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Pitfalls in Comparative Studies Inherent and Self-styled Dangers

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, incurrance 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 comparatists 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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type of research more laborious, time-consuming, and – not the least – expensive. They cannot be avoided and occur frequently enough to be considered as inherent to this type of study. Obstacles are often ‘objective’ or ‘external’ to a researcher.

- c) **Pitfalls**, however, are a more intricate phenomenon. They are often unconscious mistakes, ignorant assumptions, or self-inflicted misinterpretations. A pitfall is usually a ‘self-styled danger,’ because the problem stems from the limited understanding of a researcher. Thus, a researcher, a team leader, or an editor is ultimately accountable for the pitfall. For example, when a researcher 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 *szkola wyższa*, despite the striking similarity in names (a phenomenon called in linguistics “false friends”), then the researcher becomes trapped in a pitfall, producing results that are corrupted and misleading. Unlike obstacles, pitfalls can, in many cases, be avoided.

The objective of this chapter is to increase an understanding of pitfalls in comparative research, in order to prevent falling into such traps.

Pitfalls – list I

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,

[e]ven this latter accomplishment is worthwhile when another researcher can use these descriptions as data (assuming both method and data are well described) in order to build generalizations and models (Lutz, 1977, p. 41).

Without any doubt, a precondition for comparative analysis is a well-prepared factographical base. However, there are books that fail to advance in any substantial way the development of the field. The overload of data seems to overwhelm authors, so instead of analysing, they fall into the “descriptiveness” pitfall. To avoid this pitfall, authors could be reminded that “making understandable” is the aim and value of comparison rather than “naming everything,” and thus encouraged to be more selective.

“Comparing incomparables” pitfall

The second example deals with the problem of comparability; and the pitfall in this instance is called “comparing incomparables.” It is my assumption that in comparative studies we must deal with entities of a similar kind. Two or more phenomena chosen to be investigated should exhibit comparable features *for the purpose of the study*. There would be, namely, little point in comparing, say, a participation in fine-arts courses with methods of in-service training. The choice of a second problem or country should be suitable for the problem in question.

Two examples illustrate how studies can succumb to the pitfall “comparing incomparables.” In a well-known book entitled, *Values and the Active Community - A cross-national study of the influences of local leadership*, published by the International Studies of Values in Politics (1971), local leadership in four countries was studied. The research question was whether values represented by local leaders had an impact on social change and development in their communities (p. xxi). Oddly, the research team had chosen leaders according to criterion that “they had the power to make essentially the same type of decision in all four countries” (International Studies of Values in Politics, 1971, p. 366). However, the terminology used by the American research team leaders drew from and reflected their own conceptual realm and the political specificities of their own country. Therefore, some conclusions aiming at generalizing social and political phenomena in four countries became misleading. The research team discovered for instance, that there existed a number of important decision-makers in local communities. Their political activity and status was then described as ‘local government.’ Such a conclusion in relation to a centralized communist system does not make much sense. Studying considerably dissimilar political systems requires much attention and critical consideration.

The second example of the “comparing incomparables” pitfall can be found in the book entitled, *Vocational Education in Transition*, edited by Gert Loose (1988). The book is based on an international project carried out in seven European countries by the UNESCO Institute of Education in Hamburg. Authors of the case study chapters were obliged to follow a rigid organisational format.

Thus, the same structure was used to describe highly centralised and uniform(ist) 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 an 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).

“Compartmentalization” can be found in the book, *Adult Education in Yugoslav Society*, 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 analyse 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 & Wittpoth 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 than 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 cultural, social, political and economic conditions, while investigating its educational 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 assumptions then all the technical ingenuity and sophisticated computation is little more than an intellectual device 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" pitfall. 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 obviously 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 powerlessness. 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 possible. This can be achieved by being sensitive to nation-specific characteristics (*cf.* Reischmann 1988, p. 168).

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 systems do not necessarily divide the countries into dichotomies.

“Double-decker” pitfall

The fifth pitfall has been metaphorically named the “double-decker.” It characterises 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 individual 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 sufficient 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-awakening. It demonstrates a first-rate understanding of ongoing processes, but not of their historical backgrounds. It introduces 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 an 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. 101f).

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 comparison is left up to the reader.

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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