SOCIAL RESEARCH AND COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Comparative study is a most desirable way of approaching an understanding of education. The challenge is to do it in ways that are valid, persuasive, practically usable, and, above all, enlightening. According to Harold J Noah, comparative education has four purposes:

1. To describe educational systems, processes, or outcomes.
2. To assist in the development of educational institutions and practices.
3. To highlight the relationships between education and society.
4. To establish generalized statements about education those are valid in more than one country.

This paper seeks to introduce social research by setting out what seem to be some of the major theoretical and methodological issues raised for comparative education by the increasing prominence of the discourses of the knowledge economy, which, it is argued, represent a particularly strong version of globalization and its possible relationships to education systems, and hence an especially acute challenge to comparative education. The paper shows the diverse aspects of Comparative Education and Social Research to make comparisons across different countries or cultures.

Key Words: Idiosyncratic Causes, Positivist Model, Conflict Paradigm, Analytic Frame, Ethnography

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1. Introduction

The comparative mind, in the first place, like all other human mental activity it is inclined toward figurative thinking, using metaphors, models, and paradigms to explain the unknown in terms of the known. But the comparative mind is also like the minds of others engaged in the deliberate search to extend knowledge. It is curious, especially drawn to puzzles concerning human behavior. It is creative and flexible, being capable of moving back and forth between the particular item and the whole pattern, between the facts and the variable, between data and theories, between contemplative study and other kinds of activity. In sum, the comparative mind is a particular case of the general human cognitive condition and an even more particular case of the inquiring mind, whether scientist, philosopher, or artist. And its most special attribute is that it is drawn to the fascinating game of solving complex puzzles and playing with ideas and facts through comparison – and the use of metaphors.

Comparative education began with observations about foreign peoples and their education and developed into descriptions of foreign school systems. Inherent in this work was the practical aim of borrowing from abroad useful educational devices for the improvement of education at home. The descriptive phase gradually expanded to include examination of the social, political, and historical context in which school systems developed. A further dimension was added to the description of these relationships as comparative educators proceeded to consider the dynamic interaction between education and its societal setting. Most recently, comparative education has entered yet a new phase in which cross-national data is used to test propositions about the relationship of education to society.

Comparative education is thus part of the wider attempt to explain phenomena, first, within educational systems and institutions, and second, surrounding education and linking it with its social environment. Attempts to do the first lead to a concern with the technology of education: the methods, practices, and outcomes of different modes of instruction, organization, supervision, administration, and finance. Where attention is paid to the teaching-learning process in a number of countries, educational psychology and particularly psychometrics are especially relevant. Insofar as comparative education is concerned with pedagogy, the work has largely been done by teachers, administrators, and educational psychologists seeking to comprehend and possibly to improve the instructional work of the schools, and it is useful to term this branch of the subject comparative pedagogy. But to the extent that comparative education has looked

outside the confines of the classroom and the school system, its concerns and its data have overlapped with the interests of social scientists, some of whom have recently undertaken systematic comparative study of education as a social phenomenon.

Comparative education has one foot firmly planted in pedagogy and the other in the wider area of the social sciences and social research. Concern with the form and function of the school has, however, united these two aspects of the field by concentrating attention on similar kinds of data and complementary topics. A second unifying element, and possibly a more important one, has recently become apparent in a common movement toward empirical and quantitative methods of inquiry. Comparative education in its most recent phase emerges as the attempt to use cross-national data to test propositions about the relationship between education and society and between teaching practices and learning outcomes.

2. Rationale for the Field

Many important educational questions can best be examined from an international comparative perspective. For example, in the United States there is no nationwide certificate of completion of secondary education. This raises the question of what the advantages and disadvantages are of leaving such certification to each of the 50 states. Comparative education draws on the experience of countries such as Japan and France to show how a centralized system works, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of centralized certification. **Disciplinary Identity:** Comparative education is closely allied to and may overlap with, international education and international educational development. The Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) was "Founded in 1956 to foster cross cultural understanding, scholarship, academic achievement and societal development through the international study of educational ideas, systems and practices." Among North America universities, Stanford University, Columbia University, Indiana University, UCLA, Pennsylvania State University and University of Illinois are specially known for the programs in this field. The University of Oxford, University of London and University of Hong Kong also have outstanding programs.

