

# Global Media Journal

German Edition

Book Review

## **Comparative Communication Research. A Study of the Conceptual, Methodological, and Social Challenges of International Collaborative Studies in Communication Science**

**Volk, Sophia C. (2021). Comparative Communication Research. A Study of the Conceptual, Methodological, and Social Challenges of International Collaborative Studies in Communication Science. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 447 Pages. ISBN 978-3-658-36227-0.**

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**To cite this article:** Wöhlert, Romy (2022): Volk, Sophia C. (2021). Comparative Communication Research. A study of the Conceptual, Methodological, and Social Challenges of International Collaborative Studies in Communication Science. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 12(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.53032>

International comparative research has become a key methodology in Communication Studies, producing a growing number of research studies and results in the last few decades. Those studies have allowed communication scholars to broaden their analytical horizon and reflect upon phenomena in their own national realm through the lens of other national contexts. International comparison allows them to deconstruct their own national perspectives through the lens of “the other” and leads to a more holistic knowledge production. International comparative research in Communication Studies is also increasingly conducted in international collaborating teams. This development is encouraged by the fact that scientific collaboration in comparative research designs allows for an easier access to and joint compilation, analysis, and interpretation of research data in different national contexts and broader context knowledge. It is also the result of an increasing imperative to collaborate to meet the requirements of excellence and success in the academic community.



At the same time, comparativists (alone or in international teams) are faced with conceptual, methodological, and social challenges since international comparative research is conceptually and methodologically more complex than non-comparative research. The comparative enquiry simultaneously must establish (partial) similarities and dissimilarities of the compared objects, must adequately describe the contextual uniqueness of the studied phenomena while also maintaining sufficient common ground for comparability and analytical generalization, and must overall guarantee an equivalent project implementation in all compared settings. However, communication scholars looking for academic guidance will realize that systematic or holistic reflections on those conceptual, methodological, and social challenges are still rare in Communication Science. First attempts can be found in ethnographic reports from international comparative research projects, or as (part of) panel topics of research conferences. Scholars may also turn to other disciplines such as political sciences, sociology, psychology, education science, or the team science. Yet, the methodological discourse on comparative communication research is still limited. Therefore, the book by Sophia Volk presents a welcomed and much needed contribution to further stimulate this discourse in Communication Science. For scholars interested in international comparative research designs, it offers valuable insights and guiding tools for their own future research. Based on her dissertation project, the author provides a profound reflection on the conceptual and methodological specifics of international comparative studies and the collaborative production of comparative knowledge in Communication Science. Anchored in a sociology of science perspective, the book’s holistic view of both methodological and social dimensions of knowledge production is framed by different theoretical and empirical perspectives. Even though the subtitle of the book misleadingly indicates otherwise, the book hereby focuses on comparative research projects that may also be carried out in a collaborative team.

In the first part of the book, the author develops her theoretical framework: Chapter 2 introduces theoretical assumptions from the sociology of science and derives rationales for scientific knowledge production and the organization of comparative research in Communication Science. The author drafts an analytical matrix, outlining ten analytical dimensions to describe the intellectual and social organization of comparative communication research.

Chapter 3 gives an overview of the interdisciplinary field of comparative social research, consulting a variety of cornerstone comparative literature in the fields of comparative politics, comparative sociology, cross-cultural psychology, and cross-cultural management. Adopting the main methodological reflections of those fields, the author drafts a process model for comparative communication research, suggesting 15 principles for rigorous comparison, grouped along the steps of the comparative research process. They offer a helpful tool for novice and experienced scholars to plan and conduct sound comparative research, harmonize their research procedures, and increase the comparability and rigor of evidence. The chapter also addresses corresponding challenges and available solutions for the rigor implementation of those principles.

Turning to the collaborative dimension of international comparative research, Chapter 4 provides a thorough literature review of the interdisciplinary body of knowledge on international research collaboration. The author adopts two approaches to systematize the social complexities of international collaborative research teams: First, she follows the definition of international research projects as temporary organizations and analytically disassembles them into a team, a task, a project, and a context dimension. Second, she adapts an input-mediator-outcome model of international team research and differentiates them into the three core components inputs, mediators, and outcomes. Subsequently, the author identifies 22 challenges of international research teams and 18 solutions offered in the analyzed literature, which she integrates in the developed model. Unfortunately, the distinction of the different temporary organization dimensions lacks some clarity, for example, with the author's rather indistinct separation of a project dimension (with features like communication, or leadership) and a team dimension, or the context dimension remaining rather vague and limited.

The theoretical chapters provide a profound overview and review of the state of relevant literature and the chosen theoretical approaches. For first-time comparativists, or students interested in (collaborative) comparative research, they are a good starting point to get familiar with those topics, summarizing important methodological reflections on comparative communication research. The suggested process model for comparative communication research presents a helpful tool for the comparative research practice.

In the second part of the book, the author systematically explores the intellectual and social challenges of international comparative studies in Communication

Science, by presenting results of her empirical analysis of the output of published comparative research and the inside view of individual scientists. Chapter 5 examines the extent to which published cross-national empirical studies in Communication Science implement the principles of comparative communication research. Based on the systematic review of comparative communication studies published in 27 communication journals between 2015 and 2019, the author uncovers conceptual, methodological, and interpretative deficiencies of current scholarship, and derives a roadmap of starting points to improve the rigor of future comparative studies.

Chapter 6 examines, how project coordinators reflect on their experiences with international team research. This qualitative study is based on expert interviews with communication scientists from ten countries who coordinate(d) comparative research projects in the field. It reveals a broad range of challenges and solution strategies for productive international team research. Here, the author suggests eight “rules of caution” (p. 341) for collaborative projects and uses her – now empirically underpinned – Input-Mediator-Outcome Model to systematically describe the analyzed projects. The study indicates that the challenges of international team research are multifaceted and are most pronounced at the team (and individual) dimension, relating to issues of commitment, communication, leadership, joint decision making, and the complexity of comparative research, while solutions are mainly implemented at the project and task dimension. Here, the book confirms theoretical assumptions and empirical data gathered in other disciplines and research fields. One limitation of the study is the limited analytical scope of the selected projects: As the author admits herself, the analyzed comparative projects are mainly European-based and underrepresent scholars from non-Western countries. Also, only the project perspective of the lead PI was included in the analysis, while other – potentially differing – voices of participating team members or co-leaders remain unknown.

Chapter 7 integrates the theoretical and empirical results, proposing a phase model of collaborative and comparative research as a tool for scholars to define the conditions for productive collaboration in temporary comparative research projects.

Sophia Volk’s book presents an important contribution to the academic discourse and to a stronger intellectual exchange about methodologies and epistemologies of comparison in Communication Studies. It comprehensively illustrates the diverse conceptual and practical implementation challenges researchers may face in collaborative and comparative communication projects and invites communication scholars to systematically reflect on their methodological rigor more systematically. One minor shortcoming of the book is, that it misses out on discussing the uniqueness of the presented findings, especially by reflecting upon the generalizability of the methodological standards and challenges to other comparative designs like diachronic comparisons, or synchronic comparison of objects in one national context.