forms of participation. With national samples, the data is dispersed over a wide and diverse area, particularly in the larger countries and, while there would be claims of national representativeness, this would be at the expense of deep local context. Even in the smaller countries there is often geographically related diversity that is better captured in tightly defined locations. A careful selection of research locations is, therefore, able to represent specific intra-national experiences through a connection of survey data with insights from an historical analysis of the social and cultural context of the location. MYPLACE, therefore, provides a detailed and methodologically complementary collection of case studies which documented nationally important phenomena.

Narrowing the Focus

There is nothing inherently new in area-specific surveys selected on the basis of specific local characteristics such that survey evidence is placed within this broader context. A number of landmark sociological studies have been community-based: *Small Town Politics* (Birch 1959) and *The Affluent Worker* (Goldthorpe et al. 1969), *Marienthal* in Austria (Jahoda et al. 1972), and *Middletown* in the USA (Lynd and Lynd 1929, 1937), to name four of the best-known. While a local study may not be nationally representative, this need not be a drawback; indeed, it offers some distinct advantages. Arguably, such studies have contributed as much (and possibly more) to the development of sociological understandings of societal change and the effects on individuals as much larger nationally representative, even longitudinal, surveys. The point is that well-crafted local studies are able to generate and test sociological theory. There is no necessary connection required with national data to do this.

Representative surveys in the social sciences have, therefore, often been local. This partly relates to the ‘community study’ methodology noted

above which was popular in the early days of sociology. Later projects which sought to gauge differences between locations used purposively selected locations with the intention that the contrasts would be analytically productive. Hence, the '16–19 Year Olds Initiative' (Banks et al. 1992) and the 'Social Change and Economic Lifestyle Initiative' (Gallie et al. 1994) focused on purposively selected towns and cities, principally seeking to identify contrasts in employment experiences and prospects within radically different local labour markets. Each of these studies engaged with central questions of their time about social change in various forms. While each focused on a particular problematic, it can be argued that there was no single hypothesis that drove them. A common feature was an interest in the extent to which changes in the socio-economic structure pre-figured cultural changes. 'Testing' such emergent hypotheses is possible within narrow confines of precisely operationalised variables. On the other hand, how important is it for sociological projects to be solely hypothesis-driven? Is the formal hypothesis test (i.e. a statistical test on robust survey data) really the gold standard for sociology? Savage (2010) makes the point that sociological methodology has been evolving since the inception of the discipline and should not be fixated on the primacy of one method over another. Moreover, a case study approach, deeply rooted in the understanding of the historic-cultural context of the research arguably is better equipped to address 'respondent' and 'field' effects in survey research, since the likely differences in interpretation of standardised questions and the significance of particular political, social and economic contexts can be better anticipated and minimised (see Burawoy 1998: 13).

Case Study Methodology

The methodology of case studies is not singular because there is no single definition of what a case study is. Tight (2010: 329) in his review of methodological texts goes further and argues that 'case study is essentially a convenient label that can be applied to just about any social research project, especially perhaps when no other term seems available'. Despite this somewhat negative conclusion, Tight's paper demonstrates the centrality of location, context and complexity in understandings of case

study methods. By their very nature, case studies are tailored to suit a particular research question and, as a result, may involve a variety of modes of data collection. Central to the method, however, is that there should be a clearly recognisable 'case' which has a social identity that makes it worthy of study in its own right. In addition, there is an understanding that a case study should involve a depth (and/or breadth) of data collection that goes further than most survey- and interview-based techniques.

There is no particular data collection method that is exclusive to a case study as they are likely to involve a variety of tools that aim to complement one another. Life histories typically involve historical and documentary analysis; community studies include surveys and interviews, as well as historical and economic analyses and so forth.

