Comparative Adult Education: Arguments, Typology, Difficulties

In this introductory chapter, a short overview of background ideas that frame the reflection on and research of international comparative adult education is given. International comparison is described as an everyday experience and defined as a scientific approach. The main arguments for international comparative adult education are collected here, as well as examples for international activities in the last century. Furthermore, a typology of comparative adult education is presented, followed by a description of difficulties and problems of comparative work. Finally, perspectives for the future of international comparative adult education are offered.

1. International comparison - an everyday experience

When traveling abroad – or hosting foreigners at home – comparison is inevitable; we compare the weather, the prices, and besides many other items, our professional experiences. Comparison proves to be an everyday human strategy. When comparing we find similarities and differences. The perceived differences may lead firsthand to confusion and misunderstanding:

- When I bring a dozen of my students from my university in Germany to an American Adult Education conference, my colleagues are surprised; the average age of my German adult education students is about 23. The average age of the American adult education students my colleagues bring to the conference seems to be around forty.

- When somebody wants to know if my students are undergraduate or postgraduate, I do not know how to answer. In the German higher education system there is - up to now - no equivalent for that distinction. So I explain: After 13 years of school students matriculate at the university where they study pedagogy and andragogy for the next four to five years; after that they go out with a “Diplom” to be valued professionals for the next forty years.

- “But where are the adult learners?” my American colleagues ask me when visiting my university. I am confused: “Why and to what end should adults

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learn at a university and not with their employer or at adult education institutions?”
All of these examples have one thing in common: Both sides become aware that what we are used to understanding as “normal” suddenly does not apply to the international context (e.g.: To become an adult education professional, you have to be in the second half of life. Universities are structured in undergraduate/graduate categories. Adults want and have to change their careers by attending universities). This leads to confusion. Two basically different reactions are possible: either to stick to ones own concepts, and hope that those strangers will adapt to the “right” (= my) way. This reaction describes the ethnocentric position, leading – if power and money comes into play – to colonization. Or to become aware that in our interpretation of our world perception-patterns exist of “how things are”, which are not the only one and only right concepts in the world. The need for more exchange and clarification emerges, leading to an international-comparative reflection and hopefully understanding and valuing.

2. International comparison - a scientific approach
Comparative Adult Education on the scholarly level describes an approach to understanding and forming adult education, in which one or more aspects in two or more countries are compared. This comparison is based on methodically gained data and identifies similarities and differences between the aspects under study. These similarities and differences and their significance for theory and practice of adult education in the examined countries should be explained.

This general definition needs two additional specifications:
1. Although comparison can occur within a single country (intra-national), the term typically stands for ‘international comparative adult education’, meaning the comparison between countries.
2. Many types of international comparative research do not include explicit comparison: “It is generally accepted that most of what is included under the rubric of comparative studies in adult education ... does not include comparison in the strict sense” (Titmus, 1999, p. 36). Perhaps in these cases “comparison” refers to the implicit comparison with one’s own country that inevitably happens when analyzing a foreign country.

3. Why international comparison?
A number of arguments are named that give good reason for comparative research. They might be categorized into curiosity, applicational, and educational arguments:

3.1 Curiosity, Knowledge, Understanding
Humans have a built-in curiosity – the mother of all questioning and research – to know how things are. Thus a first argument for comparison is knowledge - “to satisfy an interest in how human beings live and learn … to become better informed about adult education systems of other countries” (Kidd, 1975, p. 10). This information helps to better understand adult education in a foreign country: “comparative education can make ‘strange patterns familiar’” (Spindler and Spindler in Bray 2003, p. 7).

In addition it is claimed that this knowledge and understanding gained by the outside-look to a foreign country reflects back to better understanding one’s own country: observations made in a foreign context help to better perceive and understand adult education and how it operates not only in the other, but also in ones own country, making “familiar patterns strange” (Spindler and Spindler in Bray 2003, p. 7) - opening through the perceived similarities and differences a new perspective to phenomena that seemed “normal” and “natural” before.

These processes of looking-outside and of reflecting-back are expected to have an effect beyond the mere comparison. It is argued that studying the historical, social, and cultural influences leads “to develop criteria for assessing contemporary developments and testing possible outcomes” (Kidd, 1975, p. 10). Hence “comparative studies of education are valuable as scholarly activities which deepen understanding of the forces which shape education systems and processes” (Bray in this book).

3.2 Practical Application: Borrowing, Copying
A second line of arguments aims toward practical benefit: It is hoped that learning from experiences abroad helps to adapt foreign experiences to one’s own practice; this should help avoid repeating (expensive) mistakes and “re-inventing the wheel”. Bray summarizes in this book that “comparative studies … are … valuable as instruments for policy makers and practitioners to effect improvements by learning about what does and does not work in a range of settings”. Charters uses the terms “efficiently”, “effectively”, and “useful” to refer to this practical benefit: International comparison is done “in order that international developments may proceed more efficiently and effectively … (and) is useful in developing the theory and practice of Adult Education” (Charters, 1999, p. 55).

Often in this argument the term “borrowing” is used (although Bray in this book argues, that “borrowing is perhaps a misnomer since it implies that the models will be given back after use, which is very rare”). The terms “copying” or “importing” are used less often, because it is argued that the transfer from one culture or setting to another seldom allows a pure copy without adaptation.

One specific expected practical outcome of comparative adult education is that learning from each other supports peace: “Research … assists in developing cooperation and understanding which is a basis for peace” (Charters, 1999, p. 55). Similarly the UNESCO Hamburg Declaration on Adult Education states the hope “to construct a culture of peace” (1997, chapter 14).
3.3 Education, Transformation

A third group of arguments for comparative adult education claims that international comparison changes, educates, and transforms the person undertaking this comparison. “Understanding” and “supporting peace” already mentioned include some of these educational and transformative aspects. But it is argued more clearly here that attitudes and values are changed and transformed, leading to more tolerance against differing ways of life and learning, reducing the fear of the strange. These changes go beyond “knowing” and “using” and include a basic personal transformation: The international-comparative perspective assists to overcome one’s own ethnocentric blindness. Similarly Kidd states that international comparison helps “to better understand oneself, (and) to reveal how one’s own cultural biases and personal attributes affect one’s judgment” (1975, p. 10). Many researchers confirm through their own experience that these personal, educating and transforming benefits do apply - examples can be found in several contributions to this book.

The groups of arguments justifying international comparative research are by themselves usually taken as self-evident. To support the international comparative view, practice, and funding more research seems necessary to gain more knowledge about how these processes of knowledge-exchange, borrowing, and transformation in reality happen, how they can be supported, and what makes them more or less successful.

4. The international interest in andragogy

In the emerging history of andragogy - the “Wissenschaft” or science of the education and learning of adults - we find a continuous interest in adult education in other countries, as was previously pointed out (Reischmann, Bron, Jelenc, 1999, p. 11). In the century between Grundtvig (Denmark) and Freire (Brazil) a number of names and ideas attained international currency. The Danish ‘Folkhøjskole’, the English university extension movement, the Swedish study circle, and the American encounter group movement became models for adult education in other countries - even if often the differences between the “borrowed” and the original have not been perceived. Research shows a lot of cross-cultural communication, for example the British-Dutch-German relationship in adult education between 1880 and 1930 (Friedenthal-Haase, Hake & Marriott, 1991).

International travel and exchange has, from the early years, offered key-persons in the adult education movement an important way to shape their understanding: Lindeman (USA) traveled to Germany, Mansbridge (Great Britain) to Australia and Canada, and Borinski (Germany) to Scandinavia. Institutions were founded for International exchange: As early as 1919 the World Association for Adult Education (WAAE) was founded with the mission “to bring into co-operation and mutual relationship the adult education move-ments and institutions of the world, in order that peoples may proceed in greater power through wisdom – the mother of all things – to knowledge”. A number of institutions working in the international arena of adult education are described in the appendix of this book.

Conferences also contributed to the international exchange of adult education on the scientific and practical level, where the “guild of international adult education experts” can be found in face-to-face meetings. Just to name a few of them (for more details: Knoll, 1999; Charters, Bray in this book): At the UNESCO-world conference on Adult Education (Conférence Internationale sur l’Éducation des Adultes = CONFINTEA) 1960 in Ottawa, Alexander N. Charters, Professor of Adult Education at Syracuse University, New York, and Roby Kidd, Canadian expert and scholar, conferred in a working group on international and comparative adult education. “According to popular descriptions comparative adult education research began at the Exeter-Conference, which A. Liveright organized in 1966” (Knoll, 1999, p. 21, similar Titmus, 1999, p. 33). It took place in New Hampshire; the ‘Exeter papers’ were published by the Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education. In 1970 Alexander Charters and Beverly Cassara published the papers from the World Council of Comparative and International Education (WCCES) in Montreal. Other meetings brought comparatists together in Ibadan, Ghana (the International Conference on Comparative Adult Education 1991). In Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1992, Colin Titmus, Great Britain, chaired a working group at the VIII World Council of Comparative Education Societies. The 1993 conference ‘Rethinking Adult Education for Development’ assembled the comparatists in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Hamburg, Germany, hosted 1997 the UNESCO CONFINTEA V Conference. In Bamberg, Germany, ISCAE’s first conference (1995) took place; 2006 Bamberg convened researchers at the 4th ISCAE-Conference, combining it with the 11th Standing Conference on the History of Adult Education, and for first time outside the USA the Induction Ceremony of the Adult Education Hall of Fame. When describing the history of comparative adult education authors often use these conferences for structuring their description of the development of the field (e.g. Knoll 1999, Titmus 1999, Charters in this book).

These examples indicate that in many countries an international interest in adult education can be observed. The international argument was and is used in the theory of adult education as well as in the practical work carried out in many countries. The effects of the international argument are sometimes evident and lasting; sometimes it remains rhetorical or marginal. Certainly, cultural differences limit the transfer from one country to another. Comparative research, by helping to understand the differences and similarities among countries and their significance for adult education, clarifies the possibilities and limits of understanding and borrowing. This research is indispensable in a world where it is
necessary to gain an understanding of the various ways adult education is experienced in many countries.

5. Putting meanings into boxes: Types of international comparative adult education

The definitions in this field are not really distinct. There are clearly two different aspects when talking about international work in adult education: a more practical, action-oriented perspective, and a more academic, reflection-oriented understanding.

5.1 International Adult Education: Practical, action-oriented

The more practical, action-oriented understanding of international adult education refers to all activities that support learning experiences aimed at the connection with other nationalities and cultures - within or outside of one’s own country. “International adult education refers to the effort of adult educators to work globally in a diversity of contexts in order to educate for liberation, equality, and freedom” (Hall 2005, p. 312). The main focus of international adult education is to educate how to become and behave as a more “international” person, thus leading to more exchange, understanding, and respect, both on a personal and national level.

This perspective includes foreign language courses (which make up about one third of the offerings in German adult education centers), excursions to museums or exhibitions in neighboring countries (which is easy in smaller countries like Germany, where in less than four or five hours - depending on the starting point - Amsterdam/The Netherlands, Paris/France, Zürich/Switzerland, Salzburg/Austria or Prague/Czech Republic can be reached), including a walk around, some shopping, and a local beer. This understanding also includes educational travel tours to foreign countries.

Sometimes this “looking beyond one’s own national borders” is a welcomed byproduct (like in vacation traveling); sometimes it is explicitly planned. For example, after World War II, countries in Europe supported programs that brought juveniles and young adults together in order to build and decorate war cemeteries; the hope was that these international meetings would show the way to mutual learning for a better understanding and peace for future generations. The Peace Corps in the USA followed a similar idea. City sister-ships throughout the world are another example. Also, UNESCO and the World Bank are big players in this type of international adult education (see the contribution of Bray in this book). By taking my students to a conference in a foreign country, I invest these efforts in the hope of “making them more international” – which means learning practical techniques (developing language skills, making phone calls, and knowing how to find something to eat and a bathroom), as well as educating emotions and valuing (the reduction of stress and threat by “the

5.2 International Comparative Adult Education: Academic, reflection-oriented

International comparative adult education - the center of this paper - has a different focus: it has a more academic, reflection-oriented perspective, it emphasizes a more theoretical approach, gaining knowledge and understanding about adult education in other countries, and is accomplished with some methodological rigor.

