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## **International comparative adult education: Seven reflections I expect to read in each study.**

### **Checklist for beginning**

Research never is perfect. So what we expect in all studies: Researchers should not only present their findings, but as well their reflections on limitations, bias, and open questions for further research.

While this is true for all research in all subjects and disciplines: Comparative Adult Education has its specific pitfalls and obstacles researchers should be aware of and should reflect on: personal blindness, political correctness, unavailable data, and misunderstanding of language are just a few to mention. Including these reflections in the research report/presentation/publication will make a more objective, reliable, valid, honest, and self-critical contribution to the knowledge of the field. The hope is, that knowing the pitfalls will make international and comparative work sounder and more enjoyable, and weaknesses can be avoided or at least mitigated

In the following, I will present a selection of seven reflections I suggest to be discussed in international comparative studies. This selection is based on 30 years of experience and observations in the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE, [www.ISCAE.org](http://www.iscae.org)) and its publications (<http://www.iscae.org/publications.htm>, especially Reischmann 2021). Frequently old sources will be used to demonstrate that there is a long history of reflections on the method of comparison. These reflections here presented can be used as a sort of checklist before, during, or after an international-comparative project.

### **1. Why compare?**

A first consideration should be to reflect, on what is expected from the comparison – the “why”. Is it just for curiosity (“Isn't it interesting that ..”), is it to learn and take over something from abroad (“borrowing”), or is the goal to understand the other and the own system better?

Already 1974 Roby Kidd offered a list of “common goals” of comparative studies, going beyond “borrowing” and “imitating”:

“The most common goals for comparative studies in adult education are:

- to become better informed about the educational system of other countries;
- to become better informed about the ways in which people in other cultures have carried out certain social functions by means of education;
- to become better informed about the historical roots of certain activities and thus to develop criteria for assessing contemporary developments and testing possible outcomes;

- to better understand the educational forms and systems operating in one's own country;
- to satisfy an interest in how other human beings live and learn;
- to better understand oneself;
- to reveal how one's own cultural biases and personal attributes affect one's judgment about possible ways of carrying on learning transactions." (Kidd 1975, 75)

Researchers that reflect on these different "whys" will get a deeper understanding of their work – and will discover more and richer aspects during that work, thus enriching the results and academic outcomes

## 2. Start with description, move to analysis!

A first basic classification discriminates between "descriptive" and "analytical" studies: As a first step the researcher always will describe with more or less methodological rigor aspects of adult education. In the "old days" of international comparison this was in the focus of interest; to make the descriptions more comparable, already the historic "Exeter Papers" (Liveright & Haygood 1968) developed a description framework studies should follow. Again in the new days especially the "big data" studies with dozen of countries included mostly remain on the description level.

These descriptive studies look comprehensive and impressive. For sure researchers should at first supply a sound factographic basis. But (coming) authors should be warned: An overload of data can lead into the "Descriptiveness-pitfall" (Bron 2008, 257): describing instead of analyzing. But what makes the value of an international (one-country) study: to make it understandable why in the given national context "the social, cultural, economic and political forces operating on the phenomena" (Titmus 1999, 37) are how they are. And in a comparative study (two or more countries): "That its author(s) look(s) explicitly for similarities and differences. ... A comparison ought to include explanations and reflections on why the similarities occur" (Bron 2008, 257).

Before starting an international comparative study it may be helpful to clarify how much description is wanted and analysis is possible. And to be aware that this decision can change during the research process.

## 3. Identify your type of international research!

When going more into the details of comparative research it might be confusing that - as Titmus stated as early as 1999 - "most what is included under the rubric of comparative studies ... does not include comparison in the strict sense" (36) and may be labeled "pre-comparative". But this openness allows the researcher to use different types of research in international (comparative) studies - each with its strengths and weaknesses ([www.ISCAE.org](http://www.ISCAE.org)).

To reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the different types researchers should at the outset identify the type of their attempt.

- A first kind, mostly evaluated as 'pre-scientific', comprises '*traveler's tales*', the reports we get from international travelers. If these descriptions are more systematic, they are labeled 'traveler's reports'. These types of international documents are mostly characterized as 'subjective-impressionistic'. Their value is evaluated as ambivalent: Critically it is argued that, because of the random observation and the subjective description, it is not clear how reliable and how representative the descriptions are. On the other hand, the plea is made that especially in this subjective focus of eye-witnesses there might be strength in this type of report.