Case studies are, therefore, a bridge between the oft described quantitative/qualitative divide as they provide the methodological framework that gives equal weighting to each data collection mode. In recent years, there has been an emerging literature, on 'mixed methods' research designs, which demonstrates the complementarity of methods and the need for a research design that is aligned with the research questions (Cresswell 2014; Plano Clark and Ivankova 2016). There is no epistemological hierarchy in which the statistical representativeness, the personal account or the observational analysis is held to be superior to all others. Each has its part to play and each, assuming the research design works, contributes uniquely to answering the research question. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that case studies serve to 'educate' researchers in the field in relation to the substantive context and, in so doing, enhance the process. He goes on to elucidate a number of advantages of case study approaches:

1. Case method knowledge (acquired through experience as a practitioner of the relevant skills) allows greater mastery of those skills than rule-based knowledge, which is useful at the early stages of learning but should not be thought of as the highest form of knowledge (Flyvbjerg 2006: 223).
2. The social sciences have, to date, not generated general, context-independent theory. Given, therefore, that, as social scientists, the knowledge we produce is concrete and context-dependent, the case study is especially well-suited to produce such knowledge (ibid.).

3. In practice, formal generalisation, either on the basis of large samples or single cases, is talked about much more than it is actually adhered to. In any case, formal generalisation is only one of many ways by which people gain and accumulate knowledge, and the fact that knowledge cannot be formally generalised does not exclude it from incremental knowledge accumulation in a given field (ibid.: 226–227).
4. The case study method is particularly suited to theory testing through ‘falsification’ tests (ibid.: 228).

The Nation as a Case?

Although, increasingly, questions are raised about the efficacy of using the nation as a unit of analysis (Urry 2000), it continues to have at least the appearance of face validity. Countries lend themselves well to being a unit of analysis due to their apparent established geographical boundaries, common heritage, and linguistic and ethnic homogeneity. However, this face validity begins to break down once such entities are enumerated, making all but the most generic, high-level, macro analyses problematic. The MYPLACE consortium countries are indicative of the weaknesses inherent in assumptions embedded in the national approach: borders are openly contested (Georgia), or have been only recently established (Croatia, Slovakia, Germany, and Hungary); countries do not always have a single state language (Finland, UK); countries are characterised by ethnic heterogeneity (Russia, UK), or contain large minorities of different nationalities (Latvia, Estonia); and there is significant regional economic variation (all countries).

It is, therefore, by no means clear that ‘country’ or ‘nation’ is the best unit of analysis. They may provide administrative conveniences, such as the ways in which a sampling frame is established at a national level, but these are artefacts of a legal process rather than necessarily reflecting social reality. Borders change, communities migrate, local economies rise and fall. Using a country as a case study becomes interesting for the ways in which an attempt to provide a single unifying narrative involves coping with complexity in terms of its social and political history. Coping with countrywide complexity may be possible where the population and/or

the area is relatively small but in countries as large as Russia and Germany there are simply too many different factors to take into account. National narratives are possible but with an increasing number of caveats to account for historical disjunctures, the experiences of different ethnic groups, regional cultural and economic variations and so forth.

This is not to argue that national comparative projects are doomed to fail as their unit of analysis is flawed but, rather, to suggest that, for such an enterprise to succeed, the resources required are considerable and the extent to which the data can be subjected to a detailed analysis is limited by the sample size. The ESS is the most rigorous national comparative survey and has set high data collection standards for each participating country. However, the target achieved sample size is 1500 per country which means that, while each data set is representative of the population as a whole, it is not possible to undertake sub-national (regional) analyses, as there are insufficient numbers of respondents to be able to represent these geographical units adequately. This is one reason why the Understanding Society survey (the UK longitudinal survey) has substantially increased its sample size to around 100,000 individuals in around 40,000 households.

There is, then, a tendency in national surveys to average out difference; national typicality masks local difference. It is a point of debate to consider the extent to which the national average is more important than sub-national clusters. When comparing nations, we use their average tendencies and this presents complexity and diversity in a massively simplified way. This may be plausible and have the ability to summarise for a macro analysis (e.g. Esping-Andersen's 1990 characterisation of European welfare regimes) but it is worth asking just how comparable such aggregates are. In terms of, say, social cohesion, what does it mean to say that Italy has more of it than Sweden? Or that, on average, Portugal is more left-wing than Germany? On the other hand, if one is interested in processes operating at the level of individual actors, and (organic) groups of individuals, then it is homogeneity of belief/experience/behaviour that counts. It is, therefore, more useful to analyse and, ultimately, to compare when there has been greater thought put into the specific parameters which inform the selection of the cases, rather than relying on the artefact that is the 'nation'.

