Chapter 11
Debating (International) Comparative Adult Education Research: Reflections on Conceptual Clarity and Methodological Challenges

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11.1 Introduction

This chapter reflects on the main arguments pursued by Field, Künzel and Schemmann in Chap. 10. In the first section I interrogate the ways concepts used to frame a particular research field (e.g. Comparative Adult Education) conditions how we construe a field of academic knowledge and its positioning within the adult education research landscape. In so doing, I take a point of departure in what Field, Künzel and Schemmann (see Chap. 10) term as International Comparative Adult Education versus Comparative Adult Education. This has the scope of shedding light on the complexities entrenched in pairing terms and concepts, and especially so in adult education scholarship that adopts a *comparative mind-set* (or assumptions about what 'comparative' means, and what research methods allow for valid, reliable, and significant comparative research). Such considerations contribute to wider reflections on the way research fields, in the Bourdieusian sense of social (and academic) milieus, are deliberately or accidentally construed (cf. among others: Milana et al. 2018; Nylander et al. 2018; Rubenson and Elfert 2015; Schemmann 2017). In extreme synthesis, in this section I argue that to flank one qualifier (international) with another (comparative), as in International Comparative Adult Education, raises problems that are worth attention when performing a cartography of research on the education and learning of adults. The problems with flanking or connecting qualifiers are well known in the academic field of Comparative and International Education, from which International Comparative Adult Education has historically emerged (cf. Chap. 10).

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Against this backdrop, I proceed by reflecting on the relation between units of analysis and research purposes, and how these are being redefined under changing environments for adult education policy developments. Such changing environments are characterised by the weakening of central governments' power and the strengthening of inter-institutional, international or multi-level governance in education, among other spheres of public interests. Scrutinising such relation provides an opportunity to reflection on the extent to which researchers capture the *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of their time, and how they fit (or do not) into the dominant set of ideas, beliefs and discourses affecting what they study, and the ways they so do. In short, in this section, I concur with Field, Künzel and Schemmann's claim about the need to rethinking the unit*s* (plural) of comparative analysis, and appreciate a number of them in Comparative Adult Education research. At the same time, I argue for territorially bound units of comparative analysis (e.g., countries) to be still relevant, for a number of reasons. In other words, I acknowledge the changing role and modes of central governments' participation in wider governance processes, but this does not necessarily point at a demise of the state, nor at territorially bound units to be dismissed in Comparative Adult Education research. Undoubtedly, the raise of policy-driven research, and the use of large-scale surveys that 'compare' education and learning systems and opportunities, and their outputs, to inform policy-making – in other words, the exploitation of comparative data for the governance of education (Gorur 2017), as Field, Künzel and Schemmann (see Chap. 10) also note, limits (if does not discharge) attention to histories, traditions, cultures, etc. Yet, the central question to me is not whether Comparative Adult Education is a "closed chapter", as they authors blatantly put it, but rather: what are the methodological challenges in carrying out Comparative Adult Education research under the current conditions?

Accordingly, in the last section of this contribution, I touch upon the relation between knowledge creation and empirical research, and point at three apparently trivial matters that constitute significant challenges, and which scholars ought to confront, when researching adult education policy *through* country comparisons today. These are: (1) the positioning of the researcher; (2) the *tertium comparationis,* or the quality that two or more countries have in common, and the criteria for country selection; and (3) the identification of secondary units of analysis that are comparable at the same time as country- and cultural-sensitive. In extreme synthesis, I suggest that the appropriateness of using territorially bound units of analysis remains a core issue, and calls for improving the qualitative methodologies to investigate adult education policy *through* country comparisons.

11.2 Adopting a Comparative Mind-Set to Researching Adult Education

Mapping the developments that a research field has experienced is a crucial step at any point in time, as further theoretical and methodological advances build on existing knowledge. However language is "a moulder of thought" (Sartori 1984, p. 16),

not a simple carrier of cumulated knowledge. For this reason assigning terms to concepts is key when engaging in mapping exercises towards a cartography of research on the education and learning of adults.

In Chap. 10, Field, Künzel and Schemmann provide a definition of International Comparative Adult Education. Such definition draws on Charters' (1988, cited in Charters and Siddiqui 1989) description of Comparative Adult Education as encompassing statements about theory, principles and methodology based on "comparative studies" about adult education; studies that compare matters related to adult education "in two or more situations" but "extend beyond description […] and/or juxtaposition […] of data" with the scope of teasing out "similarities and differences". Charters' then elucidates that the "situations" to be compared can lead to intra-national studies, when the situations being compared are found within a single country, as well as to international studies, when "a topic" is compared in two or more countries.

