



The Challenges of Comparative Criminology Research

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Abstract

There is a growing recognition of the significance of comparative research in criminology. However, this field faces several persistent challenges that hinder its development. These challenges may limit the validity of comparative research findings and introduce potential biases. If not addressed appropriately, these challenges can impede the growth of comparative criminology and its contributions. These primary challenges include a predominance of Western-centric perspectives, the ambiguity arising from involving culture as an explanatory factor in quantitative studies, difficulties in conducting survey research across different countries, and inadequacies in the comparative units utilized. This paper seeks to comprehensively review these challenges in detail and explore the path for the advancement of future research in comparative criminology.

Keywords Comparative criminology · Western-centrism · Quantitative research · Cross-national surveys · Cross-cultural studies

Introduction

Émile Durkheim (Durkheim, [1982]1895) famously notes that all sociological research involves comparison, including criminology. Comparative criminology has been characterized as “as old as criminology itself” (Howard et al., 2000). Over the past several decades, the field of comparative criminological research has been expanding rapidly and gaining prominence (Banks & Baker, 2015; Newburn et al., 2018). The importance of comparative criminological research is widely recognized. It can help bridge the gaps between different areas and facilitate the freer flow of information (Cao & Cullen, 2001). Through comparative analysis, researchers can uncover differences between countries and cultures while also gaining insights into aspects of their own country and culture that might be difficult to detect exclusively on the basis of domestic data (Jowell, 1998). By exploring

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the historical, political, and other aspects of criminal justice systems, comparative criminal justice research deepens the understanding of both one's own system and those of others (Lee & Jang, 2012). As LaFree (2007, p. 15) emphasizes, "comparative research forces researchers to treat their own nations or cultures as the unit of analysis. Researchers who limit their work to a single nation can do little to study such issues as the impact of economics and politics on legal systems because they have only one case."

Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, comparative criminology was largely overlooked as nations focused inward on domestic crime issues (Bennett, 2004; Howard et al., 2000; Liu, 2007). Prior to the 1990s, the academic community showed limited interest in this area of study (Liu, 2007). However, in recent years, comparative criminology has evolved rapidly (Meško, 2023). Despite this progress, it is essential to recognize and analyze the major challenges the field faces. These challenges, if not sufficiently studied and effectively resolved, may limit the validity of comparative research results and introduce potential biases. This article systematically reviews several key challenges confronting comparative criminology and explores their implications for future research.

The Western-Centric Bias in Comparative Criminology

According to the United Nations, regions such as Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean account for over 65% of the total number of countries globally, while Europe, North America, and Oceania comprise less than 35% (United Nations Statistics Division, 1999). In terms of population, with more than 4.7 billion residents, Asia is notably the most populous region in the world, housing the two largest countries—China and India. Africa follows as the second most populous region, with approximately 1.5 billion people. Overall, the global population is currently around 8.01 billion, with 77% residing in Asia and Africa (Population Reference Bureau, 2023). The socio-criminal conditions in these populous regions warrant significant attention.

In addition, the current situation of crime and criminal justice issues as they vary between the West and non-Western regions often reveals inconsistencies. For example, the highest reported rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) are found in non-Western regions, specifically Sub-Saharan Africa, where 33% of women aged 15–49 have experienced IPV in their lifetime, and South Asia, where this figure rises to 35% (World Bank, 2022). South Asia also faces severe challenges related to terrorism, such as deadly attacks in Afghanistan by the Islamic State. Similarly, Africa has to cope with significant terrorism threats, with the Sahel subregion accounting for 35% of global terrorism-related deaths in 2021. In contrast, organized crime ranks among the top ten perceived "high" or "very high" threats in European countries (INTERPOL, 2022). Moreover, notable differences exist in criminal justice systems between Western and non-Western regions. For example, Asia has the largest prison population globally, with half of the global total incarcerated in Asian countries. However, the incarceration rates tell a different story; Northern America has the highest incarceration rate globally (United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime, 2024).

