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Comparative Methodology in the Era of Big Data and Global Networks

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Part 4

Context

Contextualizing "context"

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The three chapters that discuss context-sensitive methodologies are written by noted scholars, known for their intellectual engagement with the topic. They differ in terms of how they approach the topic, what examples of decontextualizing methodologies they use, and which propositions they entertain to overcome the shortcomings. What they share is a deep commitment to understanding power relations embedded in context. By contextualizing the concept of "context," they masterfully address how inequalities may be brought to light methodologically. Unsurprisingly, all the authors of the three chapters are, so to speak, "culturalistically" inclined, albeit with a varied degree of kinship to schools of thought in cultural anthropology and political economy. Finally, they selectively borrow key concepts of Actor-Network Theory to show that we have to move beyond the traditional notion of context as a location or space, and rather investigate meaning-making, or meaning-concealing, respectively, embedded in context.

Those who understand versus those who compare?

Any attempt to contextualize the authors' contextualization of context requires a reflection on how demands for contextualized research have changed over time, why they have been made and by whom. More concretely, a few observations on history, disciplinary orientations and paradigm shifts may be in order here. More than in other fields of educational research, the regard for context, or rather the disregard thereof, has been a perennial and recurring theme in comparative education research. Comparative education researchers have been concerned for the past 200 years or so[1] with whether the establishment of comparability – by asking the same set of questions or nowadays by using the identical set of indicators – is a normative science with unintended homogenizing effects. For the longest time or, to be precise, until the 1960s, the perennial question was anathema because it was settled in a disciplinary manner: cross-national comparison was carried out by historians. The inherent disciplinary proximity of historians to context gave them the necessary authorization to compare across nations, systems and contexts. This is how they compared across contexts in actual practice: The researcher first provided a historical account of educational systems and explained how systems developed over time and what societal challenges the systems responded to, only to then, in an act of

comparison, disregard the fundamental differences they previously had highlighted. Nevertheless, at the surface the historians compared and contextualized or, as we would frame it today, engaged in contextualized comparison.

The issue of contextualization, or lack thereof, became virulent in the 1960s when the field of comparative education bifurcated and scholars in the two camps engaged in boundary setting, thereby amplifying and unnecessarily dichotomizing their methodological differences. In one camp were researchers in development studies with a deep commitment to area studies and single-country studies, and in the other camp were researchers with a keen interest in cross-national comparison. The first group worked "in the field," was culture sensitive and did not compare. The second group worked in libraries, searched for general patterns to advance theory and therefore compared. The first group of single-country specialists dealt with a small "n" and many variables. For the second group that compared across contexts or countries, the inverse applied. For them, the area study specialists or development workers did not do serious "science" and were at best do-gooders, and at worst, neo-imperialists. However, prejudice existed on both sides: for area and development specialists, those who compared did not understand (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006a, 2006b).

Arguably, the outright hostility between qualitative and quantitative researchers in comparative education research is a sentiment of the past. For the past two decades, comparative education researchers did not need to apologize for, nor defend, the choice of case study methodology as their comparative method of inquiry (Little, 2000). In fact, nowadays the majority of publications in *Comparative Education Review*, the journal of the Comparative and International Education Society, are one-country studies rather than cross-national comparisons.

More than 50 years later, the camp of scholars engaged in quantitative comparative researchers has become vast. Whether they use global indicators to monitor national development, apply standardized tests for large-scale student assessment, amass information to find universal patterns, or compare everything and everybody against standards and benchmarks, their project of datafication of society has reached an unprecedented scale. It is in today's environment of excessive datafication and uncontrolled algorithmization that the longstanding call for context and culture sensitivity has regained prominence.

Propositions on bringing back context

The authors of the three chapters pay tribute to theories that advance a critical understanding of context. Their foci and their propositions on how to overcome decontextualization, however, differ.

Perhaps the most compelling examples of decontextualization are the ones presented in the chapter written by Susan L. Robertson. She uncovers masterfully how platform infrastructures of Wikipedia, Coursera, LinkedIn and other digital platforms in higher education collect and sell information. More specifically, she introduces the platform as a new kind of organizational form which is currently black-boxed in such a way to conceal the new and very different way value is created

(Robertson, Chapter 10). In effect, the decontextualized usage of data is what makes these enterprises lucrative: individuals voluntarily enter information on themselves for a specific purpose that is later sold to others for other purposes. The algorithmic systems that govern the varied platforms are complex and only intelligible to very few experts and machines, elevating them thereby to an uncontestable stature.

Similar to Susan Robertson, Lesley Bartlett and Frances Vavrus explicitly contribute to methodological studies on "critical comparison." Their intellectual project is to advance critical comparison; that is, to compare in ways that enable us to lay bare, and reflect on, power relations. They compellingly argue for qualitative research, ethnography and case study research. In concert with Peter Demerath, who sees qualitative educational research as "a science of context" (Demerath, 2006, p. 101), Bartlett and Vavrus reflect on the meaning of context in an era of technology and global interconnectedness. For example, they present the term "context collapse," which was initially used by Wetsch to describe phenomena such as YouTube in which the potential context suddenly "includes everyone who has or will have access to the internet" (Wetsch, 2009, p. 99; cited in chapter 11). Similarly, the effect of collapsing contexts is a key feature of Twitter. In this chapter, Bartlett and Vavrus frame their well-known work on multi-sited ethnography and the comparative case study (vertical, horizontal and transversal axes of a case study) against the backdrop of Actor-Network Theory and science and technology studies.

Finally, the chapter by Nelli Piattoeva, Anni Klutas and Olli Suominen also draws on concepts from Actor-Network Theory to examine their role as editors and cultural translators of traveling ideas. Their self-reflecting writing style is an example of contextualization *par excellence*. Their chapter starts out with a brief personal account of the context in which the idea for studying the phenomenon emerged. They end their chapter with a critique of the commonsensical usage of the term "context." For them, context is not a neat cube or space that surrounds the object of study but rather "contextualization [is] a resourceful means of acting upon the world" (Piattoeva et al., Chapter 12).

The perennial epistemological question of whether the method of comparison – notably comparison across nations, systems, or cases – requires a level of abstraction and decontextualization that precludes a consideration of cause-and-effect relations within a bounded entity ("context") has clearly experienced a revival in today's era of big data. The chapters in this part of the book make it abundantly clear that the data are only big because they were amassed across contexts. The new question therefore becomes whether context can be "brought back" at the stage of interpretation even though the data were collected or amassed in a decontextualized manner. This question is likely to remain relevant and preoccupy many of us for a while.

Note

1 If indeed Jullien de Paris's *Esquisse d'un ouvrage sur l'éducation comparée* (Plan and preliminary views for a work on comparative education), written in 1817, should be credited for having produced the first comparative education study (Cardoso & Steiner-Khamsi, 2017; Sobe, 2002).

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