Knowledge about the education of adults in other countries can be gained from various sources, and several types of comparative research can be categorized as follows:

0. Travelers tales

A first source, rated often as “pre-scientific” and characterized as “subjective-impressionistic”, are the reports given by international travelers. The first chapter of this article was written on this level. Such reports are delivered by traveling writers or vacationers, but also by scholars who attend a conference abroad and have to report to their funding agency, and simultaneously publish this report in a journal. More systematic descriptions are categorized as ‘travelers reports’ and less systematic ‘travelers tales’.

Their value is considered to be ambivalent. On the one hand because of random observation and subjective description, it is argued that it is not clear how reliable and how representative the descriptions are. On the other hand the plea is made that, especially because of the subjective focus of eye witnesses, this type of report might possess a specific strength. The quality very much depends on the quality of the reporter. A scholar of adult education with international experiences, trained to reflect on his personal bias and knowing that different models and traditions exist, certainly may be seen to be more objective, reliable, and valid than a normal vacationer. A number of contributions in this book, when referring to “lessons learned” without using specific research
1. Country reports, single nation studies

A first stage of scholarly international adult education was the country report. Country reports try to describe the system of adult education in one country, as proposed, for example, at the 1966 Exeter conference: ‘to identify and describe the existing adult education programs within each country in order to make the relevant data available to scholars in their own and in other countries for comparative analysis’ (Charters & Siddiqui, 1989, p. 3). “Adult Education in the Republic of . . .” is a typical title of this type of report. But the hope to use them as a basis for later comparison was seldom fulfilled. Too different were the approaches, the selection of the focus, or the data presented. These single nation studies were often presented under a specific perspective: “Single nation studies are directed almost entirely at foreign audiences” (Titmus, 1999, p. 37). Country reports were presented mainly during the 1970s and 1980s. They could be written by an author within the country or by a person from the outside - this fact making a clear difference which has not been researched yet. Some of these reports are rather impressionistic; others follow a well-developed outline and structure. An example of the renewed interest in country reports is the series of “Country Portraits” published by the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) from 1997 on, presenting for example Greece, Switzerland, Spain, Finland, and Germany (in German and English).

2. Program reports, topic-oriented studies

Since attempts to describe a whole national system were seldom successful, program reports focus more narrowly on descriptions of adult education programs, institutions, and organizations in a distinct country. During and after the 1980s an increasing number of program reports were presented. Examples of this type can be found in the writing of Charters and Hilton (1989) or the case studies collected by Knox (1989). Included in this category (sometimes categorized separately) are the topic-oriented studies or the problem approach, in which not a program, but a certain topic or problem is discussed in the context of a nation. The observation in the ISCAE-conferences give the impression that there is a growing interest in this type of exchange: On the background of one country specific topics - for example aging or leisure time - are presented and discussed, with a clear “message-of-invitation” to colleagues of other countries to engage and exchange, based on their national background.

Country reports, as well as program reports, topic-oriented studies, and the problem approach, are mostly more ‘international’ and less ‘comparative’. Since only one country or program is presented, no comparable object is available.

Especially when an author presents his own country or program to a foreign readership in various countries, it is difficult for him to compare with another national system. If, for example, a German author describes a German program in an English publication, should he draw parallels to the English, Scottish, US-American, Canadian or Australian systems? This mostly leads to the consequence that readers have to draw the comparative conclusions themselves. As Titmus comments: “To make sense of these studies, readers will inevitably compare them with their knowledge of their own national provisions” (1999, p. 37).

3. Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition collects and presents data from two or more countries, but no explicit comparison – where are the similarities, what are the differences? – is given. These reports show that in country A we can observe X, while in country B we find Y. A quantifying approach to juxtaposition is offered by a series of statistical reports; another approach is descriptive, for example the German international volume of the Handbuch der Erwachsenenbildung (Handbook of Adult Education, Leirman/Pöggeler, 1978) or Peter Jarvis’ (1992) Perspectives on Adult Education and Training in Europe. Juxtaposition can also be topic- or problem-oriented when a topic is presented in a series of contributions from various countries. For example, Pöggeler’s The State and Adult Education (1990) brings together a series of articles discussing the role of the state in different countries.

4. Comparison

Comparison in the ‘strict’ understanding of ‘international comparative adult education’ reports from two or more countries and offers an explicit comparison making the similarities and differences understandable. ISCAE here uses the definition of its “founding father” Alexander N. Charters:

A study in comparative international adult education ... must include one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries or regions. Comparative study is not the mere placing side by side of data; ... such juxtaposition is only the prerequisite for comparison. At the next stage one attempts to identify the similarities and differences between the aspects under study ... The real value of comparative study emerges only from ... the attempt to understand why the differences and similarities occur and what their significance is for adult education in the countries under examination. (Charters & Hilton, 1989, p. 3)

This type of research can for example be found in the final chapter of Charters and Hilton (1989).

In this strict understanding, country reports and reports about programs or topics in one country are not a part of international comparative education. Furthermore, juxtaposition - the side-by-side placing of data and descriptions from two or more countries - is not at the stage of comparison. In the strict understanding, it is necessary that similarities and differences get explicitly worked out with some methodological rigor. While the more general interna-
tional aspect in adult education has a long tradition, only a small and limited amount of research into adult education has been done comparatively.

5. Field and method reflecting texts
These texts reflect the methods, strategies, and concepts of international comparison, and include summarizing reports about developments in the international comparative field on a material or meta-level. The article at hand is an example for this category. Research methods, problems, and pitfalls were a central focus of ISCAE’s first conference and are documented in Reischmann/Bron Jr/Jelec (1999).

6. Reports from international organizations
A bit outside of this system, but still counted as part of the international tradition are reports from transnational institutions such as UNESCO, OECD, or the World Bank. Joachim Knoll, Professor (em) at Bochum University, Germany, is one of the key persons supplying such information.

Further reflections
For these different approaches we used the term “types” (and not “stages”). Certainly, in the history of comparative (adult) education times can be identified when one type was predominantly used and valued. But what can be proved through many conferences and publications, even in this book: All these types exist and are used today, representing different approaches in the collection of available methods for different intentions.

There is not yet a final answer to the question: Where does “international adult education” end and where does “international comparative adult education” begin? Addressing this question, Wilson uses the term “twin fields” and asks: “Comparative and International Education: Fraternal or Siamese Twins?” (1994, p. 449). In a strict sense, two discriminations seem to be clear - “Comparison” can only be done when at least two objects are available, and “International” means different countries. So an international comparative study has to refer to at least two countries. Charters and Siddiqui (1989) draw clear limits:

A study that compares two or more aspects of adult education in a single country is merely an instance of intra-national comparative adult education. Similarly, a study that describes one or more dimensions of adult education in two or more countries without comparing them is an example of international adult education, not of comparative adult education. (p. 5)

Following this strict definition many presentations, papers, and research should be more appropriately labeled as “international” rather than “comparative.” This is true for the book in hand. Bray similarly states in his editorial introduction to the book with papers from the 11th World Congress on Comparative Education, held in Korea in 2001, “The fact that only one quarter of the articles explicitly take national level foci … is indicative of a further paradigm shift in the field”

(Bray, 2003, p. 9). Confirming this shift we already cited Titmus (1999), respected British scholar in international comparative adult education, who offers a much less strict understanding of comparative research in adult education: “It is generally accepted that most of what is included under the rubric of comparative studies in adult education … does not include comparison in the strict sense” (p. 36). Similarly Knoll, a longstanding German expert in the international field, states that “very few pieces of research work that are - according to their self-definition - ‘comparative’ really deserve this attribution. They normally approach a phenomenon in a problem-orientated or in a country-monographic way without considering a tertium comparationis” (Knoll, 1999, p. 20).

The scientific community will have to come to an agreement about this question. Looking back to the results of the “call for papers” in four ISCAE-conferences proves that many researchers prefer the “wider” understanding of “comparative adult education”, thus confirming Titmus and Knoll.

Most researchers in comparative adult education agree that international comparative adult education is at a beginning stage. But activities, research, conferences, and literature prove that a lot of clarification already has been done, knowledge is available, and methods are developed (i.e. Bereday, 1964; Noah/Eckstein, 1969; Kidd, 1975; Leirman/Pöggeler, 1979; Charters/Hilton, 1989; Charters/Siddiqui, 1989; Jarvis, 1992; Knox, 1993; Reischmann/Bron/Jelec, 1999).

6. Difficulties and problems of international comparative work
It certainly is challenging and rewarding to get a wider view of our world through an international orientation, but there are also handicaps that hinder research in comparative adult education. Just to name some of them (for a more comprehensive description see Bron Jr in this book):

One problem is that the continuity of scholarly work is not guaranteed. Only a small number of scholars work in international comparative adult education as their main field; others enter for just a short period of time or work. The knowledge developed in comparative adult education is scattered in many places, languages, and countries. This makes it difficult for new researchers to start working in this field. To build up continuity it is necessary to bring together the knowledge, experiences, discussions, and standards of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of international comparison, so that researchers can refer to and build upon an internationally shared set of research methods. To serve the continuity in this field through networking, conferences, and publications, the ‘International Society for Comparative Adult Education ISCAE’ (www.ISCAE.org) was founded.

Part of the continuity-problem is the regular attendance at central international meetings. Person-to-person contacts are essential in this field: “International Conferences Built Bridges” is one of the lessons learned in Henschke’s contribution in this book. To enter this field and to stay in its...
networks entails traveling and being visible. This visibility requires a considerable investment of time, energy, and money; additionally, the investment also has to be made in times when no comparative project is being carried out and no extra project money is available.

It is evident that international comparative research has clearly higher costs. It is time-consuming and not always successful to find foundations willing to support international projects. National foundations are often not interested in paying the costs of the foreign partner. My experience through ISCAE is that most conference participants attend on their own money, sometimes with some limited support from their university or foundations. Funding agencies should do more to not just assist international comparative research projects but especially to encourage and finance the possibility of bringing young scholars into this field.

An often discussed topic is how comparison can be done between different cultures: Are researchers knowledgeable enough to understand the aspects under study in a foreign cultural context? A number of the contributions in this book (and the 1999-ISCAE-publication) address this problem. The reality of international comparative studies show that this problem can not be “solved”, but it can be reduced when the aim is not ‘perfect’ but ‘better’ understanding, and when the work is carried out in dialogue with foreign partners for communicative validation (Knox, 1993).

A clear handicap is language. Besides the cultural and linguistic problems (see Jütte, 1999), researchers have to cope with a number of practical problems: International communication takes place in English, but for the majority of the world, this is a foreign language. In discussions, this raises difficulties: native English speakers are always faster! Communicating – even more, publishing – in the foreign language takes many times more effort than in one’s native context. Secretaries are often not trained to write English, so the researcher has to type everything himself. When making citations, the English literature is often not available in foreign libraries, and it makes no sense to refer to the knowledge and experience of non-English research literature, because this literature does not exist for the international readership. Thus researchers from non-English countries, when working in the international context, loose most of their national scholarly background that is based on their native language - content, theory, and methodology. When publishing, a native English speaker always has to be found for proofreading. On the other hand, native English speakers with no command of a foreign language always depend on more or less reliable translations - a wide open field for misunderstanding.