Building on Charters' definition of Comparative Adult Education, Field, Künzel and Schemmann state that

> As such, studies of *international comparative adult education* need both an international and comparative focus at the same time. In addition, following Egetenmeyer [2015, p. 17], we also subsume studies focussing questions of supra- and transnational character under the heading of international comparative adult education. (Chap. 10, p. 182, emphasis added)

In the above statement, the authors engage in a two-folded process of conceptual adjustment that is at the same time reductive and incremental in nature. It is reductive as intra-national comparisons are left out of the picture, whereas it is incremental as trans-national and supra-national comparisons are drawn into the picture. But, as Radaelli (2002) warns us, incremental approaches are *de facto* "conceptual stretching[s]". In the statement under consideration here, the inter-national quality of a comparative study is taken so as to account also for two additional qualities (i.e., supra-national and trans-national); qualities, however, that remain indeterminate in this statement. This two-folded conceptual adjustment brings with it some complications.

11.2.1   Conceptual Degreeism and a Qualifier's Intrinsic Features but Nonunanimous Interpretation

Firstly, the statement suffers of conceptual "degreeism" (Sartori 1991), in the sense that it no longer distinguishes between two or more qualities (i.e., inter-national, trans-national, supra-national) of comparative studies in adult education, but addresses the entire range of studies that all three qualities (taken together) cover. Two aspects, however, complicate the picture. On the one hand, terms like international, supra-national, and trans-national point at intrinsically distinctive features. On the other hand, the term inter-national, particularly, is far from being unanimously interpreted. For instance, in debating "overlap and ambiguity" between

scholarly communities that mark their field of work and/or belonging within Comparative and International Education through different labels, Bray (2010) notes that 'international' education

> has perhaps an even weaker sense of internal cohesion [when rivalled to comparative education]. Some writers […] use the term international education to describe the work of international schools and such bodies as the International Baccalaureate Organization (for example, Cambridge and Thompson 2004; Hill 2007). Others link the term to promotion of intercultural understanding through student exchanges, internationalisation of textbooks, and operation of international organisations such as United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (for example, Husén 1994). (Ibid, p. 714)

But the term inter-national can also capture the dissemination of educational ideas and institutions from one country to another.[1]

The terms 'trans-national' and 'supra-national' are equally far from building consensus in Comparative and International Education scholarship. Technically, the former refers to things that outspread or operate across national boundaries, whereas the latter captures things that have an influence or power that outdoes national boundaries or governments. Both concepts have been extensively used since the turn of the twenty-first century, especially among scholars researching the effects of globalisation processes on education policy developments, from a political-economic position, and with a strong emphasis on neo-liberal globalisation (see, for instance, Dale 2000, 2006; Dale and Robertson 2009).

A few years back, Moutsios (2010, p. 123, emphasis added) argued that "power in education policy lies in a *transnational* space of economic and political rule", further clarifying that

> […] this space is not inter-national, in the traditional sense, as major policies are no longer made in the context of clearly distinguished relations between nation states; nor is it supra-national, as policies are not made above or beyond nation states. It is a trans-national space, instituted and sustained by nation states, international organisations, inter-state entities and global corporations, and in which policies and discourses cross borders and flow in and out of the nation states' arenas of power […] (Ibid. 2010, p. 122)

In line with this way of thinking, the focus on 'trans-national' phenomena in Comparative and International Education research is mostly evident in education policy studies, and encompasses attention to the role of intergovernmental organisations and transnational corporations and/or advocacy groups. In the meantime, reference to 'supra-national' phenomena has been abandoned, also thanks to an expanded scholarship on so called global education policy (Verger et al. 2013; Ball 2012; Mundy et al. 2016; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). This fully acknowledges,

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[1] See for instance, Nordvall 2018, on the spread of Nordic folk high schools in countries as diverse as Japan, US, Bangladesh and Tanzania. Here the authors showcase as the travelling of an educational idea (i.e. the Nordic folk high schools) can travel from a country to another through different dissemination patterns: (1) through migration (i.e., when migrants from a Nordic country establishes a folk high school in the new country of residence), (2) through inspiration (when indigenous people learn about the Nordic concept of folk high schools), and (3) through persuasion (when people from the Nordic countries convince indigenous people to establish in their local contexts folk high schools based on the Nordic model).

as Moutsious (2010) rightly points out, that education policy is not made *above or beyond* nation states or governments. A point I subscribe to and have recently reiterated and argued for, when it comes to both publically-funded adult education (Milana 2017b), and the privatization of much adult education and learning provision today, which results from governmental deregulation (or deliberate lack of regulation).

By contrast, reference to 'supra-national' phenomena is still popular among some adult education scholars engaging in comparative studies (and the teaching of it) (Egetenmeyer 2016; Lima and Guimarães 2011; Lima et al. 2016). Here the term is used to refer to the policy influence exerted by the institutions of the European Union (EU), as if their composition and mode of operation were above and beyond national governments. In reality, national governments are *de facto* represented, and hold differential power in each of these institutions (Klatt 2014).