At the scientific level, five types of international-comparative research are identified:

1. *Country-reports*: 'Adult Education in the Republic of ...' is a typical title of this type of report. These papers describe the system of adult and continuing education in one particular country. They could be written by an author of this country or by a person from outside. Some of these reports were, and are, rather impression-istic. Others followed a well-developed outline and structure.
2. *Program reports* describe foreign adult education programs, institutions, and organizations. Examples of this type can be found in the publications of Charters/Hilton (1989) or the case studies collected by Knox (1987). Included in this type (sometimes presented in a separate category) are the topic-oriented studies or the problem approach: a certain topic or problem is discussed in the context of a nation. Country reports as well as topic-oriented studies and the problem approach focus more on 'international' and less on 'comparative'. Because when only one country or program is presented, nothing to compare is available; the readers must draw comparative conclusions themselves.
3. A third type is juxtaposition. Data from two or more countries are presented: In country A we can observe a, in country B we find b. A series of statistical reports represent this type. But no explicit comparison - where are the similarities, and what are the differences? - is given.
4. The "real comparison" goes one step further: "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, 3).
5. Finally field- and method-reflections are seen as part of international comparative adult education: reflections about the methods, strategies, and concepts of international comparison, and summarizing reports about developments in the international comparative field – as it is done in this article.
6. A bit outside of this system, but still counted as part of the international tradition, are reports from the adult educational work of international and trans-national organizations such as UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank.

It is helpful for interpretation and understanding for the author as well as the reader to identify and discuss the reason why the respective type was selected, and what the strengths and weaknesses are.

#### 4. Reflect language as a possible pitfall!

The most common handicap in international comparative work is language: international communication takes place in English. But even this language has its specific traps. Mansbridge, one of the pioneers of adult education in Britain and a restless traveler, reported an awkward situation: At a lecture in the USA he greeted the attending ladies with a word ("homely"), that in British English expresses appreciation, but in American English it means "super ugly"! (Mansbridge 1940, 95f).

It may comfort the new researcher that this problem even happens to high-ranked professionals. Already in one of the early publications (initiated and financed by the Council of Europe with 32 international experts from 12 West-European countries), Besnard & Liétard (1986, 4) noted in their editorial note: "the translation of the present text from French into English was made in ECLE [European Center for Leisure and Education, Prague]. Since there is uncertainty in

adult education terminology world-wide, and important differences exist especially between French and English terminology, the translation was not easy”.

A first simple piece of advice is that native English speakers should take into account that English is a foreign language for most of their audience in an international venture. And to avoid acronyms. In oral and written communication, it helps when one or two sentences explain what is meant - not just dropping names. Describing the context improves understanding.

To reduce the danger of misunderstanding it is helpful to have a network of colleagues in different countries. So the advice is: International societies such as ISCAE ([www.ISCAE.org](http://www.ISCAE.org)), ICAE (<http://icae.global/>), and ESREA (<https://esrea.org/>) are a great help to install such networks and exchanges. As a member of such societies, other researchers become available for correction and inspiration. This exchange can be on an informal person-to-person contact, by internet, or through participation in international conferences.

Another piece of advice is: to be critical of questionnaires and similar language-dependent instruments. The translation can lead to non-equivalent meanings for the different language groups. Bron (2008, 254) describes it as a “crucial issue ... whether questions and answers can be meaningfully translated from one language, and one social reality, into another”. Reichart (2017, 141) confirms this problem with the observation that “the simply translated questionnaire from the European manual [to the Kyrgyzstan context, JR] caused confusion among the survey institutes, the interviewers and the respondent” – even in such “simple” categories as “Houshold type” or “Marital status”. Another language limitation Sun & Erichsen point out (2012, 231): “when we introduce the East to the West, there is dearth of available literature for reference.”

Quite drastically, Guo & Beckett (2007, 117) call this language-problem to attention: “the increasing dominance of English language worldwide is contributing to neocolonialism by empowering the already powerful and leaving the disadvantages further behind ... putting them in danger to losing their first languages, cultures and identities, and contributing to the devaluation of local knowledge and culture.”

But what is the alternative? Without English, there would be no ‘worldwide’ exchange possible. It seems we have to live with that handicap. And to reflect on it when it comes up in a research project. This even can be seen as a result of an international comparative research project: to make aware how different and rich and unique countries and their cultures are.

## 5. How does culture define the object under observation?

Education is deeply rooted in the culture of a country. Sadler as early as 1900 (!) claimed: “we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools” (1900, 21). Institutions, laws, and political or cultural backgrounds are often so different that it is difficult to find an appropriate translation and comparison. Merriam (2007), as well as Sun & Erichsen (2012), illuminate the dramatic differences in perspectives on adult learning and education between different cultures. Moreover, Bron (2012) specifies pitfalls in comparative studies based on a cultural misunderstanding (“comparing the incomparable”).

Many aspects of culture influence the theory and practice of adult education: history, economy, religion, family tradition, the role of men and women, values – just to name some. Some of them might be more important in a specific research project, others less. But researchers should keep in mind that – as Jarvis 1992 states – “any comparative study of the education of adults requires a comparative study of the societies themselves” (1992, 128). This general claim of the word “culture” and “society” might threaten beginners in comparative research. Some authors use instead the term “context”. In both ways: A researcher that reflects on

these is already in the stage of “analytical comparison” - trying to understand the topic under observation.