Of course, international comparative projects have a lot more obstacles than research carried out in one country. A foreign partner has to be found and has to be convinced to join a project. Many details have to be clarified before and during the research process and at the end for the publication; such discussion requires continuous exchange. In most cases, one partner also carries an extra load of translation when the other partner does not speak his language.

Comparative research means a high investment of money, time, and effort. This is a problem especially for young scholars. When weighing the potential outcome of these investments for one’s career, a scholar often finds it more beneficial to work at the national level.

7. Prospects

International adult education and international comparative adult education share the fate of many good ideas: everybody agrees that they are important, but not many are willing to take the load of the international work on their shoulders and purses. Experiences in international and international comparative adult education have been developed in many countries. The important task is to encourage continuing work in this field, building on previous results in order to develop these experiences further.

More international knowledge, respect, and understanding are certainly needed in today’s world. The personal benefits of being a more “international” person include understanding, open mindedness, tolerance, and humility - and good times with good friends in many places in the world. Those working in international comparative adult education report how personally enriching and rewarding they experienced the wider world-view gained through an international orientation.

From a global perspective, learning from each other is an essential, basic necessity. The UNESCO Hamburg Declaration on Adult Education (1997) put this perspective in words: “One of the foremost challenges of our age is ... to construct a culture of peace based on justice and tolerance within which dialogue, mutual recognition and negotiation will replace violence, in homes and countries, within nations and between countries” (Chapter 14).

International comparative adult education faces challenging perspectives - in theory and the field of practice.

8. References


www.ISCAE.org – International Society for Comparative Adult Education


Pittfalls in Comparative Studies

Problems of comparative inquiry

Every academic endeavour faces a number of problems that have to be dealt with. The goal of this chapter is to raise an awareness of the risks of falling into various traps awaiting researchers in comparative adult education.

When pursuing an inquiry, a researcher in comparative studies can encounter three types of problems:

a) Difficulties typical for all research undertakings within the social sciences, such as objectivity, reliability, validity, selection, sustainability, reactivity, interpretation or consistency. They were/are widely discussed in the methodological research literature (cf. Campbell & Stanley 1967; Lincoln & Guba 1985). Since these methodological difficulties are common to all research in the social sciences, this chapter will not pursue further discussion on the topic.

In addition to these general difficulties, international comparative studies cause specific problems (cf. Reischmann, Bron Jr & Jelenc 1999; Titmus 1999; Hake 1999; Reischmann 1999; Blaise 1999). The two types of problems are:

b) “Obstacles” – often painfully experienced, visible difficulties which researchers have to overcome when working with international comparisons. The most frequent are the lack of comparable information, variation in the quality and reliability of statistics, lack of uniform definitions, non-availability of English publications, lack of coherent translations or competent proof-reading, incurrence of travel expenses, communication problems, and the dependency on foreign contributors/information. Another crucial issue which has preoccupied researchers of comparative studies for years is the issue of whether questions and answers can be meaningfully translated from one language, and one social reality, into another. Probably most of the comparativists would subscribe to Wittgenstein’s observation, that Die Grenzen meiner Sprache sind die Grenzen meiner Welt (the limits of my language are the limits of my world). Obstacles are considered as ‘normal’ because they must be tackled in almost every comparative research undertaking. They make this

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Obstacles and Pitfalls: Inherent and Self-styled Dangers…

In this chapter I discuss pitfalls which threaten comparative studies. Some decades ago, the Belgian sociologist André Köbben (1979) described five pitfalls that burdened the social sciences and the humanities. He named them no less sarcastically than I will name mine when building on his list.

His first pitfall is named ‘spurious similarities.’ This occurs when data from completely different societies are extracted from already published studies and analysed within a new frame of reference. During this process, as Köbben rightly warned, various “phenomena are frequently brought under one label whose meaning in the context of their respective societies is widely dissimilar” (Köbben 1979, p. 2). Comparatists face this problem quite often. The most common example is in employing the same name to denote different educational institutions or phenomena (e.g. ‘high schools’ or the actual academic standard of institutions of higher education in European countries and the USA). That there are almost always differences regarding terminology and definitions of concepts used in educational statistics is quite understandable (cf. Bron Jr & Bron 1983, pp. 48-51). Thus, what is required from a researcher, is to be aware of those differences. A platitude, which too often ought to be considered as a warning, is that “similar things need not to be identical things” (Köbben 1979, p. 3).

The next pitfall – the ‘mis-use of surveys techniques’ – deals with the very popular technique of gathering empirical - mostly quantitative - material (especially in sociology); namely surveying. The fact that surveys are relatively easy to employ leads to a situation where too many researchers omit the fact that in many cases these techniques should be exchanged for other ones “if only for the obvious reason that there may be a gap between what people say (when being interviewed) and what they do, especially when sensitive topics are involved” (Köbben 1979, p. 4). The problem lies not in the use of this technique but rather in its misuse and in the exaggeration of its values.

The third pitfall identified by Köbben is that of ‘inductivism,’ which became prevalent again in the late 1960’s and in the 1970’s. The use of computers contributed to circumstances whereby researchers became tempted to correlate data from completely different cultural settings. Too often it has been done “without much sense of theory or problem” (Köbben 1979, p. 5). In taking a closer look, we find that repeatedly, relationships between studied phenomena turn out to be just coincidental. Researchers enchanted with computing data forget to verify if established correlations are a sheer coincidence or actual relationships.

Köbben’s pitfall ‘scientific involution’ is derived from the organisation and conduct of a research project. One has to deal with it when a research enterprise turns out to be “so complicated, and people/states have invested so much energy and skill into it that for that very reason it is hard to drastically change it” (Köbben 1979, p. 6). The resulting consequence might be twofold. Most comparative studies which involve international research teams are usually costly and lengthy. Many years can elapse between their commencement and conclusion. Nevertheless, and precisely because of the time and work invested, they will still be carried out. The risk involved is that “the theoretical premises of such studies (if any) may very well have become obsolete once they are halfway” (Köbben 1979, p. 7). The second possible effect of a ‘scientific involution’ pitfall is of more serious threat to the quality of a given research project: The risk is that to save time and money the same old data will be used over and over again.

The last of Köbben’s pitfalls – ‘Galton’s problem’ – is intellectually much more challenging and the most difficult to avoid. Its name is inspired by the British scientist Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911). He questioned to which degree the phenomena, compared to each other, are independent of each other. For, as he argued, it may well be that both are copies of the same original. Assume that several countries are characterised by the existence of similar educational institutions, say folk high schools, and that it is convincing to state that this type of adult educational institution originated from a ‘common source.’ Thus, while calculating statistically, should they be treated as only one case or as several cases? There is no question that local varieties exist and that different cultural and social factors contribute to the development of folk high schools in each of their respective countries. However, as Köbben concluded for ‘Galton’s problem,’ “the element of diffusion (imitation) should not be neglected” (Köbben 1979, p. 7).

In addition to Köbben’s list, an analysis of a number of comparative studies of the last two decades (listed at the end of this chapter) revealed several more pitfalls that endanger international and comparative studies of adult education.
Pitfalls – list II

In the following I discuss some more conceptual and methodological shortcomings that threaten comparative research. As I build on Köbben's list of pitfalls, my intention is not to criticize the analysed literature in general. If I disagree with, or qualify some contentions, this should not be taken as questioning the quality of the whole book. Several of the analysed books, even if criticised, often identify important educational issues, provide a number of useful information about problems, and attempt to provide solutions in various societies. Criticism focuses on the level of success or failure of a study’s fulfilment of comparative inquiry requirements. The goal is to create awareness of the pitfalls, and by this, to emphasize their avoidance.

“Descriptiveness” pitfall

Building on Köbben's list, my first pitfall deals with the most common weakness in comparative studies, namely non-analytical descriptions. Authors of books in comparative studies describe instead of interpreting. The tables of content of such books often give the impression of being comprehensive and ‘all-covering.’ On the contrary, they usually consist of statistical figures and general information on school systems, they list types of adult educational institutions and ‘enrich’ them with a number of historical data, laws and regulations.

An early example of the “descriptiveness” pitfall can be found in Polturzycki’s (1981) book on adult education in socialist countries. Describing ten countries, the author enumerates elements of educational systems of countries under investigation, e.g. policy, legislation, financing, curricula, students, teachers’ training etc. The result is a 340-pages volume describing the existence of educational provisions for adults in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, East Germany, Hungary, Mongolia, Romania, Poland, the Soviet Union (one-fourth of the whole book), and Yugoslavia. The main part of country chapters is devoted to lengthy descriptions of the historical development of a given form of educational activity. The only actual attempt towards comparability is Polturzycki’s way of structuring the descriptions.

What we expect from a comparative study is that its author(s) look(s) explicitly for similarities and differences. Even more, it should not be enough to simply state that something is or is not similar/different. A comparison ought to include explanations and reflections on why the similarities or differences occur. Shallow and rhetorical statements do not replace an analysis. Some authors seem to be unaware that although interpretation is indeed related to description, it also differs from it by its emphasis on relationships.

Naturally not all studies intended to be comparative achieve this goal. It is sometimes argued that although comparative analysis ought to lead to generalizations and not to a report of descriptions of separate systems,
Thus, the same structure was used to describe highly centralised and uniformist educational systems, as well as systems run by federal states with decentralised and diversified provisions (within educational systems in general and vocational education in particular). Various educational phenomena from several disparate countries were subsequently simply juxtaposed in this book.

The two above-discussed studies show that when similar (English) terms are used to describe and interpret different educational realities the result can lead to seeking and examining non-existing phenomena or a situation where one is working “with one term and two concepts” (Mokrzycki, 1982, p. 47). Thus, to avoid this pitfall, sensible exchanges between the editor(s) and individual contributor(s) are needed before and during the research process. Time spent on discussing and defining ideas and terminology “may also prevent undue concept-stretching” (Lovenduski & Woodall, 1987, p. 13). Discovering and explaining incomparabilities in such a sensible, mutual process would add more to our knowledge and understanding of educational realities rather than insisting on a rigid structure of categories encompassing incomparable concepts.

Comparing seemingly incomparable phenomena is possible and this has been proven by a study undertaken and impressively accomplished by Adam Przeworski (1991). He was concerned with establishing the comparability of a broad and apparently disparate set of cases. Przeworski stressed the similarities between the socialist state regimes of Eastern Europe and the bureaucratic authoritarian regimes of Latin America. The strength of the book lies in the effort it took to find and apply an analytical model to study seemingly incomparable phenomena and processes.

“Compartmentalization” pitfall

The third pitfall is called “compartmentalization.” It directly criticizes books which laboriously describe some parts in detail and at the same time fail to see the whole. They illustrate how often there is hardly a common ground for individual contributions. Individual authors commissioned for the book write about a number of problems without a common platform for analysis and an editor(s) withdraw(s) from comparing phenomena described by contributors. The final products are books consisting of articles which originally aimed at giving a congruent picture of a given educational phenomenon, but instead, fail to do so. Such a way to organize and plan for a book can lead to an unexpected result that “almost every contribution seems to have been locked into a sterilized compartment, with no possibilities of mutual contamination or of catalytic interaction” (Kozol, 1982, p. 55). The result is a study containing many factual details but few pertinent comments on the essential social and educational issues at hand.

“Compartmentalization” can be found in the book, Adult Education in Yugoslavia, edited by Soljan, Krajnc & Golubovic (1985). It is a collection of 32 papers covering an extensive number of topics; though they do not sum up to a coherent whole. For example, despite three chapters on adult education personnel, none of them discusses the problem of abandoning the profession or the ‘snatching’ of the most energetic and competent adult educators by various state or party authorities.

The book does not give a reader a deeper understanding of adult education in Yugoslavia. It contains many factual details but few pertinent comments on the essential social and educational issues of the country.