3. International Society for Comparative Adult Education

The International Society for Comparative Adult Education (or ISCAE) is a network of individuals and organizations with members in more than thirty countries.

3.1 Purpose

Comparative education is a well established field of study that examines education in one country (or group of countries) by using data and insights drawn from the practices and situation in another country or countries. Adult education focuses on the unique needs and characteristics of students who are not children or adolescents. The focus of ISCAE then is the study of the education of adults as practiced in various countries; it also explores the methods, problems and pitfalls of international comparative research in general. ISCAE serves as a network of contacts for professionals in the field of comparative adult education; such networking encourages research assistance and cross fertilization, exchange of information, international cooperation and similar activities. There are no statutes and no membership fees. Most of the printing and distribution of newsletters and conference proceedings is done by members from the United States, Germany, or Australia.

3.2 History

ISCAE's origins can be traced back to 1960, when Dr. Alexander N. Charters, professor of adult education at Syracuse University, and Canadian scholar of adult education J. Roby Kidd formed a working group an international and comparative adult education at the first world conference of the World Council for Comparative Education in Ottawa. They named their group the Committee for Study and Research in Comparative Adult Education (CSRCAE). The group continued under that name for the next thirty years until, in 1992, it was renamed the International Society for Comparative Adult Education.

3.3 Publications and Meetings

ISCAE publishes a newsletter, ISCAE Communication, irregularly (once or twice a year). Members meet at international conferences, held every two or three years in locations around the world. At the conferences, individuals present papers on completed (or nearly complete) research; others present research in progress or ideas for future research. Studies must include two or more countries in the research in order to qualify as "comparative".

4. Comparative Education Review

Comparative education Review, the official publication of the comparative and International Education Society, investigates education throughout the world and the social, economic, and political forces that shape it. CER was founded in 1857 and is published by the University of Chicago Press. CER is co-edited by Mark Ginsburg (Academy for Educational Development, Washington, DC), David Post (Pennsylvania State University) and Heidi Ross (Indiana University).

5. Comparative Research

Comparative research is a research methodology in the social sciences that aims to make comparisons across different countries or cultures. A major problem in comparative research is that the data sets in different countries may not use the same categories, or define categories differently (for example by using different definitions of poverty).

5.1 Development of the Tradition

When the practice of comparative research began is a matter of debate. Deutsch suggests we have been using this form of investigation for over 2000 years old. In effect what he is saying is that comparing things is essential to basic scientific and philosophic enquiry, which we have been doing for a long time. Most authors are more conservative in their estimate of how long comparative research has been with us. It is largely an empty debate over the definition of the tradition: does simply comparing things count as comparative research? In any case, textbooks on this form of study were beginning to appear by the 1980s, but its rise to extreme popularity began after World War II. There are numerous reasons that comparative research has come to take a place of honor in the toolbox of the social scientist. Globalization has been a major factor, increasing the desire and possibility for educational exchanges and intellectual curiosity about other cultures. Information technology has enabled greater production of quantitative data for comparison, and international communications technology has facilitated this information to be easily spread.

5.2 What is Comparative Research?

Comparative research, simply put, is the act of comparing two or more things with a view to discovering something about one or the entire things being compared. This technique often

utilizes multiple disciplines in one study. When it comes to method, the majority agreement is that there is no methodology peculiar to comparative research. The multidisciplinary approach is good for the flexibility it offers, yet comparative programs do have a case to answer against the call that their research lacks a "seamless whole". There are certainly methods far more common than others in comparative studies, however. Quantitative analysis is much more frequently pursued than qualitative, and this is seen in the majority of comparative studies which use quantitative data.

The general method of comparing things is the same for comparative research as it is in our everyday practice of comparison. Like cases are treated alike, and different cases are treated differently; the extent of difference determines how differently cased are to be treated. The point here is that if one is able to sufficiently distinguish two cases, comparative research conclusions will not be very helpful. Secondary analysis of quantitative data is relatively widespread in comparative research, undoubtedly in part because of the cost of obtaining primary data for such large things as a country's policy environment. This study is generally aggregate data analysis. A typical method of comparing welfare states is to take balance their levels of spending on social welfare.