11.2.2   Flacking vs. Connecting Qualifiers, and Internal Conceptual Coherence

Secondly, flanking the two qualifiers 'international' and 'comparative', instead of linking them through the conjunction 'and' in International Comparative Adult Education, brings further complication to the two-folded conceptual adjustment above mentioned. In fact, the use of 'and' as a function word (as in Comparative *and* International Education) indicates a connection between things or matters that belong to the same class, type or position. It is such recognition of sameness among research fields that allows for these to be 'commonly paired' even if holding 'overlapping identities', as it is the case with international education and comparative education (Bray 2010). Whereas the simple flanking of qualifiers, with no connecting words (e.g. International Comparative Adult Education), bears further complications in that it does not distinguishes between 'international' and 'comparative' as two idiosyncratic qualities of adult education.

Moreover, when Field, Künzel and Schemmann apply an historical perspective to propose "a model of phases to explain the development of comparative adult education research" (Chap. 10, p. 182) one is left with the impression of a double understanding of the term 'international'. One points at the promotion of reciprocal exchanges and understandings about adult education, and its institutions, in different countries, facilitated by cross-national comparisons, organisation of conferences with wide-reaching audiences, and establishment of academic and professional communities operating across national borders. Another points at the leadership of intergovernmental organizations like the EU or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in planning, designing and managing large-scale surveys, analysing data and publishing results, and, last but not least, assisting governments in the systemic reforms of their adult education systems.

Notwithstanding the above, the authors no longer speak of International Comparative Adult Education (emphasis added), but of Comparative Adult Education when they discuss the results of their historical analysis, and offer a number of these "as a contribution to debate about the future purpose, nature and organisation of comparative adult education" (Chap. 10, p. 199).

This, however, creates some ambiguity, and raises an issue of conceptual stability, for at least two reasons. Firstly, Comparative Adult Education, as captured also in Charters' definition, includes more than cross-country comparisons! Secondly, theses derived from observations about the development of International Comparative Adult Education (as framed by the authors), may only partially, if at all, hold the same validity when applied to Comparative Adult Education *tout court*.

Moreover, both the supra-national and trans-national qualities that the authors include in their definition have been only marginally considered in their full depth and breath. For the most, they limit attention to the role of two intergovernmental organisations, the EU and the OECD, in designing, coordinating and publishing results of large-scale cross-national surveys. But this, as several authors argue (e.g. Lawn and Grek 2012; Lawn and Normand 2015), points at more complex infrastructures that have being developed as the result of joint efforts by national governments and other policy actors. Such infrastructures, made of data, benchmarks, indicators and algorithms, tend towards country harmonisation in the collection and interpretation of data on education systems and their outputs, and on people's skills. All of which has the scope of supporting *domestic* or national policy reforms, and this independently on whether these countries are geographically near to each other, like in Europe, or even member states of a given intergovernmental organization (e.g. EU, OECD).

Following these conceptual clarifications, Comparative Adult Education represents an area of research that: (1) Focuses on topics of concern for adult education (but also adult learning), *but* (2) Investigates such topics through comparisons that go beyond simple descriptions and/or juxtaposition of features, thus hold analytical depth aimed at understanding, comprehending or explaining similarities and differences.

Such investigations may compare two or more "situations" (in Charters' words) between or within countries, and hence *might* identify the country, or other functional geographical, cultural or political containers, as their primary unit of analysis. However, such a definition, although faithful to its historical roots, leaves out an important research area that, investigating adult education policy and governance in adult education and learning, does not strictly engage with comparisons by-the-book, yet addresses issues and concerns that are trans-national in nature, and reflect global trends. So in the next section I bring into the debate on Comparative Adult Education also that body of work that acknowledges and researches political globalisation and its effects on adult education and learning policy, systems, provision, and learners' identities, to which I refer to as Global *and* Comparative Adult Education research (Milana 2018).

11.3 Global *and* Comparative Adult Education Research on Policy

Derived from the Latin noun *globus* (through French), 'global' refers first and foremost to a spherical or rounded object (e.g. the earth), and by abstraction to what relates to or encompasses the whole of a system (e.g. the world). Education policy researchers use the term to pinpoint at political, economic and ideological pressures on education worldwide, and this despite variation in national approaches to educational policy (Carnoy 2016). It is in this sense that I use the term. Accordingly, Global *and* Comparative Adult Education Research on policy encompass those studies of worldwide pressures on adult education policy, at times combined with comparisons "in two or more situations", but not necessarily across-countries. As such, as I argue elsewhere (Milana 2018) Global *and* Comparative Adult Education research constitutes a visible (though not well organised) corpus of scholarship that shares: (a) an interest on political decisions affecting adult education and learning; (b) an understanding that adult education and learning opportunities are intrinsically dependent from governmental regulation, deregulation or lack of regulation; and (c) a belief that changes in adult education systems and learning opportunities are moved by compound organised communities and governing systems.

