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Understanding the Operation Called Comparison

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ABSTRACT – Understanding the Operation Called Comparison¹. Cultural comparison in social sciences was seen for a long time as a scientific procedure to uncover hidden structures behind the development of societies. Based on contributions from Friedrich Tenbruck and Joachim Matthes, the first part of the article comprises a critical analysis of this understanding of comparison and comparative methods. The second part presents two international research studies with an emphasis on the methodological procedures and the reasons for the development of both studies as well as the experiences gained from these projects. The significance of a comparative study is not only in the ability to understand unknown situations and realities, but also in finding out what we did not know about ourselves.

Keywords: Comparison. Cultural Comparison. Comparative Education. Comparative Methods. Comparative Research.

RESUMO – Compreendendo a Operação Denominada Comparação. Nas ciências sociais a comparação cultural foi vista por um longo período como um procedimento científico voltado para determinar as estruturas ocultas a partir das quais ocorria o desenvolvimento das sociedades. Com base em aportes de Friedrich Tenbruck e Joachim Matthes, a primeira parte do artigo oferece uma análise crítica a esse tipo de entendimento da comparação e dos métodos utilizados. Na segunda parte são apresentadas duas pesquisas internacionais, com ênfase nos procedimentos metodológicos, motivos para a realização de ambos os estudos e aprendizados adquiridos. A riqueza de um estudo comparado não está apenas na capacidade de desvelamento de situações e realidades desconhecidas, mas também daquilo que não sabíamos sobre nós mesmos.

Palavras-chave: Comparação. Comparação Cultural. Educação Comparada. Métodos Comparativos. Pesquisa Comparada.

Introductory Notes

Comparison in social sciences is generally defined as a procedure that provides a “[...] basis for making statements about empirical regularities and for evaluating and interpreting cases relatives to substantive and theoretical criteria” (Ragin, 2014, p. 1). In this perspective, comparison is central, especially in empirical social sciences, as a procedure that is initiated after determining the variables for the intended operation. However, Matthes (1992) points out that the comparison begins long before this step:

‘Comparison’ is understood as that which is performed after determining the ‘variables’ for the operation that is intended. However, the ‘comparison’ is already initiated in a previous step, along with the determination of these ‘variables.’ If we are to give an account of the process, we should ask for the reasons for the ‘comparison.’ However, this is no mere operational matter, but rather a substantial one. It is related to a cultural process which includes the sociologist’s work (Matthes, 1992, p. 94, our translation, emphasis in the original).

The comparison related to a cultural process cannot be reduced to an operational procedure that employs specific tools and methods capable of establishing similarities and differences in a distanced or seemingly neutral manner. Guided by sociocultural patterns, the comparison generates a “[...] disposition to re-define categories the merely descriptive differential categories of ‘similarity/dissimilarity’ in evaluative terms, as ‘equality/inequality’, and to couple the latter with the contrastive schema of ‘identity/difference’” (Schriewer, 1990, p. 39).

Considering the growing interest for conducting comparative studies, as well as the need for greater understanding of the operation called comparison, the next section of this article presents a critical analysis of the development of cultural comparison and of its methods in social sciences based on contributions of Friedrich Tenbruck and Joachim Matthes. Through a historical review of the development of cultural comparison (Tenbruck) and an analytical process that analyzes comparison itself (Matthes), both authors discuss the misconceptions or deviations of cultural comparison in the social sciences as well as the need for other devices and points of view in the comparison process.

The Notion of Comparison in the Social Sciences

The choice of the authors Friedrich Tenbruck and Joachim Matthes, as well as of the texts *Was war der Kulturvergleich, ehe es den Kulturvergleich gab* (What was the cultural comparison when cultural comparison did not exist yet) and *The Operation Called ‘Vergleichen’* (The operation called comparison) is related to their refined sociohistorical analysis on the cultural comparison and on the act of compar-

ing and to the reflections based on these authors in the development of the research project *Música, Identidade e Experiências Discriminatórias: um estudo comparado entre jovens negros em São Paulo e jovens de origem turca em Berlim* [Music, Identity, and Discriminatory Experiences: a comparative study between black youths in São Paulo and youths of Turkish origin in Berlin], which will be presented in the next section of this article. Some biographical information on the authors will be presented here, since they are little known in the Latin American context.

Friedrich Tenbruck was born on September 22, 1919 in the city of Essen and died on February 9, 1994 in Tübingen, Germany. He studied philosophy, history, and German literature and in 1944 earned his PhD in philosophy at the Philipps-Universität Marburg. Between 1946 and 1962 he worked in different universities in Germany and in the United States of America. After completing his thesis in 1962 at the *Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg*, he was appointed ordinary professor to the Chair of Sociology at the Institute of Economic and Social Sciences at *Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main* and in 1967 he was appointed professor at the School of Law and Economic Sciences of the *Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen*. Tenbruck revived cultural sociology and was co-founder of the Sociology of Culture section of the German Society for Sociology (DGS)².