These cultural reflections can take place at the beginning of a research project. But often it comes during the research process: Things happen, and information can not be understood immediately. “‘You never know what happens’ – that is a shared experience when working in international comparative adult education” (Reischmann 2021, 283) - this is typical for international comparative research. These “discoveries” a researcher should document in the report – it is a result of the study, and will coming researchers help in their work.

It helps, before starting such a project, to collect information about the history and culture of the other country, try to find other literature or pieces of research, and develop a specific mindset: to be open, listening, and curious. As Sun & Erichsen expressed: “In order to listen and learn from the reality of the East, we believe one’s mindset must be altered so openness and appreciativeness will come into play so we can recognize values we may otherwise miss” (2012, 232). This request sounds easy but definitely is not. Nevertheless, here applies a principle true in many life situations: It is better to do it half good than not starting to try!

Comparative research should not only look for similarities, but also for differences. They might better enlighten the understanding of the cultural context, and add new perspectives to the improvement of comparative research. Lee (1999) points out at the end of a thorough comparison of values in Korea and Australia, that “characteristics which are significant in one culture and not in the other represents more important cross-cultural data than those characteristics that are relatively significant to both” (178).

## 6. What bias has the researcher?

“All forms of comparative work involve comparison by somebody” (Titmus 1999, 37). Research is always performed by humans who have their own cultural backgrounds. This “selective perception” threatens, especially in international projects, the perception of “the other”. Bereday (1961!, 41) claims “never-ceasing watchfulness by the observer to control his own cultural or personal bias”.

Therefore, authors and researchers in international comparative adult education are advised to explicitly reflect on their personal cultural or personal background: the nearness to certain institutions, who pay for the research, feeling of a “mission” (open or hidden?), adult education as a social movement or “learning for earning”? And basically: Are researchers blinded by what they see as “normal”? This reflection on the personal bias will have two results: First, it will bring about a deeper insight into the phenomenon under observation. And as well: It changes the personality of the researcher to develop a more open and understanding mindset, as already mentioned above (at 4.).

## 7. Read about the method of comparison!

This advice may sound unnecessary in the academic field: “When doing comparison, read about the method of comparison!” But it is well grounded: The experience in many conferences and publications showed that the literature-lists included many titles about the content of the study, but (nearly) no literature refers to the method and discussion about the value, technique, and pitfalls of international comparison. Often it seems the authors started comparison without knowledge of the long tradition of publications about comparison (“Just doing comparison!”). This repeats mistakes, avoids a deeper quality, and makes these studies less informative than they could be. And it leaves the author with a foggy feeling: to work with an individual approach instead of assuring him to stand based on known and shared standards.

“Standing on the shoulders” of those, who offered knowledge about content,

methods, and reflections helps to strengthen the quality of comparison and make access into this field more enjoyable and easier. Easy access to the literature on standards of international comparative adult education offers the publications of the International Society for Comparative Adult Education ([www.ISCAE.org/publications](http://www.ISCAE.org/publications)).

### 8. Three promises

Of course, this list of suggestions could be much longer - but it seems a good beginning to apply the presented pieces of advice and suggestions. When going through the seven considerations of this article as a sort of checklist for international comparison in adult education three results can be promised:

Firstly: The quality of the research will be better, more reflected, deeper grounded - more objective, reliable, and valid, contributing to the advancement of the field.

Secondly: At the same time, researchers will feel safer in their arguments, based on the knowledge of shared standards and experiences.

A third result can be promised: The people in the "international arena" are "easy-to-have"-people, who offer friendship and inspiration: Charters/Hilton (1989, 163) describes as a benefit of international meetings "to celebrate the great good fortune of international collegiality". This growing into an international network enriches the researcher personally and professionally.

Try it!

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Basic publication in International Comparative Adult Education:

Reischmann, Jost (ed.) (2021): *Essential Readings in International and Comparative Adult Education*. Ziel Verlag, Augsburg, Germany. ISBN 978-3-96557-093-1. <http://www.iscae.org/publications.htm>

Often in international comparative studies, it is difficult to refer to older basic texts because they are hidden in old publications, difficult to locate. This book makes a selection of such old but 'essential' texts available and wants to document the long history of the international/comparative perspective. 'Standing on the shoulder of giants' allows not only a grounded look back but hopefully also a reliable and experience-based look in the future.

The editor of this book, Jost Reischmann, Prof. em., Bamberg University, Germany, has a long history in international and comparative adult education. When the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE) was founded in 1992, he became the first president and developed this society over many years.

We hope this new book will help old-timers and new-comers to contribute to the enriching world of international comparative adult education.

319 pages, 32 contributions, spanning 120 years.

More information incl. reviews: <http://www.reischmannfam.de/lit/Jr-lit-einspaltig.htm>