The second example of this pitfall is illustrated in the book, Emerging Issues in Education, edited by Arnove, Altbach & Kelly (1992). The book intended to describe and comparatively analyze inter-relationships between a number of issues in education which emerged in the late 1980’s. Despite this aim, collected essays present a variety of themes with no clear central subject.

This collection of essays present rather traditional issues such as educational reforms, teaching as a profession, school tests, school administration, and financing, leaving significant ‘emerging issues’ overlooked or ignored. Most of the contributions are written in the realm of the traditional functionalist approach. The authors use mostly a policy perspective; focusing on state initiated/run school reforms, allocation policy, centralisation versus decentralisation, public versus private, and the like. As such, this variety of articles fails to give a congruent picture. The authors commissioned for this volume write about widely spread-out topics without a common platform of analysis. Even the concluding part of the book presents some topics without an attempt to relate them to other texts published in the book.

In both the above-mentioned examples, contributions seem to have been written without the knowledge of or a correlation to the parts they are supposed to accompany. To show that it is possible to avoid the “compartmentalisation” pitfall I would like to present two studies. The first one is entitled, Continuing Education in Higher Education (Titmus, Knoll & Wittphoth 1993). It is a study of when, how and why higher education systems opened to new kinds of students and new forms of training. The book is a wealth of facts, analyses and conclusions drawn from the comparison of higher education in three countries: France, Germany and Great Britain. One of the reasons for achieving a good result is the way the whole project had been conceptualised and carried out. The three authors wrote the book together rather than by having divvied up the country chapters between themselves that would later be ‘compared’ to one another.

“Sophisticated superficiality” pitfall

The fourth pitfall in comparative (adult education) studies is labelled “sophisticated superficiality.” The books succumbing to this pitfall are guilty of two ‘sins.’ Firstly, they are dominated by an enchantment with numbers, numerals and formulae. Secondly, they neglect the cultural settings of studied problems. Researchers who have been trapped by this enchantment neglected or ignored
certain essential phenomena, as for example: Kandel’s (1933) forces which
determine the character of an educational system; Hans’ (1933) factors often
common to many nations; Mallinson’s (1957) determinants; and King’s (1967)
contextualisation of an educational system.

As Michael Sadler (1907) said many years ago: What goes on outside a
school is far more important that what goes on inside because it influences and
affects what goes on inside. Since then, all leading personalities in comparative
education advocated for the necessity to take into consideration a country’s cul-
tural, social, political and economic conditions, while investigating its educa-
tional systems. However, the introduction of statistical methods in the social
sciences and the development of their techniques with the use of computer-based
counting routines led Sadler’s, Kandel’s, Hans’, Mallinson’s and Bereday’s
(1964) cautions, demands and pleas into oblivion. Naturally, I do recognize
statistical methods as a legitimate way of gathering and analysing empirical
material in the social sciences. However, if they are based on wrong assump-
tions then all the technical ingenuity and sophisticated computation is little more
then an intellectual devise to save ungrounded hypotheses or to omit the intricacies
inherent in the question of ‘why.’

The book, The Young Manual Worker in Britain and Sweden (Murray &
Haran, 1986), proves to be an example of the “sophisticated superficiality” pit-
fall. Although it is an interesting book, it has all the shortcomings characteristic
of a statistical approach to social (and cultural) phenomena.

The book deals with the psychological and social dimensions of the problem
relating to the transition of students from schools to work. To achieve their
objective, both authors implemented a relatively rigid methodological design
and used a set of different techniques. According to their research findings, the
biggest differences observed were between the British and Swedish samples,
which led to the conclusion that there is “a consistent sexual equality view
adopted by the Swedish group” (Murray & Haran, 1986, p. 76). This is ob-
viously a correct conclusion drawn from the Multivariate Analyses of Variance
and Covariance, but it does not give us any clues as to understanding why it is
so that the Swedish male youth experience differed so much in this respect from
its British coevals. To illustrate another example (typical of this pitfall) from
their concluding research findings, the Swedish sample exhibited “a more closed
way of thinking,” while according to scores on ‘Dogmatism,’ the British sample
demonstrated “the greater sense of powerless-ess. Instead of trying to explain
why these differences manifested, the authors proceeded to present results of
another sophisticated statistical technique.

Research used in comparative studies that relies only on quantitative
methods does not usually provide a reader with explanations based on cultural
phenomena. It fails to seriously consider a warning that “it is not a matter of
statistical representativity any more but a matter of ‘qualitative reasoning’ and
argumentation what one may learn about the comparative findings” (Peschar,
1971, p. 73). A use of sophisticated statistical techniques, coupled with an
awareness of the necessity to anchor them in cultural settings is, of course possi-
ble. This can be achieved by being sensitive to nation-specific characteristics (cf.

An example of how to avoid the “sophisticated superficiality” is illustrated in
the study Gender Inequality (Vianello & Siemienska, 1990). This is an important
but difficult book. Its difficulty arises partly from its use of multivariate methods
which may not be easily grasped by all who read it. The seven-person research
team jointly authored the book rather than have it be an edited compilation of
individual papers. The sober and un-biased use of statistical methods enabled
the research team to discern and corroborate their findings; that socio-political sys-
tems do not necessarily divide the countries into dichotomies.

“Double-decker” pitfall

The fifth pitfall has been metaphorically named the “double-decker.” It char-
acterises those collective studies in which there is an apparent inconsistency
between editors’ intentions and aims and how they are met by contributing
authors. Differences usually relate to a discrepancy between editors’ theoretical
and methodological perspectives and their ambition to compare, versus an indi-
vidual contributor’s descriptive focus on studied phenomena.

Two kinds of such a pitfall can be distinguished. Although all researchers
involved are sailing in a single vessel being navigated by the same navigating
crew member(s) or captain(s) [editor(s)]:
1. the ship’s general crew members/mess [contributing authors] are left on the
lower deck [usually a thorough and competent base of facts, analyses and
interpretation within the realm of a study area], while the navigating crew or
captain(s) [editor(s)] fail(s) to encourage them to climb to the upper-deck; or
2. the ship’s general crew members/mess [contributing authors], guided by the
navigating crew or captain(s) [editor(s)], hurry to the upper-deck so quickly
that they provide their expedition sponsors [readers] with a pleasant and
interesting description of the passing landscape, but leave them with no suffi-
cient knowledge of it.

In some cases the reader can have the impression that in following the
editor’s/editors’ policy, authors of individual chapters focused too much on
describing the given phenomena instead of paying more attention to explaining
and analysing them.

Two books can exemplify this pitfall. The first one is entitled, Education in
East Central Europe (Karsten & Majoor, 1994). Its introductory chapter is good,
to the point, competent and thought-awaking. It demonstrates a first-rate under-
standing of ongoing processes, but not of their historical backgrounds. It intro-
duces problems faced by scholars (and politicians) in East Central Europe well.
In its entirety though, there is much less proficiency in providing explanations which ought to have been investigated from a respective country’s past. A reader often encounters a confusing disequilibrium between sound observations and conclusions influenced by an editor’s/editors’ competence (from their academic disciplines) and their lack of knowledge and understanding of the history of those countries under study. As a result, the book is a mixture of well-formulated observations, false-factual information, and wrong and misleading generalizations.

Another interesting example of the “double-decker” pitfall is the collective work entitled, *Higher Education Policy* (Goedegebuure, 1994), illustrating the second type of that pitfall. It intended to comparatively analyse the principles, structures, implementation, and tendencies of higher education policy in 11 higher education systems throughout the world.

Due to the editors’ strategy, individual chapter authors focused too much on describing higher education systems instead of paying more attention to explaining and analysing them. The book is the result of an interaction between six editors and several other contributors, whereby each author was asked to follow an outline. The same framework structured the concluding chapter written by the project leaders. Nevertheless, the final product does not constitute a comparative study on higher education policies nor does it present them in a comparative perspective.

The nature of the “double-decker” pitfall is an inconsistency between the format of case studies and the contents of introductory and concluding chapters. A number of steps to climb or descend between upper and lower deck would certainly decrease if managing this pitfall. Misinterpretations and omissions in country chapters can have a negative impact on an editor’s/editors’ prospects to draw rational judgements and can lead them to unaccounted generalisations.

An example of a complex research project that successfully avoided falling into a “double-decker” pitfall is a study entitled, *Education and the Values Crisis in Central and Eastern Europe* (Rust, Knost & Wichmann, 1994). The editors applied a novel approach: they invited more than one expert to describe and analyse studied phenomena in each country. In this way they secured pluralistic interpretations of these phenomena. Based on multiplied country chapters, editors were then able to provide readers with coherent, relevant, and validated explanations to similarities that surfaced from gathered material.

“Motorway” pitfall

The sixth pitfall is called a “motorway” pitfall. It is rather typical for studies which are characterised by the following features: like the previous pitfall, it always results from a collective project; contributing authors are expected to comply with a clearly designed format; and an editor’s/editors’ conclusions are usually going beyond actually contributed case-studies. The pitfall occurs when the editor’s/editors’ intentions and instructions have been neglected by contributing authors. As a result, a reader is left with the impression that the main body of a given book, and introductory and concluding chapters resemble two vehicles moving in opposing motorway lanes. Characteristics of the “motorway” pitfall result from the fact that the competence and scholarship of individual authors do not guarantee a high quality of the whole book.

The typical design of such a publishing venture is that each contributing author gets an outline of the points that the editor(s) consider(s) important. Usually the outline for a book dealing with general presentation and assessment of (adult) educational phenomena consists of a historical overview, major theoretical perspectives, structure, organisation and legislation, government policy, current problems, organisations and persons, and an evaluation of research and scholarship.

Illustrating the “motorway” pitfall is a book entitled, *Perspectives on Adult Education and Training in Europe* (Jarvis, 1992). It covers “leading scholars’ perspectives” (p. XI) on adult education and training in their own countries. Each contributing author received an outline of the points that the editor considered important. However, some of the authors went so far in presenting their own perspective, that the editor complained that “some of the emphases here reflect the subjective interpretations of the authors” (p. 405).

It seems that common to studies which qualify as “motorway” pitfalls is an editor’s/editors’ belief that having the same structure of chapters will secure their comparability. Authors of case study chapters are usually obliged to follow a rigid organisational format. Notwithstanding, sometimes a common ‘structure’ consists of merely similar headings and sub-headings for all case study chapters, and does not necessarily provide a framework for the content. This exact pitfall can easily emerge when the same structure is applied to describe highly centralised and uniform(ist) educational systems, as well as federal states’ systems with decentralised and diversified provisions. Clearly, a commonly employed outline for description does not, or cannot, constitute a component of comparability on its own.

It is not unusual that some contributions in a collective book are better than average, while others are worse. The problem lies in: (a) how close the contributing authors followed a predetermined format of the publication, and (b) how much the editor’s/editors’ conclusions were actually derived from the submitted contributions.

A book entitled, *Changing Pattern of European Family Life* (Boh et al., 1989) can serve as a good example, illustrating an original approach to a studied phenomenon and an accurate procedure applied in a research enterprise. It is not a simple set of texts from different contributors asked to write on specific topics. It is rather a collection of four chapters containing individual sections summarising work conducted in and reported by research team members from fourteen
countries. This book’s editors successfully united scholars originating from various cultural and research traditions. The book by Boh et al. (1989) is an excellent example confirming that project leaders and all contributors ‘drove’ in the same direction, and in the same motorway lane, while maintaining the same speed. This is a good, reliable, educational result of a work done by many scholars.

“Bias/dogmatism” pitfall
The seventh pitfall to be discussed here relates to bias and/or dogmatism, i.e. an author’s commitment to an ideology and/or political partisanship that leads to the neglect of research methodology requirements.