In order to problematise the comparative dimension in Global *and* Comparative Adult Education research on policy, I examined the (overt or hidden) primary units of analysis and scope of 58 scholarly publications (largely articles in international peer-reviewed journals published between 2000 and 2015). A meta-analysis, based on an inductive strategy, led to the identification of four fairly consistent and logical configurations, or research patterns (Milana 2018).

Briefly said, the first pattern captures historical accounts that describe changes and evolutions along a temporal continuum, for instance in the thinking about adult education and learning by the 'big actors' in education governance, like the World Bank, UNESCO, the OECD and the EU (e.g. Lee et al. 2008; Lee and Friedrich 2011). This points at external factors that impact on normative, administrative and financial changes in adult education and learning opportunities in different contexts, but pays little attention to internal (national) factors. The second pattern engages with (horizontal) comparisons of policies by different actors, at a given point in time or through history. It often uses geographical and/or geopolitical lenses to study the complexity of national or inter-national policy, and its practical implications for adult education and learning (e.g. Storan 2010). At times, it studies political actors with a inter-national reach, examines changes in the governance of adult education and learning, assesses the working of specific policy tools, and debates the potential implications for adult education and learning opportunities (e.g. Easton and Samples 2015; Milana 2012; Németh 2015; Tuckett 2015). Such body of work engages with the complexity of global governance in adult education, and the interplay between local-global dynamics, but it has overlooked the potentials for deeper investigations

of within-country power relations, for instance, between levels of government and between state, market and civil society. The third pattern juxtaposes (vertically) policies by intergovernmental organisations with policies by member states to assess convergence and/or divergence and stresses the impact that global policy-relevant events and publications have at either national or regional levels (e.g., Milana 2016; Rubenson and Nesbit 2011). At times it focuses on a political notion introduced and/or sustained by international organizations, and how it concretises within specific national contexts (e.g., Cavaco et al. 2014; Papastamatis and Panitsidou 2009; Plant and Turner 2005). Overall it points at the raising (and falling) of political notions, and their translations into new educational models, services or provisions, yet leaving underexplored questions such as whether, and to what extent, local and national systems of governance influence the working of inter-national and global systems, etc. Finally, the fourth pattern collates contributions that draw on available body of facts or information (i.e., evidence), so as to question and provide counter-evidence for widespread political beliefs (e.g. Ahmed 2010, on the idea that lifelong learning will contrast the effects of the 2009 global financial crisis; Preece 2009, on the ideas that lifelong learning promotes country development, independently from the country's position in the world system).

What is worth noting here, is that the main unit of analysis in all of the above studies is rarely (if at all) the country, but rather *time* (pattern one), *space* (pattern two), or *systems* (pattern three) (Bray et al. 2014); whereas the background or justification for all work falling under the fourth pattern was found in *political beliefs*. Yet in those patterns that best fit the definition of Comparative Adult Education, as researchers engaged in horizontal comparisons (pattern two) or vertical juxtapositions leading to analytical results (pattern three), countries and other territorially bound entities like continents (e.g. Europe), or their sub-national divisions (e.g. administrative regions), were often retained as secondary units of analysis. This should come with no surprise, as territorially bound systems of governance, though not the solely, are still relevant containers for domestic policy developments, as also testified by recent developments in international relations. It may suffix here to consider the triggering of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on March 29, 2017 by the British government, which began the legal process for the country's formal exit (in 2-year time) from the EU.

Further, as Field, Künzel and Schemmann (Chap. 10) appropriately note, since the mid 1990s there has been an increase of large-scale surveys that 'compare' adult education and learning systems and opportunities or their outputs in terms of adult skills across countries in specific regions (e.g. the Adult Education Survey– AES in Europe), or world around (e.g. the International Adult Literacy Survey – IALS in 1994, 1996, 1998, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills -Survey – ALLS in 2003, 2006, 2008, the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Skills – PIAAC in 2008–2013, 2012–2016, 2016-ongoing). The authors now acknowledge a point I had raised in my previous response to their work (Milana 2017a), namely that adult education researchers celebrate all this as, among other reasons, it makes available a rich set of micro data, which can be further interrogated through secondary-data

analyses for different purposes. Further, availability of such sets of data for an ever-expanding number of countries, as it is the case with PIAAC, is equally celebrated for making cross-country comparisons really global, thus going beyond what could else be termed *methodological continentalism*, or research that favours empirical research and knowledge accumulation about countries within a continent (e.g. Europe). Yet, the authors underestimate the dual nature (technical insomuch as political) of large-scale cross-country surveys under the auspices of intergovernmental organisations (Gorur 2017). So, for instance, PIAAC institutionalises the practice of assessing adults' skills at country level, but what a skill is, and how it can be measured and assessed depends on the adopted operational definitions, tests, and psychometric paradigm for its design, analysis, and scoring. Moreover, through a number of techniques (e.g. comparative graphics, score boards, descriptive reports, executive summaries and so on) PIAAC mediates between values (e.g. what count as a 'skilled' adult, population, nation) and perceptions (e.g. whether an adult, population or national is high- or low-skilled).