National aggregates mask important sub-national variations and give a distorted view which, while accurate in terms of the overall mean, is not representative of the difference which lies underneath it.

The MYPLACE Survey Case Study Research Design

The MYPLACE project articulates ‘case’ at various levels: country (an artefact of the FP7 funding process), research locations, and individuals within locations. These ‘empirical units’ are the inputs from which further ‘cases’ of findings will be generated through conceptual development (Ragin 1992).

Questions of Sample Selection

Flyvbjerg (2006) contrasts ‘random selection’ with ‘information oriented selection’, where the former delivers representativeness and generalisability, and the latter allows small samples to be theoretically productive through the careful selection of contrasting cases or ‘critical cases’. MYPLACE uses both strategies. Firstly, the purposive selection of two *contrasting* locations in each country (four in Germany) was undertaken on the basis of a prior analysis of literature and socio-demographic indicators, and the subsequent development of selection criteria. The single biggest gain in case study sampling is delivered by having two cases, rather than one (Sudman 1976). This strategy allowed each team to focus on an area where there were grounds to suspect that young people would have a greater propensity to be receptive to radical ideologies than elsewhere. The selection of the contrasting region was not to have a ‘control’ group in the formal, statistical, sense but enabled a comparative contextual analysis where there were no a priori reasons to suspect a high propensity for receptivity to radical agendas. This dual location ‘theoretical sampling’ approach avoided the national partiality of single case studies and represents significant added value in allowing contrasts both within and between countries. Table 2.1¹ shows the

Table 2.1 MYPLACE research locations

| Country (country code ^a) | Location | Hypothesised receptivity to radicalisation | Geographic notes |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|--|--|
| Croatia (HR) | Podsljeme | Low | District of Zagreb |
| | Peščenica Žitnjak | High | District of Zagreb |
| Denmark (DK) | Odense East | High | District of Odense |
| | Odense Centre | Low | District of Odense |
| Estonia (EE) | Narva area | High | Area in eastern Estonia, bordering Russia |
| | Tartu | Low | City in central-southern Estonia |
| Finland (FI) | Liekka and Nurmes | High | Two small towns in eastern Finland |
| | Kuopio | Low | Town in central Finland |
| Georgia (GE) | Kutaisi | High | City in western Georgia |
| | Telavi | Low | Town north-west of Tbilisi |
| Germany-western (DE-W) | Bremen | Low | City in north-western Germany |
| | Bremerhaven | High | The sea port that serves Bremen |
| Germany-eastern (DE-E) | Jena | Low | City in south-eastern Germany |
| | Rostock | High | City in north-eastern Germany |
| Greece (GR) | New Philadelphia | High | North-eastern district of Athens |
| | Argyroupouli | Low | South-western district of Athens |
| Hungary (HU) | Sopron | Low | Town close to the Austrian border |
| | Ózd | High | Town close to the Slovak border |
| Latvia (LV) | Agenskalns | Low | District of Riga |
| | Forstate and Jaunbuve | High | Two districts of Daugavpils, close to the Russian border |

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

| Country (country code ^a) | Location | Hypothesised receptivity to radicalisation | Geographic notes |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|--|--|
| Portugal (PT) | Lumiar | Low | District of Lisbon in the main city area |
| | Barreiro | High | District of Lisbon on the opposite side of the river Tagus to the main city area |
| Russia (RU) | Kupchino | High | District of St Petersburg |
| | Vyborg | Low | City close to the Finnish-Russian border |
| Slovakia (SK) | Rimavska Sobota | High | Town close to the Hungarian border |
| | Trnava | Low | City north-east of Bratislava |
| Spain (ES) | Vic | High | Town around an hour from Barcelona |
| | Sant Cugat | Low | A district of Barcelona |
| UK (GB) | Coventry | Low | City in central England |
| | Nuneaton | High | Town in central England |

^aThroughout this volume, in graphs and short references, countries are referred to by ISO 3166-1 codes

locations and their expected propensities for young people to be receptive to radical ideologies.