Joachim Matthes was born on June 1, 1930 in Magdeburg and died in 2009 in the city of Erlangen, Germany. In 1949 he initiated his studies in Sociology, Philosophy and Law at the newly founded *Freie Universität Berlin*, where he remained until he earned his PhD in 1956. In 1964 he presented his thesis at the *Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster*. Between 1964 and his retirement in 1993 he was a professor at the *Pädagogische Hochschule Ruhr*, *Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster*, *Universität Bielefeld*, and *Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg*. After retirement, he went to reside in Singapore³.

The Sociological Understanding of Cultural Comparison and its Limitations

Tenbruck (1992) argues in his article *What was the cultural comparison when cultural comparison did not exist yet* that Sociology – from Comte, including Spencer, Durkheim, and varying a little in Marxism – became a discipline focused on the history of society (Tenbruck, 1992, p. 13). In this conception, cultural comparison was seen as a means of revealing the history of society, which defined reality objectively and the scientific truth as the only and total truth:

Despite the preliminary nature and the inconsistent findings, cultural comparison was seen as a means of ultimate revelation of the history of society, which defined reality objectively. Especially in cultural comparison, Sociology assumed the role of an observer who only registers the ultimate essence and nature of history. It took the findings not only as correct knowledge, but also as guidelines that

should be adopted by all due to their binding character. There was the belief that scientific truth was also the only and total truth (Tenbruck, 1992, p. 22, our translation).

The author also argues that cultural comparison was a scientific procedure aimed to determine the hidden laws founded on which societies developed, either causes, constellations, lines, and degrees or barriers and hindrances to development, thus seeking to organize these results in a possible theory of society (Tenbruck, 1992). Another criticism concerns the fact that cultural comparison in Sociology is restricted to seeking parallelism in the internal development of a given society in relation to another, which is problematic, since the internal development consists in the relation with external structures or conditions. This was the first deviation (*Irrweg*) in sociological theory, which produced comparisons that were vague, unproven, and far from reality. The second error or deviation occurred as a result of the first: As external factors were ignored, it was also neglected the fact that for a long time different cultures had already established comparisons between them. In other words: Sociology, founded on its methodological considerations, assumed cultural comparison as an invention of their own, suppressing the fact that it is a universal and inevitable social praxis, since cultures coexist in convergence or divergence with others, producing a relation of interdependence between them (Tenbruck, 1992).

Tenbruck also argues that cultural comparison – as developed in Sociology – presents a problem that needs to be completely reviewed: The solution cannot be restricted only to methodical repairs through the inclusion of ad hoc variables in the dominant theories. Instead of remaining as a discipline dedicated to the history of society, it is necessary a complete change of perspective that can comprehend the interrelations between the internal social structures and the external factors, assuming that these external factors, manifested in the social practices and mutual cultural comparison, are object of social interest. However, the author continues, these external factors also cannot be objectively comprehended:

In this change of perspective it is also necessary to recognize that the ‘external conditions’ cannot be simply ‘objectively’ detected by Sociology, since they themselves have been object of mutual evaluation of different cultures. Therefore, Sociology cannot remain focused only on the proper use of their methodological procedures, but should also consider the fact that the comparison between cultures has always been a social practice founded on which cultures and societies mutually establish their points of view (Tenbruck, 1992, p. 14, our translation, emphasis in the original).

Another aspect addressed by Tenbruck concerns the recurring criticism of ethnocentrism and the attempts of definition of the term. The author argues that, rather than considering only a single definition of ethnocentrism, Sociology should, above all, strive to understand the

mechanisms adopted in cultural comparison, analyzing systematically both the constellation of external factors and the openness to react to new situations (Tenbruck, 1992), for example, the strategies developed by individuals in certain social contexts to react to racism resulting from ethnocentrism (see Weller, 2011).

Tenbruck concludes his article highlighting three aspects that need to be reconsidered by Sociology. First another concept of comparison needs to be developed, which incorporates both the external conditions and the cultural encounters between different ones. This new concept requires another terminology as well as empirical studies of encounters between cultures. Another aspect is related to the need to abandon the belief or hope that the cultural comparison would reveal parallels of evolution, of which, apropos, there is not much left but a devout belief in a generalized differentiation process, of a modernization that occurred in Europe and spread around the world through cultural encounters, but that does not necessarily follow the European model. Finally, we must question the position that Sociology could assume the role of neutral observer that registers society as a fact that can be objectively determined, since the social facts are constituted in the actions of individuals and through language (Tenbruck, 1992). The comparison can and should be objective in surveying its factual inventory. But the question – what should be compared and what is fundamental in the comparison – cannot be objectively defined. At the same time, the work in the field of cultural comparison should undertake the task of identifying and researching the significances of the reciprocal social practice of comparison between cultures (Tenbruck, 1992).