Obviously in this kind of surveys, the main unit of comparative analysis remains the country for at least two reasons. On the one hand, national governments are those that invest money and research resources and capacities in data gathering within well-defined geographical territories. On the other hand, it is in the interest of intergovernmental organisations, under which auspices such surveys are designed and run, to advice national governments on public reforms of their national education systems insomuch as of their labour, welfare and economic systems.

Additionally, territorially bound units of analysis, even when assumed as primary units, are not necessarily to reproduce traditional systems of governance, as demonstrated by an on-going comparative study on *Policies Supporting Young People in their Life Course* (http://www.young-adulllt.eu/), where a unit of comparison across countries is the 'functional region' (FR):

> a sub-division of territories that result from the spatial differentiation and organisation of social and economic relations rather than to geographical boundaries and particularities or to historical developments […] Thus, a FR can be described as a territorial unit which may be defined as a central place and the surrounding places affected by it defined by business or economic activities […] Even though there are some incompatibilities with territorial and/or administrative regions, in most cases FRs do provide the basis for understanding regional disparities, planning and implementing labour market and economic policies […] FRs which are regarded as autonomous units can take different shapes or types and different inner patterns of interaction, since any kind of spatial flow or interaction can organize this region. (Parreira do Amaral and Kotthoff n.y., n.p.)

In short, territorially bound units of analysis (e.g. countries or any of their territorial subdivisions) still are key for Comparative Adult Education research *for* policy, such as the large-scale surveys under the auspices of intergovernmental organisations; whereas they rarely (if at all) are so for Global and Comparative Adult Education research *on* policy, as defined thus far. Nonetheless, more often than not in these kinds of studies, territorially bound units still represent secondary units of analysis.

11.4 The Challenges of Comparative Adult Education Research on Policy *Through* Country Comparisons

What I have argued thus far supports the observation by Field, Künzel and Schemmann (Chap. 10) that

> The challenge of redefining and developing the field of CAE research in the light of changing conditions – within the research community as within the wider world – remains an important one. Recognizing limitations and tensions is an essential part of that ongoing process. (Chap. 10, p. 200)

No doubt this is an important process within the adult education research community. At the same time, the appropriateness of using territorially bound units of analysis remains a core issue for Global and Comparative Adult Education research on policy, and even more so when researchers engage in empirical studies on the implications that policy developments have for adult education practice. Consequently they are forced to engage with questions such as: How can one best capture the complexities of adult education policy within and above single countries? How can one carry out comparative policy analyses across time, space and culture that recognise the various ideational, material and institutional forms that adult education entails around the world?

In spite of continuous advances in adult education scholarship to conceptualise and theorise its very object of study in terms of learning processes, educational programs, social projects, and political efforts, constant alterations of the wider socio-economic and political conditions for adult education policy developments call for equal (if not stronger) efforts to improve the qualitative methodologies to investigate adult education policy *through* country comparisons.

In fact, we live in times where evidence-based policymaking has turned into the new mantra, as also testified by the report by the European Commission, EACEA and Eurydice (2017) *Support Mechanisms for Evidence-based Policy-Making in Education*. Following Davies (1999, p. 109), the report frames evidence-based policy-making as what "helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation." Among what helps is research-based knowledge, or knowledge produced through *empirical* research – research that is done upon empirical observations or data purposely collected to answer particular questions.

The reader may be familiar with the famous quote by William Edwards Deming (often cited by Andreas Schleicher, the Director for Education and Skills at the OECD): "Without data, you're just another person with an opinion". Deming was an American engineer and statistician; so it is reasonable to assume that the data he refers to were primarily of a numerical nature. Yet, it is a misconception of much research *for* policy to equate statistical data to evidence. As a matter of fact, the term *evidence* indicates "the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid" (Oxford Dictionaries Online, n.p.). But this

does not reduce available facts or information, nor empirical observations or data, to *statistics*.