Given the importance of non-Western regions and the significant differences in crime and criminal justice between the West and non-West, comparative criminology research should not overlook these regions. However, there is a notable issue of Western-centric bias in this field (Aas, 2012; Lee & Laidler, 2013; Liu, 2007, 2017a; Moosavi, 2019). Liu (2007, p. 7) notes that comparative criminological studies typically include very few non-Western countries, identifying this as "one persistent problem." Similarly, Aas (2012)

emphasizes the geopolitical imbalances in the production of criminological knowledge, pointing out that regions such as the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa are often overlooked in comparative criminological traditions. This neglect stands in sharp contrast to the attention afforded to the Global North, where peripheral countries in the Global South receive limited consideration (Lee & Laidler, 2013). In fact, much empirical evidence supports this prevailing perception concerning the field. For instance, Messner (2021) analyzed empirical articles published in *Criminology* from 2000 to 2019, revealing that of the 22 comparative articles, 16 relied on data from the USA, while only 6 excluded USA data. A similar review of presentations at the annual conferences of the *American Society of Criminology* and the *European Society of Criminology* further demonstrated a USA-centric or Europe-centric focus (Barberet, 2007; Kim & Merlo, 2014).

Several factors may contribute to this phenomenon. First, and most significantly, there are the global divides in knowledge production. Like many other social sciences, criminology has largely remained a discipline of the “Global North” (Lee & Laidler, 2013). There exists “a staggering amount of inequality in the geography of the production of academic knowledge” (Graham et al., 2011, p. 14). In the 2010 *World Social Science Report*, the International Social Science Council (2010) highlights the hegemony of the Global North in social science production, noting that North America alone produced over half of the social science articles published in the SSCI journals over the preceding decade. Europe was the second-largest producer, contributing nearly 40% of global social science articles during the same period. Notably, “Four countries – the USA, the UK, the Netherlands, and Germany – produce two-thirds of the social science journals registered in the most encompassing of the social science journals’ databases” (International Social Science Council, 2010, p. 143). Overall, the production and collaboration of social science knowledge exhibit substantial dominance by the Global North (Alatas, 2003; Connell, 2017; International Social Science Council, 2010). This imbalance in knowledge production and dissemination in non-Western countries naturally leads to relatively less research on non-Western social-scientific issues.

The second contributing factor might be the insufficient recognition of the importance of non-Western contexts in comparative criminology. Western criminologists often assert that their theories possess universal applicability, with little testing and examination of their theories’ validity in non-Western contexts. They frequently overlook non-Western knowledge and experiences (Connell, 2006, 2007; Liu, 2021; Moosavi, 2019; Yu & Liu, 2024; Zhang & Liu, 2023). As one of the first scholars to critique the Western-centric nature of criminology, Cohen (1998) highlights the tendency for Western criminological theories and approaches to be naively applied to non-Western contexts without adequate consideration of the relevant cultural and social differences. While many studies have demonstrated that mainstream Western theories cannot be perfectly applied in non-Western environments (Antonaccio & Botchkovar, 2015; Liu, 2017b; Liu et al., 2024; Suzuki et al., 2018), research on crime and criminal justice in non-Western contexts remains less comprehensive than that in the West. As Keim (2010) observes, the supposedly universal criminological theories developed in Western contexts often fail to account for the experiences and realities of the majority of the world’s population living in the Global South, with the social contexts of this region frequently subsumed under narratives primarily generated in the Global North.

The third potential reason for the Western-centric bias in comparative criminology is the language barrier. English is recognized as the predominant academic lingua franca, exhibiting remarkable dominance in global scholarly communication (Alhasnawi, 2021). In the field of criminology, English is also regarded as the common language (Suzuki et al.,

2018). However, it is important to note that “the majority of the world’s scholars do not possess English as their first language” (Flowerdew, 2008, p. 77). This language barrier may discourage English-speaking scholars from choosing non-English-speaking regions for comparative studies, resulting in a disproportionately large predisposition to focus on English-speaking areas. Similarly, scholars from non-Western countries who lack proficiency in English often encounter challenges that restrict their participation in the academic discourse. Additionally, comparative studies published in local languages are frequently overlooked by English-speaking academics, thereby perpetuating the limited visibility of valuable research from these regions.