The factors which contribute to the propensity for young people to be receptive to radical ideologies are likely to be both nationally and locally sensitive, as well as contingent upon the existence of different political parties and groups. We were, therefore, not able to specify a common set of criteria that each partner should use to inform their selection of locations. The primary consideration when selecting

locations was the importance of local factors and the extent to which there were grounds to suspect that particular factors may be associated with young people's receptivity to radical ideologies. Location selection was systematic at the local level but free from a centrally provided instruction on exactly which criteria to use, or the weight that should be given to different criteria. Early work in MYPLACE established that the following criteria were *potentially* important:

1. Community segregation and perception of minority groups
2. Underlying socio-economic inequalities
3. Civic engagement
4. Political heritage: continuity and discontinuity
5. 'Supply' side: organisation and strategy of radical/populist parties and social movements
6. 'Demand' side: ideological resonance and local democracy
7. Individual motivations: gender family and community
8. Extent of political engagement/alienation
9. Integration of populist/radical groups with other youth 'subcultures'.

These nine criteria were the prime substantive factors which informed the selection of research locations. To these we added further technical requirements which were aimed at facilitating the production of a data set suitable for comparative analysis. A map and a more detailed, but still summarised, description of each of the research locations can be found in the preliminary pages to this volume. These descriptions show the ways in which the criteria were deployed when selecting where to conduct the survey.

The ability of the randomly sampled survey to represent a specific population and provide the groundwork for generalisation underpins its importance. Avoiding sources of bias is instrumental in achieving this: stratification of a population prior to selection, and the weighting of results and data imputation as a result of non-response are routinely used to improve the match between an achieved sample and the population it is taken to represent. In other words, the flaws in the ability of a sample to represent a population can only be dealt with through means which factor in the characteristics of those being studied.

MYPLACE used random sample survey techniques in order to be able to generalise to the locations chosen and data were subject to measures of quality in order to maximise their representativeness.

Strengths and Limitations

The selection of the granularity to which we summarise is a key issue which has a strong impact on our scientific conclusions. It is important that the MYPLACE data are not used to 'represent' a country. Any reference to the young people in the MYPLACE survey must always be linked to the specific location they came from. It would be inappropriate to combine the survey responses in the different locations within one country, as this would be to conflate highly contrasting case studies. There are instances when there are close similarities in the responses by young people in both case study locations (or all four, for Germany), in which case the country shorthand can be used but, even in those circumstances, this is only to describe the MYPLACE locations jointly and not to generalise to the country in question as a whole. We cannot use our data for national generalisations; however, this is far from being a drawback. Despite this apparent limitation, it is nonetheless possible to undertake comparative statistical analysis. This is possible through a targeted, theoretically informed, selection of case study locations, exemplified by Grimm et al. in this volume, where it is interesting to make comparisons about Euroscepticism on the basis of both case study *and* national contexts where there is an expectation of differences. It is also possible to use the combined data set of all 30 locations in exploratory modelling. Mieriņa, in this volume, uses multi-level modelling (Goldstein 2011) to explore how the left–right spectrum is differently understood across Europe. This statistical technique exploits the highly structured nature of the data where respondents are clustered into the 30 locations in 14 countries. This procedure is able to detect effects which are better explained by a level (e.g. the location the respondent is from) as opposed to being associated with a variable (such as social class). Hence, case analysis is undertaken alongside variable analysis.

Conclusion

As we complete this book, the results of the UK referendum on membership of the EU—the so-called Brexit—show there to be important national and sub-national patterns. The aggregate figures of 52% ‘leave’ and 48% ‘remain’ belie strong votes to remain in Scotland, London and Manchester, where around 60% of voters chose to ‘remain’. To summarise the UK, let alone England, using a single figure which ignores important regional variation demonstrates quite clearly the inadequacy of a national approach to sociological research. Summaries are useful and essential ways of comprehending complex phenomena but there are important questions about how far a sociological analysis can be made of national survey data. Our data has a greater richness which allows us to drill deeper and to connect our survey data to local socio-economic conditions and history, as well as to the follow-up interviews included in the project. In this regard, we have undertaken a project which embraces the spirit of Burawoy’s criticism that surveys tend to be limited by ‘context effects’ and, instead, represent an holistic representation of the young people in their locales. This is an historical documentation that will stand the test of time.

Note

1. This table was first published in Pilkington and Pollock (2015: 24–25).

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Author Biography

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