Independently from the type of data academics handle, in the social sciences knowledge production is neither neutral nor value-free; this is because knowledge production involves not only scientific and technical knowledge, but also a number of judgments and decisions that the researcher makes – either consciously or unconsciously (Flyvebjerg 2001). In either type of empirical research, quantitative as well as qualitative, many judgments and decisions are embedded in the concepts and theories the researcher employs, as well as in the heuristic models and tools s/he uses to make the data 'speak'. But more judgments and decisions are entrenched in the research architecture for the empirical study s/he carries out.

Having acknowledged this, and because of the complexities of adult education policy making today, three methodological challenges are worth special attention when one engages in empirical research on adult education policy *through* qualitative country comparisons.

11.4.1   The Researcher's Positioning

The first methodological challenge the researcher must confront is whether, and to what extent s/he is fully aware of own ontological and epistemological positioning when s/he engages with empirical investigations of adult education policy. But also to what extent s/he is effective in making her/his positioning unambiguous when communicating about her/his research findings.

Most often researchers believe that positioning the self within an acknowledged 'paradigm' (Kuhn 1962) will suffix. But, as Schwandt (2001) observes, although the notion of paradigm offers "convenient conceptual shorthand for pointing to apparently significant differences in methodologies" (Ibid., p. 183), it remains unclear in its very definition, and even more opaque when it comes to clarifying ontological and epistemological matters. In fact, even clear reference to a certain paradigm as acknowledged in the literature within a discipline or scholarly community still raises critical issues in terms of: (1) what such paradigm comprises/does not comprise; hence (2) what beliefs, assumptions, values and methods are or are not shared among researchers committed to different paradigms; and last, but not least, (3) how paradigms are socially and politically constituted (Schwandt 2001, p. 184). Let me illustrate this point with an example. Creswell (2007), likewise Guba and Lincoln (1994), identifies, for instance, socio constructivism as a paradigm. At the same time Creswell (2007) positions critical theory among interpretative communities that are distinguished from (and not clearly related to) paradigms, whereas Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify critical theory as one paradigm. In sum, 'labelling' where one stands, as a researcher, is not enough. But where one stands is key, as it is own positioning that makes the researcher accountable for what s/he does – including accountable for the validity and reliability of the methodologies s/he employs.

For instance, my own position tends towards sociological realism as I understand the real world as made of a combination of the domain of the empirical – or what human beings experience, the domain of the actual – or what happens, and the mechanisms that make things happen (Collier 2011). Yet, the social world at any given point in time, as Archer (2011, p. 67) poses it, is an emergent entity of "myrial agentical "doings" (including thinking, believing and imagining)". So it is people's strategic and intentional actions that re-elaborate past cultural and structural conditions that generate (often unintended) consequences, which produce the observable outcomes we call *facts*.

In a recent study of mine on transformations in adult education public policy (Milana 2017b), one of the observable outcomes of invisible cultural and structural elaboration was the institution of adult education as a subsystem of state education in different countries. As an emergent social reality, its features can be summarised in the existence of real sites where human beings with certain characteristics (e.g. age, educational attainment, literacy capacities) interact with others, supposedly to teach or educate them. But the properties and power of such subsystem varied in the countries under consideration (i.e., Argentina, Brazil, Italy, and the USA), and within each of them; so do the social positioning of the population whose motivation and strategic action aims towards maintenance or change of this sub-system.

In sum, at ontological and epistemological level, I argue for overcoming the impasse of getting caught into a paradigm controversy, or even a paradigm war, yet as a researcher one ought always to clarify her/his worldview of what s/he studies – alias where s/he stands, to the audiences s/he addresses. Too often this is either taken for granted, or treated as an unnecessary addendum that may as well be silenced without consequences.

11.4.2 Validating the Selection of Countries

The second methodological challenge a researcher must confront is whether, and at which conditions, are country comparisons relevant to investigate adult education policy. In other words, if one acknowledges the changing environments for adult education policy developments (as mentioned in the introduction), as characterised by the weakening of central governments power and the strengthening of inter-institutional, international or multi-level governance, what is the *tertium comparationis?*

For instance, in the above-mentioned study on transformations in public adult education policy (Milana 2017b), both Brazil and Argentina have public education systems that, at national level, recognise adult education as a distinct teaching modality across different types and levels of formal education. In Italy, even if not lawfully defined as such, only adult basic and secondary education (i.e., basic literacy and education up to secondary school levels for out-of-school youth and

adults) hold a similar status. By contrast, in the USA, where no centralised education system exists, adult education is by federal law a social service catering to certain populations. Further, when it comes to its provision, adult basic and secondary education may be under the aegis of state-run schools, like in Italy, municipal-run educational institutions, as in the USA, or both state- and municipal-run schools and a number of other educational settings, in partnerships with civil society organisations, and the workers' unions, like in Brazil and Argentina. Yet what made the policies of these countries *comparable* was the balance between, on the one hand, the degree to which these countries were similar or different, and on the one hand, the type of resemblance or discrepancy they showcased.