The Ambiguous Impact of Culture on Crime in Quantitative Research

Crime and social control are fundamentally social and cultural phenomena, a principle that underpins the field of criminology (Karstedt, 2001). The concept of culture has been widely used in the explanation of delinquency (Kornhauser, 1978). Posick and Gould (2015, p. 198) contend that “the importance of culture in shaping systems of criminal justice and responses to crime cannot be overstated.” As highlights by Howard et al. (2000), the endeavor to explain crime through cultural variation is a long-standing pursuit. Comparative studies reveal similarities and differences, providing deeper insights into how social processes operate across various jurisdictions worldwide (Jones et al., 2009). While many comparative studies utilize culture to explain differences in crime across nations, the relationship between crime and cultural patterns is uncertain (Karstedt, 2001; Posick & Gould, 2015).

In quantitative comparative research, examining the influence of culture on crime and criminal justice presents notable challenges. One fundamental question is how to effectively measure culture in research. The social sciences lack a unified definition of culture, with over 200 distinct definitions existing in scholarly discourse (Karstedt, 2001; Lonner, 1994). As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2012, p. 1) note: “Culture is a notoriously difficult term to define.” Hofstede (1998, p. 478) offers a broad definition, describing culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.” Sewell (2005) characterizes culture as “the semiotic dimension of human social practice in general.” Spencer-Oatey (2008, p. 3) elaborates that “culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but not determine) each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour.” Given that inherently complex nature of culture (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012, p. 9), measuring and analyzing its effects prove to be exceptionally challenging tasks (Howard et al., 2000).

Two significant contributions to understanding cultural dimensions have been provided by Hofstede and Schwartz. Hofstede and colleagues (2010) identifies six dimensions of national culture, including power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint. Schwartz (2006) proposes the theory of cultural value orientations, including seven value orientations: embeddedness, intellectual autonomy, affective autonomy, hierarchy, egalitarianism, harmony, and mastery. However, culture is complex and cannot be fully encapsulated by a limited set of dimensions. As Steenkamp (2001, p. 41) notes, “no limited set of dimensions can exhaustively describe the culture of societies in their full richness and complexity.”

Consequently, the challenge of identifying suitable measurement standards is often left unaddressed through a lack of cultural research in many quantitative studies within comparative criminology (Stamatel, 2009).

The second critical question is how to attribute the causes of differences in crime patterns and criminal justice systems to cultural factors. The political, religious, and cultural systems of any two nations may vary significantly, complicating the understanding of crime and criminal justice. When empirical results differ in obvious ways between two compared societies, researchers may struggle to identify the underlying causes of these differences (Lai et al., 2010). Some researchers have measured nationality as a proxy for culture. For example, Kobayashi and Farrington (2019) conducted comparative analyses to investigate why student deviance appears less prevalent among Japanese students than among their American counterparts. In their study, the key explanatory variable “Culture” was represented as a binary distinction between “Japanese versus Americans,” with Japanese students coded as 1 and American students as 0. However, using nationality as a proxy variable for culture does not elucidate the underlying substantive factors that contribute to the national differences in deviance, such as varying proneness toward uncertainty avoidance or risk-taking (Kobayashi & Farrington, 2019).

Challenges in Conducting Surveys Across Countries

In the field of criminology and criminal justice, survey research is the predominant method of data collection (Kleck et al., 2006). In comparative criminological research, surveys also play an important role in gathering information. However, this method faces several challenges that can impact the quality and reliability of the data collected.