It is of course a cliché to state that a cultural bias is present in any conclusions which a researcher makes, being very difficult to avoid, even after a very carefully prepared inquiry. Nevertheless, there are methods which can help ensure that this bias be reduced or avoided altogether. Researchers are usually aware of this danger and as a rule, try to limit their cultural bias.

Different, however, is the situation that arises with ideological bias. It is too often the case that political partisanship becomes quite noticeable in the narrative of research reports, but that it is even proudly present in its rationale. An uncritical devotion to a given ideological, as opposed to methodological, school of thought does not however necessarily result in some new developments. Instead, authors “pretend to shed a new light on the past by couching well-known information in incomprehensible jargon” (Andreski, 1972, p. 76).

Analysing several publications of the same author (Fals Borda 1969, 1991a, 1991b) illustrates this type of pitfall well. Fals Borda’s books show how dangerous it can be for academic standards if one fails to step out of personal prejudices, conditioning and bias, but rather allows personal values to stand in the way. Partisanship overtakes academic requirements when a researcher is strongly committed to ideological movements, especially radical ones.

A second author to succumb to the “bias/dogmatism” pitfall (Hunt, 1987), shares with the first one not only his biased approach to the studied problem but also a peculiar verbosity. Hunt represents an ideologically simplistic view which undermines his analysis and dents his arguments. His rationale is contaminated by authoritative and unsubstantiated assertions.

It is worthwhile to quote here Mokrzycki’s warning in length:

We should clearly distinguish between two types of methodological works in the social sciences: those based directly or indirectly on a philosophical doctrine and those that result from a critical analysis of social research processes. While the first type of works tends to establish methodological dogmas within the social sciences, the second type seems to be the only effective remedy against those dogmas (Mokrzycki, 1979, p. 101).

The “bias and/or dogmatism” pitfall not only threatens adherents of left-wing ideologies. Far too often, other researchers too work in the realm of normative statements within an ideological position.

It would be a contradictio in terminis to speak about a positive example of that pitfall.

Conclusions
A substantial number of ‘comparative’ publications have appeared over a period of time. Several books studied for this article corroborate the fact that a success of multi-national and ‘multi-authored’-enterprises depend on researchers’ competences as much as on a qualified, sensible and thoughtful organization of the research project.

The belief (and trust) that a common outline (common to all contributors) serves as a guarantee to achieving expected aims of comparability and comparisons of the investigated phenomena, is unjustified. A much more significant foundation to the success of high quality research undertakings is apparently a case study’s author’s/authors’ direct and deep involvement, necessary from the very beginning – in designing the whole project, and in making decisions on an outline for all – as well as the current/constant involvement of project leaders in the process of writing ‘national profiles’ or case study reports.

Despite a few positive examples, astonishingly, many books demonstrate the difficulty of arranging genuinely collaborative international study. Chris Duke (1996), one of the most experienced researchers, wrote about his own experiences in multi-national research projects in a review (published in the Studies in the Education of Adults, 28(1), 121-122):

> the road to real understanding and dialogue between colleagues, countries and systems proved long and slow; only after more than two years was collaboration widened to share common frameworks and methodology with partners in other countries.

Similar testimonies are reported in ISCAE volume 1 (Blais, 1999), or in the present volume (eg. Henschke).

If an editor(s) do(es) not or could not wait until this ‘critical mass’ is achieved, the whole undertaking might result in academic failure. It is a regrettably common feature that in many comparative studies the relevance of comparability suffers from a lack of comparability and comparability.

A customary perception is that some specific comparisons can be usefully made, e.g. of the structure of formal education, or the methods of financing training. However, the key features and ideologies of education in a particular country tend to be so deeply rooted in a specific political and cultural structure that even explaining seemingly well-known concepts and practices can be difficult, not to mention the complications involved in a reasonable comparison between them. This standpoint has a long-lasting impact on comparative studies in the social sciences. It constitutes the foundation for a widespread belief: that when comparing two rather similar societies, there is a chance that a close and specific comparison will elicit not general rules, but rather a sharper sense of what determines studied phenomenon in both countries. However, in this sense,
such a study is contrastive rather than comparative, i.e. cross-national rather than supra-national.

What is, and should be expected from comparative studies is that they will not only focus on similarities between studied phenomena but also on differences, especially those which derive from unique historical developments, different cultural settings, and various political systems. It is, and would be necessary to understand the cultural, economic and social forces working within each society and the way they influence education. Researchers who succeed in avoiding pitfalls and overcome obstacles can themselves, along with their readership, benefit from the real virtues of comparative studies; for comparisons may sometimes help not only in determining similarities and differences, but can also contribute to identifying forces which initiate studied phenomena. By using comparative methods, researchers can draw their conclusions with more confidence. If not, we will inevitably continue to suffer from the dangers of misinterpreting findings due to obstacles and pitfalls, grounded in ignorance, founded in cultural, social and political contexts.

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Obstacles and Pitfalls: Inherent and Self-styled Dangers…


Books assessed for pitfalls


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Learning the Arabian or the American Way?
Negotiating Divergent Cultures and Education Systems

Introduction

Comparative and international educational research is interested in a world of unceasing change, and “challenges us to think broadly about the link between local practices and global issues and to explore the overlapping values and social systems that underpin the educational enterprise itself” (Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008, p. 1). Comparative Education really does come into its own in “analysing and demonstrating the contextual idioms which still add up to educational distinctiveness in any one place or time. Comparative Education is paramount in demonstrating and assessing the dynamic of change brought about by the interplay of technological and cultural development with existing educational practices and assumptions” (King, 1965, p. 159).

It has also been argued that comparative adult education changes, educates, and transforms the person undertaking the comparison in addition to informing the reading audience. More clearly, intercultural experience and discourse transform attitudes and values, leading to a greater mutual understanding of differing ways of life and learning, reducing the fear of the strange (Reischmann, 2008). “These changes go beyond ‘knowing’ and ‘using’ and include a basic personal transformation: The international-comparative perspective assists to overcome one’s own ethnocentric blindness (p. 22).” In light of the purposes of comparative and international research, the aim of this paper’s authors was to leverage systematic inquiry into personal experience and competing cultural perspectives as a window to view the micro and macro-level cultural differences between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States, rendering them both more and less “strange” to one another.

Since September 11, 2001, the perceived dichotomy between the Islamic East and the West has seized westerners’ collective imagination. Some strands of conversation in the West about gender and Islam are appropriately nuanced and shed light on the diversity of experiences and practices within Eastern cultures, while many other depictions are much less sanguine. Many Western interpretations of Eastern cultures are approached from a position of “intellectual privilege”, capitalizing on Western cultural sensibilities in order to promote political and ideological images of Eastern cultures for Western purposes and gain. A comparative approach between Eastern and Western
cultures must be approached with great caution, as Marcuse (1965) warns us of repressive tolerance, and the risks we run of reinforcing preconceptions and stereotypes, and unwittingly reinforcing privilege and hegemony when presenting “diverse perspectives” as a mere token of “inclusion”. The authors of this paper do not take this challenge lightly, prudently proceeding in hopes of not reinforcing Western, privileged perceptions of Saudi Arabian culture, but rather challenging them at both micro and macro levels.

Background

Saudi Arabia was declared a unified Kingdom in 1932 by Abdul Aziz ben Saud. As the custodian of Meccah and Medina and Islam’s holy book The Qur’an, Saudi Arabia as a country is considered the “keeper” of Islam as a religion, a great responsibility in preserving the Muslim faith. Basic law of government and education are centered on Islam, with the purpose of conserving a society and culture of faith. In its early years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was a relatively weak economically until the discovery of oil in the 1930s and the oil boom of the 1970s. With this boom came the development of housing, schools, and universities, and the transformation of Saudi Arabian society.

Presently, Saudi Arabia is one of the richest countries in the world and a major political and economic influence which has ushered in a great amount of social change. The education system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has also been under great reform for the past 60 years. Public schools were established in the 1930s, but it was not until 1951 that an extensive program of publicly funded secondary schools was initiated. In 1961, education for females was mandated, and by 1963 girls’ education was available at both the intermediate and secondary levels. The first university, known as King Saud University, was founded in Riyadh in 1957, and was the first university in the Arabian Gulf region. Within a very short time span, 7 universities and 78 colleges were established. A national organization for technical and vocational training was created in 1980, to accommodate the kingdom's increasing needs for specialized technical training. The number of Saudi students who studied abroad was very weak economically until the early 1980s, when scholarships were curtailed, but as of 2005, Saudi Arabia has newly begun to support students with scholarships to study in the West where this paper begins.

Methods

In this paper, the authors provide a brief summary of an autoethnographic project that was completed in the spring of 2012. The interactions between the self and others in a culture, and the interactions between an individual identity and various cultures, serve as the foci of autoethnographic research: the autoethnographer is interested in the spaces between individuals and the cultures in which they participate, and the tensions created in between (Muncey, 2010). The auto in autoethnography takes up the personal views and experiences of individuals, while ethnography takes up the facets and dimensions of collectively defined identities, or cultures. “From this individual’s point of view, self is the starting point for cultural acquisition and transmission” (Chang, 2008, p. 23), and the individual becomes the basic unit of culture, intercultural experience, and comparison—a natural starting point for building international and comparative perspectives. Autoethnography links two common approaches in comparative research (Reischmann, 2008), sojourners’ narratives of intercultural experiences, and the more systematic descriptions and comparisons of cultures, relating and theorizing the two in relationship. This methodological approach seeks to describe and methodically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience in comparison (Ellis, 2000, 2004).

The application of autoethnography as the methodological framework for this research rests on four foundational assumptions (Chang, 2008): “(1) culture is a group oriented concept by which self is always connected with others; (2) the reading and writing of self-narratives provides a window through which self and others can be examined and understood; (3) telling one’s story does not automatically result in the cultural understanding of self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation; and (4)
autoethnography is an excellent instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners... gain profound understanding of self and others and function more effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds” (p. 13). Autoethnography, then, offers a systematic and rigorous method of self-inquiry that can shed light on personal experience as well as broader cultural similarities and differences.

**Conceptual Framework**

Talk about Islamic East-West relations at points of cultural juncture is often framed with regard to the Islamic belief structure, or with the gender oriented social organization of society. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss Islam and Saudi Arabian gender norms from a Western point of view, nor to reinforce Western preconceived notions of Islamic culture. *Kyriarchy* (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009) is a term that describes the intersectionality of dimensions of identity as they are experienced by any person, where in some contexts the person may be advantaged, and in other contexts disadvantaged. Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) discusses how different dimensions of identity become nodal points of experience, through which other dimensions of identity are also experienced. These nodal points of identity then inform identity and experience, and one can assume that these nodes also shift and are experienced differently when a person moves to another culture. Upon entry and participation in another culture, the primary nodes of experience may shift. For example, in Saudi Arabia, being male may be the nodal point of experience through which the other identity dimensions are also experienced, but upon moving to the US, the primary node of identity and experience may change to one’s faith, as that perhaps becomes the node that most dominantly influences the experience of the other dimensions. For a Saudi woman, the node of gender may be the primary node through which identity is experienced at home, but even if gender remains the primary node of experience in the US, the position of being a woman of color and a Muslim in a US American context necessitates shifts in how a person sees and understands herself.

Based on the outlined methods of autoethnography, and the notion of kyriarchy, two stories of Saudi Arabian students are shared in this paper. Sarah’s story is told through the identity dimension of gender and her accompanying transformations, and Obaid’s story is told through the identity dimension of his faith, and how this has impacted his learning experience. The authors employ pieces of narrative from personal experiences in both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States to highlight the tensions between the two cultures as experienced by individuals, as well as to explore the transformative benefits of gained cultural and linguistic knowledge in comparison. Through the telling of individual stories, the authors present a broad brush stroke picture of some divergences between cultures and educational purposes. And finally, the methodological approach of autoethnography is briefly discussed as a tool for comparative research in the field of adult education.