In line with how a lot of theorizing has gone in the last century, comparative research does not tend to investigate 'grand theories', such as Marxism. It instead occupies itself with middle-range theories? Theories that do not purport to describe our social system in its entirety, but a subset of it. A good example of this is the common research program that looks for differences between two or more social systems, and then looks at these differences in relation to some other variable coexisting in those societies to see if it is related. The classic case of this is Esping-Anderson's research on social welfare systems. He noticed there was a difference in types of social welfare systems, and compared them based on their level of decommodification of social welfare goods. He found that he was able to class welfare states into four types, based on their level of decommodificaiton. He further theorized from this that decommodification was based on a combination of class coalitions and mobilization, and regime legacy. Here Esping-Anderson is using comparative research: he takes many western countries and compares their level of decommodification, then develops a theory of the divergence based on his findings.

Comparative research can take many forms. Two factors are space and time. Spatially, cross-national comparisons are by far the most common, although comparisons within countries,

contrasting different areas, cultures or governments also subsist and are very constructive, especially in a country like New Zealand, where policy often changes depending on which race it pertains to. Recurrent interregional studies include comparing similar or different countries or sets of countries, comparing one's own country to others or the whole world. The historical comparative model involves comparing different time-frames. The two main choices within this model are comparing two stages in time, or just comparing the same thing over time, to see if a policy's effects differ over a stretch of time. When it comes to subject matter of comparative enquiries, many contend there is none unique to it. This may indeed be true, but a brief perusal of comparative endeavors reveals there are some topics more recurrent than others. Determining whether socio-economic or political factors are more important in explaining government action is a familiar theme. In general, however, the only thing is certain in comparative research issues is the existence of differences to be analyzed.

6. Social Research

Social research refers to research conducted by social scientists (primarily within sociology and social psychology), but also within other disciplines such as social policy, human geography, political science, social anthropology and education. Sociologists and other social scientists study diverse things: from census data on hundreds of thousands of human beings, through the in-depth analysis of the life of a single important person to monitoring what is happening on a street today – or what was happening a few hundred years ago. Social scientists use many different methods in order to describe, explore and understand social life. Social methods can generally be subdivided into two broad categories. Quantitative methods are concerned with attempts to quantify social phenomena and collect and analyze numerical data, and focus on the links among a smaller number of attributes across many cases. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, emphasize personal experiences and interpretation over quantification, are more concerned with understanding the meaning of social phenomenon and focus on links among a larger number of attributes across relatively few cases. While very different in many aspects, both qualitative and quantitative approaches involve a systematic interaction between theories and data. Common tools of quantitative researchers include surveys, questionnaires, and secondary analysis of statistical data that has been gathered for other purposes (for examples, censuses or

the results of social attitudes surveys). Commonly used qualitative methods include focus groups, participant observation, and other techniques.

6.1 Ordinary Human Inquiry

Before the advent of sociology and application of the scientific method to social research, human inquiry was mostly based on personal experiences, and received wisdom in the form of tradition and authority. Such approaches often led to errors such as inaccurate observations, overgeneralization, selective observations, subjectivity and lack of logic.

6.2 Foundations of Social Research

Social research (and social science in general) is based on logic and empirical observations. Charles C. Ragin writes in his Constructing Social Research book that "Social research involved the interaction between ideas and evidence. Ideas help social researchers make sense of evidence, and researchers use evidence to extend, revise and test ideas." Social research thus attempts to create or validate theories through data collection and data analysis and its goal is exploration, description and explanation. It should never lead or be mistaken with philosophy or belief. Social research aims to find social patterns of regularity in social life and usually deals with social groups (aggregates of individuals), not individuals themselves (although science of psychology is an exception here). Research can also be divided into pure research and applied research. Pure research has no application on real life, whereas applied research attempts to influence the real world.

There are no laws in social science that parallel the laws in the natural science. A law in social science is a universal generalization about a class of facts. A fact is an observed phenomenon, and observation means it has been seen, heard or otherwise experienced by researcher. A theory is a systematic explanation for the observations that relate to a particular aspect of social life. Concepts are the basic building blocks of theory and are abstract elements representing classes of phenomena. Axioms or postulates are basic assertions assumed to be true. Propositions are conclusions drawn about the relationships among concepts, based on analysis of axioms. Hypotheses are specified expectations about empirical reality which are derived from propositions. Social research involves testing these hypotheses to see if they are true. Social

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research involves creating a theory, operationalization (measurement of variables) and observation (actual collection of data to test hypothesized relationship).