The Representativeness of Samples

In cross-national survey studies, maintaining comparability requires that the categories or demographic characteristics of the samples are clearly defined and consistent across the studied cultures. To ensure congruity in the demographic structure of samples, many comparative studies opt to sample within a narrow demographic range. Due to the high accessibility and low cost of student samples, as well as the ease of measuring changes using student samples, a large number of studies in the fields of criminology and criminal justice use student samples for behavioral research, criminological theory testing, methodological pilot testing, and evaluating attitudes towards crime and judicial issues (Payne & Chappell, 2008). Within comparative criminology, this is also the case, usually selecting college students and primary and secondary school students as research subjects (Newman, 1977).

However, such samples do not adequately represent the general population of each country, which necessitates caution in interpreting the results due to this non-representativeness. For example, Tuliao et al. (2021) conducted a comparative study using university student samples from the USA and the Philippines. Similarly, Barn and Powers (2021) focused on university students in their comparative study of India and the UK, acknowledging that this relatively narrow sample does not reflect other groups within the general population. This limitation has been highlighted in many comparative criminological studies and is regarded as a significant constraint on the applicability of the findings (for example, Hartley et al., 2021; Jiao et al., 2016; Kobayashi & Farrington, 2019; Schuster & Krahé, 2019).

Therefore, addressing the issue of sample representativeness is crucial for enhancing the validity of conclusions drawn in comparative criminology.

The Translation of Survey Instruments

In comparative research, particularly in criminology, the use of multiple languages makes translation a crucial component of the research process. The challenge of comparison in criminological studies is fundamentally a challenge of translation (Melossi, 2012). High-quality source questionnaires and accurate translations are essential for ensuring the overall comparability of survey data when the same questions are posed across different countries (Behr & Scholz, 2011). Conversely, poor-quality translation can significantly undermine the comparability and reliability of data collected from various countries (Harkness & Schoua-Glusberg, 1998).

However, the translation process inevitably introduces some degree of distortion, as “it can never achieve an ultimate translation in the target language without a loss” (Colson & Field, 2019, p. 6). Translation between different languages may lead to deviations in meaning and understanding (Luo, 2021). Cultural differences further complicate this process, as expressions and concepts in one language may lack direct equivalents in another (Wong & Shen, 1999). The challenge is particularly pronounced when translating terms related to legal terms and concepts. For example, the concept of “plea bargaining” in the American legal system is referred to as “Absprache” in Germany, “comparution immédiate sur reconnaissance préalable de culpabilité” in France, “patteggiamento” in Italy, and “ren zui ren fa” in China. While all these terms broadly refer to forms of guilty pleas, they are not interchangeable. In fact, each concept embodies distinct meanings, rules, and practices that are deeply rooted in the particular legal mentalities and cultural contexts of each country (Colson & Field, 2019; He, 2023). Therefore, careful attention to translation is essential in comparative criminology to ensure that research findings are accurately interpreted across diverse cultural landscapes.

The Inadequacy of Comparative Units

In comparative criminology, the selection of appropriate comparative units is essential for effective analysis. However, the current inadequacy of these units poses a significant challenge to the field. The terminology surrounding comparative criminology, such as comparative, transnational, international, cross-national, and global criminology, lacks consensus among scholars (Banks & Baker, 2015; Friedrichs, 2016; Pakes, 2010). Although these terms are often used interchangeably (Stamatel, 2009), the essence of “comparative criminology” lies in the act of comparison itself. The unit of comparison serves as the foundation for conducting any comparative research, as it establishes the boundaries of the analysis. However, the question of the unit of comparison in comparative criminology research remains a topic of debate. As Eisner (2023, p. 78) states, “the boundaries of what makes criminological research ‘comparative’ remain somewhat opaque.”

Beirne & Nelken, (1997, p. xv) described comparative criminology as “the systematic and theoretically informed comparison of crime in two or more cultures.” In 2010, Nelken (2010) further defined “comparative criminal justice” as “the study of what people and institutions in different places do – and should do – about crime problems.” Nivette (2015, p. 462) pointed out that comparative criminology is “designed to investigate differences in

crime and criminal justice organizations across borders.” While comparisons are frequently made between nation-states, other units of analysis—such as cities, organizations, provinces, or regions—are also relevant.