Now, the problem is that when one engages in multi-sited research, both qualities, namely the degree and the type of likeness and unlikeness, is what turn truly visible through comparisons, so it can be fully apprehended only *ex post*; whereas what makes this knowledge valid and worthwhile pursing precedes the analyses, because it is concerned with what the researchers decides to include (or not to include) *ex ante* in her/his study. There is a paradox here.

Further complicating the picture is that when one applies for research funding s/he ought to decide *ex ante* the countries to be included in a study, and is asked to justify in details the reasons behind such decision.

In the above-mentioned study (Milana 2017b), for instance, the *tertium comparationis* or comparable quality across countries as diverse as Argentina, Brazil, Italy, and the USA, was the state's direct intervention in adult education at the time of carrying out the study, notwithstanding the form through which it materialised, namely through funding schemes with a start and an end-date to which individual states (Brazil) or provinces (Argentina) could voluntarily partake, or state-wide massive structural reforms that left no discretionary decisions for the administrative powers operating at either regional (Italy) or urban (USA) scales. But these countries were carefully selected so as to showcase both likeness and unlikeness in relation to a number of criteria, which were consistent with my worldviews on adult education policy. Thus, for instance, I was concerned with the geopolitical positioning of a country, its level of economic development and its international recognition as a major economy; and the country's long-term membership of intergovernmental organisations that contribute to policy developments in adult education (e.g. the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the European Union, the Organisation of Ibero-American States). At the same time, I was equally concerned with the state form and administrative organisation of a country, the degree of institutionalisation of public adult education, the literacy level of the country's populations; and, in the case of Latin America, also with the country's colonial history (e.g. whether it had been under Spanish or Portuguese power).

In sum, when a researcher engages in country comparisons opportunistic reasons may at times be inescapable, but it is what constitute the *tertium comparationis*, as well as the criteria for country selection, that still allow for valid and significant research on adult education policy *through* qualitative country comparisons.

11.4.3 Comparing Country- and Cultural-Sensitive Units of Analysis

Again, if one acknowledges the changing environments for adult education policy developments, the third methodological challenge one must confront is what constitutes secondary units of analysis, and to which extent are these units 'comparable', yet in ways that preserve 'etic' connotations, namely that safeguard the cultural characterisation of the phenomena being studied (Pike 1967).

Adult education as a habitual or established practice has developed over centuries worldwide; thus, national-specific histories are inherently entangled in wider social, political and cultural phenomena, and the changes experienced by individual countries and, in some cases, entire regions. This accounts for both similarities as well as differences in pedagogical traditions that coexist within, and most evidently across, countries. However, with the quantification of facts or information that occurs when one reduces phenomenological complexity, and the obsession with 'data reduction', large and thick body of knowledge is often trivialised.

When one engages in multi-sited research both country- and culture-specific knowledge is needed for the identification of secondary units of analysis that allow 'thick' cross-country comparisons. Similarly to the country selection, however, truly valid and significant comparisons require attentiveness to country and culture-specific knowledge, which is acquired *through* research.

For example, in the above-mentioned study (Milana 2017b), and despite definitional problems, the main unit of analysis was adult basic and secondary education, although this kind of public provision is differently defined by law, it takes up different forms, and is under the aegis of different stakeholders. Hence in order to investigate adult basic and secondary education as an emergent and observable reality in each of the countries under consideration, I first had to zoom in, by assuming an etic (or insider) perspective, to discover which practice was a local (e.g. country-specific) instance of adult basic and secondary education. Only building on this knowledge it was then possible to zoom out, by assuming an emic (or outsider) perspective, that requires a certain degree of abstraction (cf. Crossley et al. 2016), but is equally essential for the identification of secondary units of analysis.

So the prospects to identifying secondary units of analysis that are comparable at the same time as country- and culture-sensitive depend on the researcher's capacity to engage in a constant dance between etic and emic perspectives; a capacity that is highly dependent on at least two factors: the researchers physical placement or displacement, and her/his degree of familiarity or unfamiliarity with indigenous knowledge.