**Illuminating Narratives**

**Gender: Sarah’s Experience**

My experience of going abroad to the US for my studies, both prior to and following my departure, has been informed by my gender. As I was completing my Master’s degree in Education, my parents supported me and my goal to study abroad in the United States, and they encouraged me to enter the initial process for a state sponsored scholarship. While I was in this process, we began receiving many email messages from my relatives, friends, and neighbors. One of my friends wrote: “Studying abroad alone is difficult for a male, so it would be so hard for you. Listen to me, and forget this idea. Because you are here, you do not understand my words. Please, listen to me and forget this idea. I love you and do not want to see you suffer.” “Sarah! Sarah! Are you serious? Or you are just kidding us?” exclaimed one of my relatives in a phone message when she heard I had decided to study abroad. Their comments and concerns made me question myself and my dreams, and I wondered if something was wrong with me. I felt confused as I experienced the tension between my dreams and my family’s and friends’ opinions.

My parents also had bitter conversations with some of our relatives. I can recall one of my relatives saying, “if you are good parents, you should protect your daughter!”. “There were some dialogues which I could not get out of my mind, such as the part of an argument between my father and my uncle. My uncle: “Your daughter cannot stand alone; because everything she wants we do it for her, so she cannot take up the responsibility of doing everything for herself.” My father: “You do not perfectly know her.” My uncle: “However, she will face a different culture and custom, so people may not accept her as a Muslim woman.” At the last statement, I could not bear to listen to the rest of conversation, and I became wrought with worry. However, there were friends who also supported me. One friend wrote, “I know you, Sarah. You can do it, and this is your dream. Therefore, do not listen to anyone else, just keep going!” My siblings also supported me. My brother said to me, “You want to improve yourself, you want to become a doctor, you want to improve the Saudi family’s and friends’ opinions.

When the flight attendant announced, “Now, we are in the U.S.,” I felt like I wanted to return back to my country, because I did not know where I was going, and could not speak English. When I arrived at the Washington airport, I just followed people and used sign language and a few words. After I had arrived to the town and lived by myself in an apartment, I faced a lot of difficulties which...
I am, especially after I was in contact with my friends or family. I used many of my experience of learning English and shared my strategies for studying. I avoided going places, because I knew I could not explain myself or what I needed. I only ate fast food, because I could not find any food to my liking. I often went to the store, only to come home empty handed and disappointed.

After several months, I felt even more lonely and homesick, especially during the holidays like Thanksgiving and Spring Break, or when I received emails or phone messages from my family. In my journals, I wrote some simple feelings:

- When the moon is full and its light is vivid
- I feel that I need someone who can listen to me
- Then the stars send to my heart a hidden ray
- and say we are here, we are with you
- So I realize that I would find this person who I was looking for
- I know as well as looking about me
- Be close

It was during these breaks where I felt the most alone and isolated. Sometimes my family sent me messages like, “Right now, our parents and siblings are sitting in your room and we are talking about you. We also are drinking the coffee which you like and watching television. We just miss and love you. Take care.” Sometimes I felt as though I could not stand being apart from my family any longer.

But I also grew with my experience. At home, I had not been responsible for many things and had never paid an electricity bill, water bill, or for rent, because my family had always taken care of things. But when I came to the United States, I had to do much more than that, which helped me become more confident in myself and discover my own value. For example, in the English center, I helped new international students find and understand what they needed. Sometimes the school asked me to translate for Arabic students or employees and to help them to correctly understand each other. I also showed students where they could find appropriate food. With both international and Arabic students, I showed them some important places such as the health center, bus stop (and explained the schedule), and library, and sometimes I described my experience of learning English and shared my strategies for studying.

Even though I had learned many new things, I sometimes asked myself who I am, especially after I was in contact with my friends or family. I used many English words while I was communicating with them, and my language seemed confused. Also, when I returned to my country (especially the first visit), many people who know me told me that “you seem like American people.” I continuously caught myself “acting like an American” and didn’t know where I belonged exactly. However, I felt extremely proud when my family told me that there were some girls in my area who are also studying abroad because I have opened the door for them. To clarify, through my decision to study abroad, I believed that I had a different perspective which might lead me to achieve a big goal, and I have overcome many obstacles in order to follow my dream. I believe this experience has transformed me. I did what women traditionally do not do, such as stating that my dream to study abroad was bigger than other people’s emotions, desires, and customs. This is similar to what Mezirow (2000) mentioned about transformative learning as changing a frame of reference, which is inclusive of two dimensions: a habit of mind and resulting points of view. As I renegotiated my worlds and social expectations, integrating my new selves while parting with and letting go of some old selves, I learned to see and understand myself in new ways.

In taking on the responsibilities that came with my studies in the US, I became a Muslim woman who can navigate in two worlds. I have grown beyond my social expectations at home, and have influenced other women, and I continue to grow and change as my experience of dual cultures deepens. I understand my culture in a more profound way, as I see it through different eyes, but I also understand this new culture in ways I could not see in the beginning. Being a Muslim woman has informed all of these experiences, as have the expectations others have of me as a Muslim woman, both in Saudi Arabia and the US. I believe I have challenged these gendered social expectations, both individually and socially. I am not a woman confined by my gender, but rather an empowered woman who is redefining my understandings of my gender through multiple lenses and experiences. This is my transformation.

Faith: Obaid’s Experience

When I decided to pursue my studies in the in the United States, I still remember my brother’s advice, “If you have to be motivated and willing to change, go, otherwise you should stay.” When I came to United States for the first time, it was very hard for me because I did not speak the English language; also, the culture and lifestyle were different from my country. A month, after arriving in the United States, I wrote in my journal, “Next month, I will go back to my country and never come back.” When I decided to return to my country, I was puzzled because people in my culture considered my return to be a failure. At that time, I felt more than just pain. I stayed.

The power of language is probably the most effective way of reducing or eliminating the feeling of alienation as well as the negative impact of culture.
shock. I am a social person by nature and I like to communicate with people, but limitations with the English language made me feel shy and made people regard me as a shy person. After several months, I began communicating with people around me. I spent time with American people and started to learn about the United States culture. One day, one of them said to me, “Obaid, I thought you were a shy person but you are not!”

After some months of studying in an English program, my language was getting better. I could communicate with people around me, and I was getting to know some friends. I was studying very hard and my teachers encouraged me. They told me each semester, that “Obaid you learn very fast.” I did not participate much in class, and my teachers wondered about that. They did not know the reason, but I did. In Saudi Arabia students normally do not talk very much in the classroom. In general, students just listen, and the teachers say everything. This classroom expectation was a major change for me, and I still struggle with the American expectation to voice one’s opinions and beliefs.

Our educational system in Saudi Arabia, in particular, and the Arab countries in general, relies on studies in faith and mobilization of memory, which limits creative thinking. For example, in the first semester of my language learning, a teacher asked students to read a short story. I memorized the whole story, and I was feeling great about it. The next day the teacher asked the students to write one or two paragraphs about the story. My two paragraphs were exact copies of the story. The next day the teacher accused me of cheating. He asked me to write the two paragraphs again in front of him. When I did, he laughed and told me that in the United States the system considers what I did as cheating. At that time I realized I can no longer simply recite text, and that I should change my learning patterns, so I could learn more effectively. I sent to my brother an email, he was in high school at the time, and I told him please not to rely only on rote memorization.

The education system in the United States also seems very flexible. For example, I can email my professor if I want to ask them questions, and they usually respond to me. In my country, even if I know a professor’s email address, sometimes they do not answer. In addition, outside of the classroom it is hard to communicate with them. However, the atmosphere and environment of the education system in the United States is comfortable and enhances learning. For example, at any time I can go to the university campus and study. In the US, I have adopted the university campus as my home and my personal refuge. I spend more of my time studying there. In my country, the university campus closes with the end of working hours.

Also, in Saudi Arabia we do not have school on Friday. This day is a very important day for Muslims and more significant and beneficial than any other day of the week. When I came to America, I found it difficult to attend the classroom on this day. Sometimes, I did not want to attend class, not because I wanted be absent, but sometimes I forgot because as Muslims we always get ready from early in the morning for this day. But after having been in the US for several months, I adopted this situation of class on Fridays. When I returned to Saudi Arabia, I even found myself considering Friday to be a work day. After I returned to my studies in the US, my mother sent me an email, writing “Obaid, do not lose your religion, just two years and you forget this important day. Your religion is the most important thing, if your studies in the United States make you to forget your religion, then please come back.” These experiences have challenged me, and how I view education and my faith. I often feel that the social expectations in both cultures do not agree, and I have to find myself somewhere in the middle.

The second semester I was enrolled in my doctoral program was a big challenge in my education. In the Foundations of Educational Research class, I was initially lost, not because of the limit of my English language, but because of my beliefs. In my country, if you ask a person what they believe, he or she will say the faith Islam or the Holy Book. In this course, we studied many educational philosophies, such as pragmatism. In our culture, some of these philosophies conflict with our religion, from which our education stems. At the beginning of this course these philosophies did not make sense to me. I was wondering how these philosophies could possibly make sense to American students. In our education system we study some of these philosophers, but we do not believe much of the information on them, because some of them are contrary to our religion. When faced with these new philosophies, I sometimes felt like I had lost my identity and my spirit. At the end of the course, I realized the importance of these philosophies, and how they could guide us to effective teaching and research.

I consider my studying abroad in the United States to be a major turning point in my life that has opened my view. This shift is not only in the academic side, but also in the side of behavioral, social, and cultural influences. For example, after I started speaking the English language, my personality has changed; I have become a more social person and my learning has improved. I have adapted to the education system in the United States, and have tried to learn in creative ways and not just try to memorize everything. My view of things has become more accepting, for example of educational philosophies. In addition, I have adapted to many new situations, and am learning to negotiate my cultural identity within the context of Western education. According to Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2010), international students’ intercultural learning experiences are both transitional and transformational and necessitate identity change to a greater or lesser extent. Between Sarah’s experience as a Saudi woman and mine as a Saudi man, we attribute some similar changes such as psychology, behavior, and identity to these experiences, and recognize that they have been filtered through our gender and religious norms. However, we also
realize the challenges of negotiating competing ideas, beliefs, and social expectations, and wonder how these will continue to be transformed, for us personally, and within the evolving Saudi education system.

Analytical Summary
What do these examples mean for international comparison in general? These short stories highlight some of the differences between social and cultural expectations, and purposes for education. One of the major challenges in completing comparative educational scholarship between “Eastern” and “Western” cultures is the tendency to discuss another country’s sociocultural dimensions through Western understandings. While many of these social expectations and beliefs do differ greatly, it is very difficult to conduct comparative studies without falling into the trap of evaluating education systems by Western cultural sensibilities. As seen here, the Saudi education system is subject to global trends as much as any other country, and has been responding with rapid expansion and educational reform. The experiences of the Saudi student-authors of this paper serve as evidence of these. To critique each system according to Western “norms” is to commit a logical fallacy in some terms, not to mention Western education systems are themselves rapidly evolving and being reformed and may not be the gold standard either. This leads us to the questions of, when pursuing educational research in comparison, by whose standards, whose beliefs, which values, for what purposes, and to what end do we compare education systems?

While gender and faith were nodal dimensions of identity that informed both Sarah’s and Obaid’s experiences, they have found ways to learn and change in spite of the social expectations others have held of them (in both “Eastern” and “Western” cultures). Autoethnography offers the opportunity to explore macro level social customs and understandings through the eyes of individual experience. Methodologically, this allows us to see how shifts and changes simultaneously occur at both micro and macro levels, and how each level is influenced by the other in their flowing states of change. Global processes continue to contribute to the rapid evolution of education in Saudi Arabia, enabling student mobility and the opportunities for individuals to grow personally, which then feeds back into wider systemic changes. And as for the charge to international and comparative education researchers to challenge readers to “think broadly about the link between local practices and global issues and to explore the overlapping values and social systems that underpin the educational enterprise itself” (Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008, p. 1), we find the methodological approach of autoethnography very useful.