Social theories are written in the language of variables, in other words, theories describe logical relationships between variables. Variables are logical sets of attributes, with people being the 'carriers' of those variables (for example, gender can be a variable with two attributes male and female). Variables are also divided into independent variables (data) that influences the dependent variables (which scientists are trying to explain). For example, in a study of how different dosages of a drug are related to the severity of symptoms of a disease, a measure of the severity of the symptoms of the disease is a dependent variable and the administration of the drug in specified doses in the independent variable. Researchers will compare the different values of the dependent variables (severity of the symptoms) and attempt to draw conclusions.

6.3 Types of Explanations

Explanations in social theories can be idiographic or nomothetic. An idiographic approach to an explanation is one where the scientists seek to exhaust the idiosyncratic causes of a particular condition or event, i.e., by trying to provide all possible explanations of a particular case. Nomothetic explanations tend to be more general with scientists trying to identify a few causal factors that impact a wide class of conditions or events. For example, when dealing with the problem of how people choose a job, idiographic explanation would be to list all possible reasons why a given person (or group) chooses a given job while nomothetic explanation would try to find factors that determine why job applicants in general choose a given job.

6.4 Types of Inquiry

Social research can be deductive or inductive. The inductive inquiry (also known as grounded research) is a model in which general principles (theories) are developed from specific observations. In deductive inquiry specific expectations of hypothesis are developed on the basis of general principles (i.e. social scientists start from an existing theory, and then search for proof). For example, in inductive research, if a scientist finds that some specific religious minorities tend to favor a specific political view, he may then extrapolate this to the hypothesis that all religious minorities tend to have the same political view. In deductive research, a scientist

would start from a hypothesis that religious affiliation influenced political views and then begin observations to prove or disprove this hypothesis.

6.5 Quantitative / Qualitative Debate

There is usually a trade off between the number of cases and the number of their variables that social research can study. Qualitative research usually involves few cases with many variables, while quantitative involves many phenomena with few variables. There is some debate over whether "quantitative research" and "qualitative research" methods can be complementary: some researchers argue that combining the two approaches is beneficial and helps build a more complete picture of the social world, while other researchers believe that the epistemologies that underpin each of the approaches are so divergent that they cannot be reconciled within a research project. While quantitative methods are based on a natural science, positivist model of testing theory, qualitative methods are based on interpretivism and are more focused around generating theories and accounts. Positivists treat the social world as something that is 'out there,' external to the social scientist and waiting to be researched. Interpretivists, on the other hand, believe that the social world is constructed by social agency and therefore any intervention by a researcher will affect social reality. Herein lies the supposed conflict between quantitative and qualitative approaches – quantitative approaches traditionally seek to minimize intervention in order to produce valid an reliable statistics, whereas qualitative approaches traditionally treat intervention as something that is necessary (often arguing that participation can lead to a better understanding of a social situation).

However, it is increasingly recognized that the significance of these differences should not be exaggerated and that quantitative and qualitative approaches can be complementary. They can be combined in a number of ways, for example:

1. Qualitative methods can be used in order to develop quantitative research tools. For example, focus groups could be used to explore an issue with a small number of people and the data gathered using this method could then be used to develop a quantitative survey questionnaire that could be administered to a far greater number of people allowing results to be generalized.

2. Qualitative methods can be used to explore and facilitate the interpretation of relationships between variables. For example, researchers may inductively hypothesize that there would be a positive relationship between positive attributes of sales staff and the amount of sales of a store.

However, quantitative, deductive, structured observation of large number convenience stores could reveal that this was not the case, and in order to understand why the relationship between the variables was negative the researchers may undertake qualitative case studies of much less number of stores including participant observation. This might abductively confirm that the relationship was negative, but that it was not the positive attitude of sales staff that led to low sales, but rather that high sales led to busy staff who were less likely to be express positive emotions at work!

Quantitative methods are useful for describing social phenomena, especially on a larger scale. Qualitative methods allow social scientists to provide richer explanations (and descriptions) of social phenomena, frequently on a smaller scale. By using two or more approaches researchers may be able to 'triangulate' their findings and provide a more valid representation of the social world. A combination of different methods is often used within "comparative research", which involves the study of social processes across nation-states, or across different types of society.