Referring back of the above-mentioned study (Milana 2017b) as an example, my knowledge about the Argentinean, Brazilian, Northern American and Italian adult education systems, and their urban concretisations, were gained through access to formalised legal descriptors, people's oral or written accounts, on-site interactions, class observations, and field notes from the locations in which these systems materialise, an so on. However, my physical placement (or displacement)

as well as degree of familiarity (or unfamiliarity) with indigenous linguistic, historical and cultural knowledge relativised my comprehension of the facts subject to knowledge acquisition. For instance, I was born and raised in Italy, but I had been living abroad and using English as my working language for several years at the time of starting this study. Further, I mastered Spanish as a second language but had just engaged with the learning of Brazilian Portuguese. While carrying out the study, I relocated to the USA, from where I travelled time an again to Argentina and Brazil. Then I returned to Europe, and went back and forth between Denmark and Italy. All of this exposed me to different cultural and linguistic interpretations of adult education, gave me differential access to relevant scientific literature, and made me interact with diverse scientific and professional communities. Whenever possible, I discussed theories, concepts and the adult education practices I had been observing with both insiders and outsiders of the sub-systems under investigation, and with insiders and outsiders of the different geopolitical and socio-cultural territories I was constantly, literally, border crossing. Hence, I joined in and out various social worlds, with their scientific conceptualisations, languages and artefacts that (either consciously or unconsciously) have influenced both my empirical access to adult education policy and the abstractions I used to make sense of it.

Briefly put it, when one studies adult education policy *through* qualitative country comparisons, both factors (i.e. physical placement/displacement, and familiarity/unfamiliarity with indigenous knowledge) should be a matter of concern first and foremost at the time of *designing* the study. But preoccupation with both factors should never leave the researcher *throughout fieldwork*… and beyond.

11.5   Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have argued in favour of using Comparative Adult Education to define that area of research that centres attention on topics of concern for adult education (and learning) through comparisons, which uses analytical depth to understand, comprehend or explain similarities and differences in two or more "situations", between or within countries. Thus those studies that assume the country as their main unit of comparative analysis represent a sub-area of Comparative Adult Education research, and may be better addressed as cross-country comparisons in adult education.

But, I also argued that the above definition of Comparative Adult Education does not apply well enough to all those studies that address trans-national issues and concerns, by researching policy and governance in adult education and learning, and which do not necessarily run by-the-book comparisons. Thus, I suggested that Global *and* Comparative Adult Education Research might be a most suitable label for such kind of policy studies that, although assuming a comparative mind-set, tend towards making time, space or systems (if not political beliefs) their may units of analysis.

Now, when we consider the full breath and depth of global *and* comparative adult education studies that differently acknowledge political globalisation, we are thus forced to rethinking the multiplicity of unit*s* of comparative analysis that can help such endeavour.

While the primary units of analysis may go well beyond territorially bound units like the country or any of its territorial sub-division, these remains nonetheless relevant secondary units of analysis. However, to engage in Comparative Adult Education research on policy *through* country comparisons do raise methodological challenges that need to be carefully considered rather than trivialised. In addition to territorially bound units reflecting traditional systems of governance, we are forced to think of alternative sub-divisions of the territories under consideration, so as to account also spatial relations that go beyond governmental ones, such as social and economic relations.

So, in response to Field, Künzel and Schemmann's question "has the chapter of comparative adult education now closed? (Chap. 10, p. 199) my short answer is: No. We should rather conceive the present as a 'transformation' phase, where the institutionalisation of Comparative Adult Education has substantially abandoned its 'international' dimension in favour of a trans-national one, and for this reason I suggest here Global *and* Comparative Adult Education Research as perhaps better capturing the multiplicity of research trends and traditions that co-exist today, and which:

- Adopt a comparative perspective or mind-set, yet are not confined to comparing countries (as, for instance, in the 'reductive' interpretation of cross-country large scale surveys), or consider its very object of study (adult education and learning) as what results of things that have an influence or power that outdoes national boundaries or governments (cf. my earlier critique of the term 'supra-national', when subsumed in International Comparative Adult Education research);
- Are faithful to Charters' focus on comparing "situations", yet such situations are differently conceptualised and framed so as to adapt to the study of adult education and learning as a social phenomenon, which is itself in transition.

To conclude, today Comparative Adult Education research done within the academia and by independent researchers and/or research institutes co-exists with cross-country comparisons in adult education under the aegis of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organisations and their statistical agencies, as well as policy concultancy firms, among other interests groups. Yet, under this condition, in response to Field, Künzel and Schemmann's final query: "How can we move on to make a case for CAE that goes beyond learner participation and individual competences?" (Chap. 10, p. 200) my answer is: By keeping advancing, both theoretically and methodologically. Yet to take advantage of such opportunities, adult education researchers shall escape the trap of either imposing or rejecting the country as their main unit of comparative analysis. Rather we shall engage in deeper considerations of what unit*s* of analysis would best serve comparative research aspirations, clarify their hierarchical order, and how they relate to each others. Moreover, both qualitative and quantitative researchers should recognise and make it recogni-

sable to other: where they stand (e.g. the researcher's positioning), why they (still) think meaningful comparing countries, and specifically the once they do compare (e.g. validating the selection of countries), and how they secure that the analysis they perform *through* country comparisons are country- and cultural-sensitive.

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