Resources

O. Aljohani, S. Alajlan, E. Erichsen: Learning the Arabian or the American Way?


The Freirean “Andragogy” and Orality in Indigenous African Education: a Framework for Comparative Education

ABSTRACT: Almost all learning, critical theories, and process models that embrace the humanistic perspective in adult education are connected by their emphasis on dialogue. Dialogue in education, and especially adult education, is a platform that allows the learner’s experiences to be important factors in the process of knowledge creation. All of Paulo Freire’s ideas and practices are couched in the dialogue that establishes learners as co-investigators and co-creators of knowledge. Freire establishes dialogue as the best platform for “helping adults to learn.” In traditional African education, dialogue is a non-negotiable component of lifelong learning. Dialogue within its traditional usage includes interaction with the ancestors, the entire community, and the natural environment. The unwritten nature of lifelong learning in traditional Africa makes dialogue the center of life and learning in every community. Dialogue as the literary element in indigenous African education is summed in the concept, Orality. This paper establishes Freire’s philosophy as andragogic and dialogic and compares it with Orality in indigenous African education. The paper uses the analysis of the comparison to argue for a more integrated approach to comparative adult education. The paper concludes by offering the analysis as a possible cross-cultural framework for comparative education that recognizes and is responsive to indigenous pedagogies.

Keywords: Africa, Andragogy, Freire, indigenous, Orality, comparative education

Introduction

In recent years, I have tried to slant some of my research and writing towards lifelong learning in indigenous Africa. As I try to present ideas and perspectives from the traditional worldview, I have always faced the problem of connecting the circular and holistic indigenous worldview to the dominant and more documented linear thought pattern. Any individual that attempts such a task of crisscrossing ideas between two distinct and contrary (sometimes contradictory) worldviews must be prepared for the possibility of losing substance in translation. Anyanwu (1983) argues that whereas the linear and scientific notion of causality is interested in the how question, the African mindset is interested in the “why aspect of everything.” He borrows the “Principle of Synchronicity” to explain causality within the holistic framework. Citing another source, he defines the principle of synchronicity as “a mental attitude which took full
account of that peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the objective (psychic) state of the observer or observes” (p. 68).

The nature of most indigenous societies is such that life and living provide a revolving but coherent connection between all fibers of society. In such a setting, life, as day and night, is repetition. Repetition, within the holistic worldview, gives meaning to existence and all other things that make life meaningful. The belief in reincarnation for instance, is a repetition of life and death. The African name Babatunde is a good example. Babatunde is the name given to a male child born after the death of a male elder in a family and it simply means “our father has return.” The father returning is indicative of the fact that there is a constant link between the ancestors, the unborn, and the living. The traditional African mode of knowing combines the spiritual and the physical because both are perceived as “a unitary world of aesthetic continuum” (p. 105). In spite of the divides between the holistic and the linear worldviews, it is possible to draw on their similarities and even differences to create a platform for intercultural comparative adult education. It is not possible for me to present a comprehensive and full paper on this proposal but I hope that the sketch presented in this piece will form the basis for a full paper and dialogue on the subject at a later date.

The Risks of Intercultural Comparative Adult Education

My approach in this paper is to call the definition and understanding of comparative adult education into question. My call does not go anywhere close to what Newman (2012) did with his piece that presented “some mutinous thoughts” (p. 36) on transformative learning. My argument in this piece is to invite the experts on comparative adult education to consider definitions that will make comparative adult education in the 21st century such that it is, in line with the Belém Framework for Action (2010), “responsive to indigenous people, rural populations and migrants” (p. 22). I was reminded by one of the reviewers of my abstract that “comparison means to explicitly identify and analyze similarities and differences in two or more countries and includes the attempt to understand why differences and similarities occur and what they tell us about adult education in these countries (emphasis mine)”. Another comment from the reviewer(s) is “indigenous and Orality are the two main concepts in his (mine) chapter published in ISCAE second volume…”

The reviewer(s) comments above take us back to my earlier clarification on the difference between the linear and holistic frameworks. The definition of comparison along countries tends to ignore the peculiarities of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual countries with indigenous populations. The dangers of continuing along this definition, especially in the age of globalization, include annihilating what Giroux (1985) ascribes to Freire as the “cultural powers” of indigenous populations in such countries (p. xxi). He further presents cultural powers in Freiran terms as the foundation for the “social and historical particularities, the problems, sufferings, visions, and acts of resistance, that constitute the cultural forms of subordinate groups” (p. xxi). I adopt this understanding of cultural powers and argue that it presents some beacon of hope for indigenous people to have a sense of belonging to the global community and to harvest some of the dividends of adult education. For comparative adult education to insist on “comparison” along national boundaries is to commit existential fallacy that draws particular conclusions from universal premises. In this case, using the universal instances of linear understandings to draw particular conclusions even for indigenous people with holistic mindsets is pure existential fallacy. Furthermore, to insist on the universal umbrella of comparison is to impose what Bron (2008) calls “pitfalls…ignorant assumptions…”. He uses the excellent example of when a research is “not aware of or ignores the fact that an American high school does not whatsoever equate to a German Hochschule, or a Swedish högskola, or a Polish szkoła wyższa” (p. 66). To insist that ideas from indigenous frameworks must be compared on the “countries” basis is to impose “self-inflicted misinterpretations” (p. 66) on comparative adult education in the 21st century.

Indigenous and Orality were prominent in my comparison of lifelong learning in traditional African and Native American indigenous education. These same concepts are prominent in my other publications that touch on the “cultural powers” of traditional African people without repeating or diluting the quality of the contributions to dialogue. Orality was developed as a concept to capture the unwritten body of knowledge that exists within indigenous societies and it is the equivalent of “literary” in the western worldview. Within this understanding, I can present a “book” on proverbs from the oral literature of indigenous African pedagogy. In addition, the circular nature of the indigenous society compels meaningful repetitions that say and use old things in new ways to make useable new meanings.

Intercultural comparative adult education has its risks in spite of which it can draw on similarities and differences and use the analysis of such differences and similarities to create new meanings. It is in this sense that “comparing the incomparables” is worth the risks. I present a sketchy summary of the paper below and I hope to develop all the arguments in a full paper later.

Orality and Freire’s Andragogy

In this section I offer a sketch of my line of argument in establishing a basis for comparative analysis of Paulo Freire’s ideas and Orality in indigenous African education. First, I establish Freire’s dialogic process that culminates in conscientization as being Andragogic. Second, I argue that Orality, as the absolute medium of education in indigenous Africa, and indeed in all indigenous societies, is sustained by horizontal dialogue across all areas of human activity.
in any community.

Paulo Freire’s works have possibly been interpreted in millions of ways across the globe by those who subscribe to his ideas and their effectiveness as well as by his detractors. Either way, it is an incontrovertible fact that Freire’s work and influence have implications beyond many borders of human existence and contexts including cultural, social, and geo-spaces of education.

The core of Freire’s pedagogy is the process of conscientization which is the objective of his liberating education. His process is one where each individual unearths the reality of her/his world in dialogue with others with the world as a mediating factor.

Freire’s philosophy underlines horizontal dialogue as a *sine qua non* for liberating education and establishes empowerment as both its means and ends. Freire’s presentation of the learner, educator, the context, content, process, and the outcome makes his process a celebration of the learner. Andragogy, from its etymology through its coinage and popularity in adult education by Malcolm Knowles, is a celebration of the learner as the principal investigator and creator of knowledge. Dialogue is at the center of his process. Mayo (2007) affirms that dialogue and “the pedagogy of question” are the areas of emphasis in Freire’s process of problematizing knowledge (p. 107). It is within these understandings of the centrality of dialogue and the imperative of the learners’ context and experience that Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is indeed, andragogical, hence the reference to the Freirean Andragogy. I intend to analyze the symmetrical relationship between conscientization and Andragogy in detail with the full paper.

I am always compelled to clarify the fact that traditional Africa simply refers to Africa prior to colonialism and related foreign intrusion. I must also clarify that I use the concepts indigenous and traditional synonymously. In addition, I use them as common threads in making universal pronouncements in spite of the enormous diversity of traditional and contemporary Africa. Finally, that Orality, or the power of the spoken word, is at the core of traditional African education and it presents the learner, context, content, and educator as participants in a lifelong dialogue with the physical and spiritual worlds. Orality emphasizes dialogic power as a guarantee of praxis and individual empowerment through education. It establishes participation, imitation, observation, and other forms of engagement as forms of dialogue with the physical and spiritual communities that form the context of indigenous education. Whereas the spoken word is established as an imperative of this process, it is by no means the equivalent of the total package of Orality. However, it is within the framework of the imperative of the spoken word and its significance to dialogue in liberating learning that Freire’s Andragogy and Orality are used to advance the argument for intercultural *comparison* in comparative adult education.

### Similarities and Differences

In this section I try to draw attention to a few of the lines of convergence and difference in Freire’s Andragogy and Orality in indigenous African education. The first point of convergence is the fact that the world is a mediating factor in both. For the traditional African, Orality implies constant interaction with the world in a holistic way. Freire (2004) too insists that problem-posing education involves “naming of the world” (p. 89). He re-echoes the same views in the last interview he granted 15 days before his death. Torres (2007) quotes generously from that interview for her article entitled *A million Paulo Freires*. Her quote further affirms Freire’s position that “knowledge is… a process resulting from the continual interaction between human beings and their surroundings” (p. 65) and affirms the imperative of the world as the mediating factor in knowledge creation and usage.

Learning is also problematized through Orality in indigenous African education. The use of problems in indigenous pedagogy is a way of problematizing learning though encoding and decoding complex patterns of words. This same pattern is implied in Freire’s contention that learning is problematized through praxis. Other areas of similarity between the two include the fact that both fall within the humanistic perspective in adult education and learning. Furthermore, both are applicable in formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments. In addition and more importantly, both establish the centrality of the learner as Homo sapiens – rational thinking beings – in the process of knowing. Finally Orality, in spite of its nature is about application just as Freire’s Andragogy emphasizes applied education.

There are several areas of dis-similarity between the two. Freire’s Andragogy was influenced by the political climate and the perceived poor state of education in his context; Orality dates back to the ancestors. In a similar vein, Freire’s Andragogy is copy-righted/authored by him; everyone has the copy right to Orality because the ancestors passed it down to all and anything that belongs to the ancestors belongs to the entire community. Another point of difference is the fact that Freire uses individuals as teachers and oppressors; the other uses the entire community as teachers with no room for oppression as analyzed by Freire because of the fear of the wrath of the ancestors. Whereas Orality by definition and nature is unwritten, Freire’s Andragogy is written and has been subjected to scientific research and critique. A further point of departure for both is that there is a dearth of literature related to Orality while Freire’s Andragogy occupies extensive space in academic literature. There are several other points of difference that will be part of a full paper.

### Conclusion

I have tried to argue that comparative education, in definition and practice, has
to update its methodology in the 21st century to be inclusive of indigenous populations that are often sub-summed in comparisons based on the current definitions of comparative education. Another justification for my argument is the need to accommodate comparisons between linear and holistic concepts as frameworks for comparative education in a globalized world where the learning community is a contested concept. I have established Freire’s ideas as being Andragogic and I have used that argument to compare it with Orality in traditional African education and learning. Similarities and differences were used to establish the fact that there is a viable basis for intercultural comparison using Freire’s Andragogy and Orality in indigenous African lifelong learning.