This variety in definitions raises an important question: is the unit of comparison defined by culture or geographical location? Howard and his colleagues (2000, p. 144) proposed a more nuanced approach, defining comparative criminology as “an approach that employs basic unifying concepts of human groups and seeks to compare cultures and nation-states to highlight the similarities and differences between each class with respect to these universal concepts.” Runhovde (2022, p. 372) echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of studying comparative criminology across “geo-political, historical, and cultural contexts.”

Despite ongoing debates, the nation-state remains the predominant unit of analysis in comparative criminological research (Bennett, 2004; Eisner, 2023; Kohn, 1987; LaFree, 2021; Nivette, 2014). Many studies focus on comparisons between countries, with traditional comparative research often accepting national boundaries as the primary unit for analysis. This perspective typically emphasizes differences in the laws and practices across various nation-states (Banks & Baker, 2015). The nation-state is imagined as a self-contained unit (Eisner, 2023). In the field of criminological research, the institutional structures of the criminal justice systems, the definitions of criminal acts, and the methodologies employed to collect crime statistics are significantly influenced by the characteristics of individual nation-states (Dollinger et al., 2022; Harrendorf, 2018). Prevailing assumptions frequently regard nation-states as relatively homogeneous units, conflating nation, territory, society, and culture into a singular entity distinct from yet other nation-states (Beck & Grande, 2010; Dollinger et al., 2022).

However, relying solely on countries as bounded units for comparison may prove inadequate in contemporary research contexts. Globalization has brought about supranational governance entities, such as the European Union and the United Nations, which play increasingly significant roles in shaping social and legal frameworks. At the same time, the governance structures of subnational entities have become increasingly prominent, especially as linkages between global cities have become more pronounced (Pakes, 2010). As Pakes (2010, p. 27) critically comments, “the state is perhaps the comfort zone of comparative research and comparatists may have leant too comfortably against the bedrock of the nation-state.” Consequently, exploring diverse research units beyond the nation-state can yield valuable perspectives and insights, thereby advancing the field of comparative criminology.

First, geographical units smaller than countries also provide valuable insights for comparative research. Most nations are characterized by rich cultural, racial, and geographic diversity, often encompassing multiple languages; few can be classified as singular cultural units (Newman, 1977). In recent decades, global migration trends have further contributed to this cultural heterogeneity within many countries (Bossert et al., 2011; Messner, 2022). Within a single nation, substantial diversity can exist among regional subcultures, sustained by various factors, including geographic and climatic conditions, patterns of immigration and migration, the concentration of ethnic and foreign communities, variations in economic and technological development, institutional policies and characteristics, and individuals’ self-identification with their specific habitat (Dheer et al., 2014).

For instance, research has highlighted variations in the patterns of individualism and collectivism observed across different areas of the USA. Collectivist tendencies are notably strongest in the Deep South, while individualist tendencies are most pronounced in the Mountain West and Great Plains (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Furthermore, evidence

suggests the presence of a distinct subculture of violence that is more prevalent in the southern USA (Grosjean, 2014; Vandello et al., 2008). Heterogeneity is also apparent in Canada, particularly between Quebec and other regions. Although Quebec is situated within an English-speaking North American context, its residents employ various political and legal strategies to protect their identity and maintain their regional, cultural, linguistic, and social integrity. This dynamic often leads to a sense of cultural alienation from the rest of Canada (Anderson, 2014; Dheer et al., 2014; Laroche et al., 2005). Indeed, Quebec is recognized as a relatively collectivist society, in contrast to the more individualistic cultures found in many other parts of Canada (Major et al., 1994).

