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## 16. Dealing with cross-country variation in the comparative study of public administration and street-level bureaucracy

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Comparing is the end of happiness and the beginning of discontent.  
(Kierkegaard)

### 16.1 INTRODUCTION

In many developed countries more or less similar public tasks are being fulfilled. Nevertheless, the institutions and organizational arrangements in these countries are largely different. Especially on the local layer of government where many public functions are being assumed and thus *the street level* of government bureaucracy seems most visible, there is a great variety of institutional settings, functional responsibilities and territorial structures. However, existing research about street-level bureaucracy has hitherto paid little attention to the impacts of these country-specific institutional contexts and to the question of what differences these can make for actual street-level policymaking, public service delivery and task fulfilment. Comparative Public Administration, too, has not provided much evidence so far on how different public administrative settings and cultures actually influence the activities of administrative actors and the performance of service provision.

Hence, the challenge to link up these two fields of analyses and to concentrate empirical studies more systematically on the effects of different organizational arrangements in various areas of public service provision needs to be taken up. The impact assessment and evaluation of institutional changes, an area of investigation that is still conceptually, methodologically and empirically underdeveloped (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2011), is at stake. Linking up the analysis of administrative behaviour at the street level to a cross-country comparison of administrative settings and cultures, thus combining the research foci of street-level bureaucracy and Comparative Public Administration, would certainly add a hitherto largely ignored part of the study of public administration. This claim has repeatedly been put forward but only rarely addressed by the international academic community (for cross-national comparative aspects of street-level bureaucracy research, see also Chapters 6, 7 and 18 of this *Research Handbook*).

Against this background, this chapter is intended to outline major dimensions, criteria and findings of cross-country comparative studies in public administration, which promise to be a fruitful ground for advancing comparative research of street-level bureaucracy. In doing so, we shall explore the ways in which existing concepts and analytical tools of Comparative Public Administration could be used for street-level bureaucracy research by way of incorporating comparative aspects more explicitly. To this aim, in Section 16.2