References


Non-formal learning - similar settings, divergent cultures

Comparison of Polish and Swedish ENGOs

1. Introduction

Non-formal learning of adults is in focus of this paper. Its characteristic features are: it is organized outside the formal school system, is voluntary, usually short-term, the presence of a teacher (trainer, coach, instructor) is not necessary (cf. Schugurensky 2007:164f). What is important: Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective (COM(2001) 678 final).

Adults whose non-formal learning were studied are staff of WWF and Greenpeace - two world-wide environmental organisations (ENGOs). They work in two countries - Poland and Sweden. The empirical material of this study consists of interviews with the staff of WWF and Greenpeace. My questions concerned mainly capacity building of the organization, its educational needs and training/learning activities that has been organized or attended. Language of interviews was English, Polish and Swedish.

I was interested to determine how learning in these two ENGOs was organized?; who did what? But also to learn where did training competences come from? Were there any significant differences in how non-formal learning processes are run in two ENGOs in two countries? Some of these questions are focusing on a phenomenon called social movement learning (SML) - a term that is discussed later.

Polish and Swedish WWF and Greenpeace share with their mother-organisations missions, goals and ways of working and acting. Thus, a starting hypothesis for this paper was that similar organisational settings are present in both country organisations.

My working hypothesis was the following:

Despite many similarities how a given ENGO work is organized, its staff and members do act and learn differently. One possible explanation is a political culture of a society they are living in.

A broad definition of political culture was formulated by Kavanagh (1972) according to which it is a set of values within which a political system operates. Individuals are socialised into a country’s political culture. The underlying assumption is that norms, rules, habits, traditions and belief systems shape the behaviour of citizens. If they have trust in public authorities, there will be a closer relationship between state and society (Askvik et al 2011).
In his influential article, Pye (1968) stressed the importance of history. According to him a political culture is the product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the members of that system, and thus it is rooted in both public events and private experiences. My point of departure was that Poland and Sweden have different capacity for action. Such differences may facilitate or hinder functioning of civil society organizations, and among them environmental NGOs. This has been corroborated by some interviewees:

> Thus, I believed that Poles and Swedes employed in the same international organizations were in reality working and behaving differently, as different were the conditions of their work.

**2. Points of departure**

The assumption while preparing this paper was twofold - theoretical and practical one. Obviously I had to subscribe to adult educational theory that would suit best my research (it will be discussed in section 3 below). However, studying educational phenomena that occur in social aggregates, nongovernmental organizations, I was compelled to adhere to sociological theories, too.

**2.1. Theoretical assumption**

Sociological theory that I found most useful stems from Eyeraman and Jamieson (1991) and their argument, that social movements characteristic feature is their cognitive praxis. Social movements, according to them, do generate new knowledge and, eventually, new worldviews. One of the best examples (and proof) of this assumption are environmental movements. They were often instrumental in pursuing new knowledge about pollution, hazardous chemicals, transport and agriculture impacts on the environment.

As an adult educationist I find some support in North American school of social movement research called resource mobilisation theory (McCarthy & Zald, Oberschall, Tilly). Their studies on internal and external resources that facilitate collective actions appeal to me, as it is similar to my own discipline's approach.

Due to its emphasis on macro-social perspective and disregard of individual motivation I find less support in new social movement theories (Melucci, Offe, Touraine).

**2.2 Practical assumption**

Practical assumption, based on my previous studies on NGOs, was that participation in NGO is - also - an educational endeavour. Knowledge and skills acquired in working for the organization, change or strengthen competences and attitudes for those involved in NGO work. Expectations and requirements concerning competences of members and volunteers are steadily growing. Especially when goodwill and commitment are not sufficient in a longer perspective.

**3. On learning**

Researchers of social movement focused their interests on cognitive aspects of their work and on knowledge generated by them. Even if much was written about cognitive praxis, communities of practice, and alike, learning itself, however, was not investigated. Before I report my provisional results I ponder first on terminology.

Learning, form a psychological point of view, is defined as any process that for living beings leads to a durable change of capacity and is not caused by oblivion, biological maturing or aging (Illeris 2008:401). Very often learning is envisaged as only knowledge and skills. However, it does also encompass attitudes, competencies, viewpoints, meaning, insights. For an adult educationist it is important to stress that ... it is basically characteristic that adults learn what they want to learn, and have very little inclination to acquire something they do not want, that is, something they do not perceive as meaningful for their own life goals (Illeris 2008:406).

**3.1 Learning: formal, non-formal and informal**

Of the three types of educational provisions - formal, non-formal and informal - the two latter is connected with social movement learning (SML).

'Formal learning' is commonly associated with 'schooling' - a chronologically graded system of teaching and learning, structured courses, assessments and certificates. Is typically provided by an education institution with prescribed...
For an extensive analysis of understanding and use of 'social learning' concept see Rodela (2007:21). There is a number of definitions of what is meant by social learning, and what makes learning to be "social". For the purpose of my project, I found the following definition most useful. 'Social learning' is the learning of groups, networks, communities and social systems, engaged in problem solving activities, in conditions that are new, unexpected, uncertain, conflicting and hard to predict (Wildemeersch & Vandenaeebele 2007:21).

There are three characteristic features of social learning:

First and obviously, social learning is done in and by groups, communities, and networks. Second, social learning is about social issues. More precisely: it concerns matters of common interest and collective action. Sustainability issues typically belong to this category. Third, social learning implies that, even in the middle of conflicts in views and interests, there is an effort at collaboration and consensus (van Koppen 2002:376).

In my research I subscribe to two tracks of thoughts: the one that conceptualize social learning as individual learning that take place in a social context as well as to that which sees social learning as a process of social change in which people learn from each other in ways that can benefit wider social-ecological systems (Reed et al. 2010:2).

Social movement learning can take place in two different forums. Through their actions social movements attempt to persuade and educate the general public, decision makers, other target groups, for the sake of their cause. Thus the first forum lies outside organizations; people learn as a result of the actions undertaken by them.

3.2. Social movement learning - understanding the concept

As a reaction to ruling perspective on learning by an individual, various theories on social learning have been formulated (cf. Wenger 1998, Fenwick 2000, Wildemeersch & Vandenaeebele 2007). There is a number of definitions of what is meant by social learning, and what makes learning to be "social". For the purpose of my project, I found the following definition most useful. 'Social learning' is the learning of groups, networks, communities and social systems, engaged in problem solving activities, in conditions that are new, unexpected, uncertain, conflicting and hard to predict (Wildemeersch & Vandenaeebele 2007:21).

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1 For an extensive analysis of understanding and use of 'social learning' concept see Rodela (2011).
advocacy training.

Most important, and most valued, were opportunities to learn latest developments within the area of responsibility of an individual employee. Be it scientific, legislative, political. This could be seminars or lectures given on sustainable consumption, transport policies, petroleum pollutant spills, eutrophication, blue-green algae. Topic and type depended on personal interests, aspirations, needs.

Scope of the courses outside the main domain of work span from working with media, creating web-pages, raising funds, conflict management. In time WWF and Greenpeace employees amassed a set of know-how that enabled them to pursuit their organizations' missions. Interestingly, what comes out of all three interviews is the fact that contents that were learned in courses given by others were often similar to topics discussed during internal workshops.

Learning outcomes are often of direct relevance for those who partook in learning situation. Nevertheless, some results contribute to a long-term personal development, too. Among social skills that use to be learned through active participation in NGOs are diplomacy, persistence, consistency, public speaking.

4.2. … and how?

Even less diverse then content were ways in which the knowledge and skills have been obtained. With ENGOs that do not have members three main learning opportunities were courses, workshops and information meetings. Sometimes e-learning is chosen instead of more traditional form. The use of Internet, and of internal (requiring log-in procedures) web-sites is a growing phenomenon. Usually Polish and Swedish Greenpeace and WWF staff attended relevant events organized and hosted by other NGOs, specialized firms or state authorities:

In this fashion, we learn while attending conferences and courses organised by others. Upon certain occasions, we work in a similar way, i.e. by holding an event for the needs of other organizations (WWF Poland, Tymorek, May 17, 2012).

Equally important, though less frequent, is a knowledge transfer within own organization: Sometimes we have internal exchange of knowledge. When someone goes to a workshop or has a certain knowledge - tries to transfer it to other co-workers (Focus Slovenia). Some organisations are better equipped to do so than others. For instance WWF Poland profits from 50 years of experiences collected by WWF International:

Whenever we initiate a new theme or programme, and there exists such a need and/or possibility, a person designated to plan a given programme may travel to those countries where necessary experience had been already won… In other words, we learn from inner-organisational experience (WWF Poland, Tymorek, May 17, 2012).

If WWF Poland commences a certain theme, we always check whether it had not been already studied elsewhere in order to avoid, e.g. similar errors or to formulate targets and plan our work as best as possible…. This is a feature that other organisations - both on a national scale and even more so local ones - simply do not possess (WWF Poland, Tymorek, May 17, 2012).

ENGOs, as mentioned before, are knowledge-intensive organizations, but only as far as environment is concerned. They work intuitively in other spheres of their activity. Usually, "methods" that ENGOs often "apply" in public-relations work, contacts with authorities and/or media are based on common sense, try-and-error, experiential learning.

Conclusions

My working hypothesis, as I presented earlier, was the following:

despite many similarities how a given ENGO work is organized, its staff and members do act and learn differently. One possible explanation is a political culture of a society they are living in.

Examples of how political culture of Poland and Sweden indeed differ have strengthen this assumption. Nevertheless, contrary to my hypothesis pertinent findings show the opposite:

despite significant differences in political culture, traditions of civil society and practical conditions in which ENGOs work, learning processes that occur in these ENGOs were visibly alike.

As my research shows, adults do act differently in different countries, while they do learn similarly.

References


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2 Although one reservation is needed here - educational work within ENGO that do have members differs from those who work mainly through its own professional staff.

3 Again - one reservation needs to be made here. More innovative forms of learning and educating could be found in ENGOs that not only have members and/or volunteers, but also rely on them in their work.


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**Becoming Educated:**

**A Comparison Of Women’s Educational Resilience In Post-Conflict Cambodia and Urban Black America**

Educational resilience can be defined as persisting in school in spite of the adversities in life one faces. Worldwide, girls from poor backgrounds have low secondary school completion rates and even lower completion of tertiary education. Their challenges are exacerbated and intensified when they grow up in contexts characterized by extreme social disruption, such as in a conflict or post-conflict nation or in an urban area impacted by a high rate of drug use, violence, and crime.

This paper compares the educational life histories of young Cambodian women, who grew up during and after the Khmer Rouge genocide, and Black American women, who grew up during the crack cocaine epidemic in the urban United States. We are looking for ways in which girls’ and women’s experiences of accessing and persisting in school from primary through tertiary levels are similar across two nations with very different economic and social profiles.

In Cambodia, the net enrollment ratio for girls/women at the secondary level in 2006 was 33%; at the tertiary level in 2008, it was 34%. In the U.S., secondary-level enrollment for girls/women overall was 91%; at the tertiary level in 2009, it was 57% (United Nations Statistics Division). In Cambodia, the girls most likely not to complete secondary school have come from poor, rural areas. Eighty percent of Cambodians live in rural areas where access to education, health and other social services is limited. In the U.S., one of the demographics least likely to complete secondary school has been poor, urban Blacks girls (NCIS, 2010). Black girls are almost 2 times more likely to drop out than their white counterparts (NCIS, 2012). While studies have addressed the high dropout rates for Black boys, 53% for Black versus 22% for White boys in 2007-2008 (Schott Foundation, http://blackboysreport.org/; Toldson, 2008), 63% of Black female students nationwide failed to graduate from secondary school (NCES 2009).

This paper goes beyond the statistics, seeking “inside out” stories from women about their efforts to stay in school.

**Research Design**

This educational life history study compares the educational resilience of poor,