Second, some innovative units for comparison that extend beyond the nation-state are worth considering in criminological research. One valuable approach is country clustering, which groups nations based on comparable legal frameworks and practices (Harrendorf, 2018). For instance, Smit et al. (2008) categorized European countries, the USA, and Canada into four distinct clusters: East, North/West, Central, and South. They concluded that “first, all countries that used to be Soviet states are placed in the category ‘East’. Secondly, all ‘countries in transition’ i.e. all countries that used to be in the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union before the 90’s are placed in the category ‘Central’. The former Yugoslavian countries are not in this category. The remainder of the countries are divided in two categories ‘North/West’ and ‘South’ on geographical grounds only. With ‘South’ meaning south of the Pyrenees and the Alps. The USA and Canada are placed in the category ‘North/West’” (Smit et al., 2008, p. 186).

Similarly, Rocque et al. (2015) proposed a classification based on welfare regimes, dividing countries into clusters that include Western Europe (conservative), Anglo-Saxon (liberal), Northern European (social democratic), Mediterranean (Latin), Eastern and Central European (Post-Socialist), and Latin America. Their analysis revealed several theoretically robust correlates of diversity and high-frequency crimes across these six country clusters, concluding that “the correlates of both diversity of offending and high-frequency offending are similar yet their effects vary in some important ways across cultural context” (Rocque et al., 2015, p. 413).

In addition, the concept of “large supranational cultural spaces” (Meško, 2023, p. 79) has gained attention for its ability to transcend simple geographical categorization and to integrate cultural dimensions. One example is the “Arab world,” which comprises a diverse group of countries primarily located in West Asia (such as Jordan and Lebanon) and North Africa (such as Algeria and Egypt). These countries can be grouped together on the basis of a range of commonalities (Asli, 2024), including language, legal systems, culture, and history. A significant characteristic of Arab societies is the “prominent role of Islamic law in shaping the legal and political confines of what constitutes crime, justice and punishment” (Ouassini & Ouassini, 2020, p. 524). Ouassini and Ouassini (2020, p. 524) also argue that the Arab world holds critical insights for comparative criminology but has not received enough attention thus far.

Another salient example is the “Confucian-influenced societies” (Gupta et al., 2002; Liu, 2009, 2016). Confucianism, established by Confucius (551–479 BC), has profoundly shaped the ethical and moral foundations of traditional Chinese culture for over two millennia. In agricultural feudal societies, Confucianism was regarded as a national doctrine, permeating various aspects of Chinese society, including politics, economy, philosophy, social psychology, social customs, modes of thinking, and lifestyles (Gao et al., 2012). Countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam collectively formed a “Confucian Cultural Sphere.” Meanwhile, due to the influence of Chinese immigration, Confucian values also have significantly influenced Singapore and Malaysia (Lee, 2010). While the degree

of acceptance and depth of the influence of Confucianism vary across regions, it remains one of the most influential schools of thought within East Asian value systems, exerting a profound impact on individuals and societies (Ma & Marquis, 2022: ch. 2).

Discussion

Despite ongoing developments in criminology, the neglect of non-Western areas persists. Many scholars advocate for a shift away from Western-centrism and call for greater attention to areas outside North America and Europe. They propose the development of criminological subfields that are rooted in local cultures and environments. Notable examples include Southern criminology proposed by Carrington and her colleagues (2016, 2018), Asian criminology proposed by Jianhong Liu (2009, 2011, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2021, 2022), Arab criminology introduced by Ouassini and Ouassini, 2020, 2023), and so on.

The Western bias poses a significant obstacle to the further development of comparative criminology. To address these challenges, several measures can be considered. First, global criminologists could focus more on non-Western regions when conducting comparative studies. The diverse cultures, social contexts, and crime situations in these areas can bring new vitality and insights to the field of comparative criminology. Second, scholars from non-Western regions can develop and broadcast valuable criminological knowledge that reflects their distinct cultural and social contexts. A notable example of this approach is the relationism theory of criminal justice proposed by Liu (2024), which seeks to “explain multiple criminal justice outcomes at the system, institutional, and individual levels across cultures.” Furthermore, enhancing international cooperation is essential for conducting comparative criminology from more inclusive perspectives (Eisner, 2023). Collaborative efforts that engage researchers from diverse backgrounds can foster richer and more nuanced understandings of crime and justice.