6.6 Paradigms

Social scientists usually follow one or more of the several specific sociological paradigms (points of view):

1. Conflict paradigm focuses on the ability of some groups to dominate others, or resistance to such domination.

2. Ethno-methodology paradigm examines how people make sense out of social life in the process of living it, as if each was a researcher engaged in enquiry.

3. Feminist paradigm focuses on how male dominance of society has shaped social life.

4. Darwinism paradigm sees a progressive evolution in social life.

5. Positivism paradigm was an early 19th century approach, now considered obsolete in its pure form. Positivists believed we can scientifically discover all the rules governing social life.

6. Structural functionalism paradigm also known as a social systems paradigm addresses what functions various elements.

7. Symbolic interactionism paradigm examines how shared meaning and social patterns are developed in the course of social interactions.

Of these, the conflict paradigm of Karl Marx, and symbolic interactionism of Max Weber and structural functionalism of Emile Durkheim are the most well known.

6.7 The Ethics of Social Research

Two main assumptions of the ethics in social research are:

1. Voluntary participation
2. No harm to subjects

6.8 Social Research Organizations

Centre for rural social research, Australia, Economic and Social Research Council, United Kingdom (Research Funding Council), Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, USA, Institute for Social Research, Germany, Mass-Observation, United Kingdom, Matrix Research & Consultancy Limited, United Kingdom, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Australia, National Centre for Social Research, United Kingdom, National Opinion Research Centre, USA, New School for Social Research, New York City, Mada-al-Carmel – The Arab Centre for Applied Social Research, Haifa, Israel.

6.9 Social Research Techniques

Quantitative methods, Structured interviewing, Statistical surveys and questionnaires, Structural observation, Content analysis, Secondary analysis, Quantitative marketing research, Qualitative methods, Analytic induction, Ethnography, Focus groups, Morphological analysis, Participant observation, Semi structured interview, N-Structured interviewing, Textual analysis, Theoretical sampling.

7. Analytic Frame

Analytic frame is a detailed sketch or outline of some social phenomenon, representing initial idea of a scientist analyzing this phenomenon. Charles C. Ragin defines it as one of the four building blocks of social research (the other three being ideas (social theories), evidence (data) and images (new ideas synthesized from existing data). Thus analytic frames are used to

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elaborate on starting ideas and they would usually consist of a list of some key elements found in most of the analyzed phenomena (for example, social movements).

Two specific types of analytic frames are case and aspect based frames. Framing by case refers to researchers using concepts to classify the phenomena they study, while framing by aspect refers to using concepts to characterize the phenomena. For example, a scientist describing a restaurant, a bus, a coffeehouse and a waiting room as non-interaction places is assigning them into the same category, thus framing them by case. Framing by aspect is going further and differentiating between cases in a given category (how exactly is non-interaction achieved in those places, what forms of social interaction are permitted in those places, etc.).

Frames can be also divided into fixed, fluid or flexible. Fixed frame are those which won't change in later research states – they are common in quantitative research, and are used to test and prove or falsify a hypothesis. Flexible frames are common in comparative research, where they show which factors may be more relevant in specific research context, helping to explore the problem without making specific hypothesis. Fluid frames are used when researcher wants to limit the influence of the existing, more established theories; they are thus subject to much change and the researcher can use several frames switching between them depending on the gathered data. Fluid frames are most common in the qualitative research.

8. Conclusion

If properly done, comparative education can deepen understanding of our own education and society; it can be of assistance to policy makers and administrators; and it can form a most valuable part of the education of teachers. Expressed another way, comparative education can help us understand better our own past; locate ourselves more exactly in the present; and discern a little more clearly what our educational future may be. These contributions can be made via work that is primarily descriptive, as well as through work that seeks to be analytic or explanatory; through work that is limited to just one, or a very few, nations, as well as through work that embraces a wider scope; through work that relies on non-quantitative, as well as quantitative, data and methods; and through work that proceeds with explicitly formulated social science paradigms in mind, as well as in a less formalized manner. Accurate, reliable description of data will often show us that our own problems are not unique, and such knowledge can be most useful. It directs us to search out and try to understand forces and factors at work that

transcend the boundaries of our own society. Exercises in mapping the experiences of other countries can feed directly into policy making and decision-taking. Indeed, as Edmund King has pointed out, comparative studies of education are legitimated and energized precisely to the extent that they originate from the need to make decisions about the conduct of education.

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