Methodological Challenges for Comparative Research Into Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we examine the methodological presuppositions underlying comparative research into higher education. We begin by criticizing the familiar, external approaches to comparing nationally differentiated higher education systems, on the basis of structural-functional or system theory. We then argue in favour of the power-source analysis developed mainly by Michael Mann (1986), and from this basis offer a modified general model of social dynamics, with the aim of achieving a better insight into the methodologically critical areas of comparative educational research. For comparative social research, it is inadequate merely to model educational systems; we also need to locate historicity and explicate the key events, the moments of “switching” (to borrow Max Weber’s metaphor of the “switchen of history”) when higher education, for instance, took its subsequent direction. What we propose as methods appropriate for a comparative, historically aware sociological analysis of higher education, drawn from the armoury of qualitative research, are research strategies under the “casing” label but there is no sense in an exclusive polarization with quantitative research. The aim of the research approach outlined here is to generate theoretically articulated, but above all meaningful and useful descriptions of the reality of higher education. What we are particularly interested in is the theory of social power, from a methodological standpoint based on the principle of sufficient reason.

KEYWORDS: methodology, comparative research, higher education, power source analysis, historical key events, sociology of education.

The Limitations of Systemic Thinking

The traditions in comparative research into higher education are not very firm. Where commensurate statistical data are available for different countries, it has been common to compare indicators describing educational organizations, student and staff numbers, or financial resources. Alternatively, higher education policy
can be analyzed through official educational policy documents, legislation, white papers, and so on. In practice, however, it is far from simple even to develop cross-nationally comparable methods of defining, and describing, higher education systems, with their different institutional organization and practices.

All too easily, the most interesting and important points for research and comparison are concealed by superficial indicators, and investigation achieves no more than to scratch at higher education's surface manifestations.

In most cases, the indicators produce fragmentary and limited abstract information, which does not allow for a comprehensive description of procedural changes, far less for explication. In this kind of research, it has often been difficult or impossible to operate with theoretical concepts or to attempt even firm generalizations. With a view to the future of research, therefore, we need to get away from a situation where individual variables are compared disparately without reference to theoretical links and/or fundamental contextual factors.

Theories with a strong functional bias (from Durkheim, 1964 and Parsons, 1967 to the various system theories) have tended to regard human society as if it were a universal systemic constant. Nationally specific, divergent societies have been forced into societal moulds of assumed universal validity. Structural functionalism in the Parsons tradition, in particular, reduces higher education to the status of one of the many pre-ordained functional subsystems of the societal totality. Similarly, the inherently significant latent functions and dysfunctions identifiable using the functionalist approach (Merton, 1937) have too readily been seen as mechanically generated by their structural contexts. Society has been conceived in terms of pseudo-rational, mutually supportive, and complementary levels, subsystems and dimensions (cf. Heiskala, 1994).

The system theory approach has been a relatively widely used method for carrying out comparative educational research, and Margaret Archer (1979, 1989) for example, has also adopted a systemic approach. While emphasizing the systemic autonomy of education, in her comparisons of national educational systems she also pays serious attention to the social origins of the systems. Archer (1989, p. 243) also appeals strongly to Fritz Ringer (1979) who suggests that "an educational system is at least partly an autonomous element in the total society, not just an adjunct of more decisive processes or institutions" (p. 2). In approaching the explication of educational expansion, therefore, Archer rejects the ways in which Human Capital Theory, Consumption Theory, Modernization Theory, Political Integration Theory, Social Control Theory, or Ideological Diffusion Theory each assert some particular selected item as universally responsible for the phenomenon. The neo-Durkheimian, neo-Marxian, and neo-Weberian theorists she dismisses in similar fashion, accusing them of