In employing quantitative methods to explore the influence of culture on crime and criminal justice, researchers often encounter challenges in measuring culture and attributing differences between countries to cultural factors. Future research could benefit from adopting mixed methods that combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to better understand the impact of culture. The value of qualitative methods in comprehending crime and criminal justice in a globalized world is increasingly recognized, even though international criminology has traditionally relied on quantitative methods (Travers, 2020). For example, Steffensmeier et al. (2017) compared the age-crime patterns in Taiwan and the USA to test the age-crime invariance thesis. The quantitative results revealed substantial differences in age-crime patterns between Taiwan and the USA, diverging from the J-shaped norm predicted by Hirschi and Gottfredson. Although the quantitative research did not include cultural variables, the authors conducted interviews to investigate how Taiwanese culture and practices might influence child-adolescent socialization and social control, potentially leading to different age-crime patterns. This mixed-methods approach further strengthened confidence in the quantitative findings.

When conducting surveys for comparative studies, the representativeness of samples should be considered carefully. Future research could consider broadening the samples to encompass a wider variety of participants beyond just university and school students. Additionally, variations in language can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of questions, potentially skewing the results. It is important to be mindful of the subtle effects of translation, as language differences can greatly impact survey responses.

As Eisner (2023, p. 79) aptly note, “What we choose for comparison determines what we find.” Relying solely on the nation-state as the unit of analysis in comparative studies often proves inadequate for capturing the complexities of crime and criminal justice. By moving beyond the national unit, researchers can gain broader perspectives.

When identifying units of comparison, geographical units above or below the national level can serve as alternative units of comparison. In addition, innovative comparative units, such as country clustering and large supranational cultural spaces, present valuable opportunities for further research. However, any chosen unit of comparison is likely to encounter issues of internal heterogeneity. Just as cultural diversity exists among different sub-regions within a country, similar variations can also occur among sub-regions and ethnic groups within a city. When considering country clustering, caution is warranted due to significant variations between countries. As Harrendorf (2018, p. 201) reminds, “Country clusters are potentially feasible only for countries for which data are highly similar.” In the context of large supranational cultural spaces, while sub-regions may share certain cultural commonalities, the impact of sub-regional cultural specifics can vary significantly across sub-regions. For example, in the Arab world, Islamic law plays a prominent role in shaping the legal and political frameworks of crime, justice, and punishment (Ouassini & Ouassini, 2020). However, each country’s criminal justice system reflects a unique interpretation of Islamic law (Crystal, 2001; Ouassini & Ouassini, 2020). Future studies can take into account how heterogeneity within the chosen unit for comparison may affect the usefulness of the comparative approach in a certain study and the interpretation of results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, comparative criminology is essential for deepening our understanding of crime and criminal justice across diverse cultural contexts. Despite the increasing interest in comparative criminological research (Nelken, 2012), several persistent challenges must be acknowledged, including a predominance of Western-centric perspectives, the ambiguity arising from involving culture as an explanatory factor in quantitative studies, difficulties in conducting survey research across different countries, and inadequate comparative units. These challenges represent potential limitations in comparative research that, if not addressed adequately, may lead to biased findings and undermine the validity of cross-cultural comparisons.

Recognizing the inherent difficulties in fully overcoming these challenges is crucial. Nevertheless, certain strategies may help mitigate their impact. Future research could benefit from incorporating more non-Western perspectives and employing a more diverse range of comparative units. The integration of mixed methods could yield richer insights into the cultural influence of crime and criminal justice. Enhancing the representativeness of samples and minimizing the influence of language differences are also vital considerations in conducting cross-national surveys.

By systematically addressing these challenges, researchers can enhance the comprehensiveness and nuances of criminological inquiries on a global scale, ultimately contributing to a more robust understanding of criminological phenomena.

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Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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