The Operation Called Comparison⁴

In his article *The Operation Called 'Vergleichen'*, Matthes (1992) discusses an affirmation of Theodore Abel (1948) that no one took the time to describe the nature of the method called comprehension, to justify that the same problem occurs with the method called comparison. The use and even the requirement of comparison are recurrent, but there is no detailed methodological discussion about this operation. However, it is no longer possible to argue that comprehension is “[...] a simple operation of thinking in the labor of scientific research” (Matthes, 1992, p. 75) as did Abel; comparison also cannot be defined that way. Then, the author points to two paths leading the comparison beyond a scientific task in the field of social sciences: the first path is developed based on the article by Friedrich Tenbruck (1992), in which the author highlights the need to bring to the forefront not only the comparison as a social and cultural process, but also the importance of a critical view on the practice of comparison that had been conducted until then. The second path is developed by Matthes himself and concerns a process of reconstruction and of criticism of the usual practices of comparison in the social sciences, which should come from itself (from the social sciences) considering what is revealed by following this path. This second

path presents obstacles, since there are no broader epistemological and methodological discussions on aspects of comparison (Matthes, 1992, p. 75). Instead of seeking to define *what is to compare*, the author argues for the need to determine what has been carried out under the designation *comparison* and how this operation is being comprehended. In general, in the comparison in social sciences it is observed the immediate junction of various things, which could be defined – according to the author – as “[...] dissimilarities, which joins a supposed whole, without acknowledging or pointing to the regularity of this immediate junction” (Matthes, 1992, p. 76).

According to the author, there are two concepts that both coexist and overlap in Sociology. The first concept assumes the comparison as a principle that is inherent in the very creation of Sociology; the second concept assumes that Sociology lacks its own comparative methods (Matthes, 1992). The second concept is more recurrent in recent discussions, especially when the interest in non-Western cultures acquires greater relevance. The first concept – resulting from the focus of Sociology on Western societies and that still persists today – is of Durkheimian origin, described in the work *The Rules of Sociological Method* as follows: “Comparative Sociology is not a particular branch of Sociology; it is Sociology itself, as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to explain the facts” (Durkheim, 1999, p. 142). According to Matthes (1992), the Durkheimian proposal for Sociology is culturally founded on a concept of neutrality of the power of conceptualization, which took shape in Sociology – as in the sciences as a whole – from the universalization of Western modernity:

Declaring the sociological theory in this format as genuinely cross-cultural coincides with the ‘modern’ cultural thinking and is also suitable for raising awareness of the sociological practice of research. However, such situation makes the sociological theorization turn to its own cultural pre-formations and the possibility – in fact, the necessity – of apprehending other realities beyond that which is familiar to us is hidden (Matthes, 1992, p. 80, our translation, emphasis in the original).

As pointed out by sociologist René König in his introduction to the German edition of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, the Durkheimian method, instead of comparative, can be better defined as a method that seeks to establish correlations based on causal principles (see König, 1984; Matthes, 1992). Matthes also highlights that the Durkheimian method does not compare different things: it is a measure (*Größe*) abstracted from a specific social context, which is universalized as a theoretical construct that can be tested in a varied manner in worldly manifestations (Matthes, 1992).

Thus, the establishment of correlations, understood as central function of Sociology and equated to the comparison, also becomes a comparative method. This understanding of the comparison – according to Matthes – explicitly or implicitly prevails to the present day, hin-

dering a broader methodological reflection on the comparison itself. This limitation of the methodological reflection produced a guiding line for the operation that the author defines as a comparison conducted along a “[...] model line of the social development” (Matthes, 1992, p. 81), founded on which the steps in the stair of the social development of a given society are conceived through an exercise of abstraction.

In Sociology, the comparison usually results from a classification that distinguishes between traditional and modern, based on a type of development model (Matthes, 1992). When the comparison remains restricted to the cultural context in which this logic was developed, the flaws of this model will hardly be noticed. In other words: in this circle it is possible to work with a model in which societies or parts of the society that exist in it are taken as example of a genre or subgenre and the respective deviations are seen as peripheral differences, which can be explained through complementary efforts of interpretation. That is what was enthusiastically conducted as international comparison in Sociology during some decades of the 20th century (Matthes, 1992). More recently, flaws in this model are being pointed to, especially when it comes to the comparison with other cultures, for example, with non-Western cultures.

It has become increasingly evident that modernity can no longer be taken as a global process of equation to that which has been done in the Western first world. Thus, Sociology is also challenged to review the comparative processes adopted thus far, taking into account that “[...] in societies exposed to modernization processes there is no simple reproduction of the Western world, but something new emerges, differently new, in a difficult and quite diverse transformation process” (Matthes, 1992, p. 90).

The Us and the Our in the Comparison of the Other: alterity as relational process

How is the us that emerges as bearer (*Träger*) of comparison constituted and to what extent does this process of making our lead to a new type of comparison? How to determine more approximately this other type of comparison? According to Matthes, there is neither a way nor a specific manner to determine this new type of comparison. The recurrent theses that the comparison is based on a Western perspective, on a model of scientific imperialism that needs to be reviewed, also do not advance and eventually, so to speak, fall in contradiction, as they also operate through the logic of an us that exists on this side and on the other side, as well as through units organized by means of a schema defined as exemplary genres (*Gattungsexemplare*). These theses – according to the author – even duplicate the aporias or contradictions, insofar as they point to the others’ need to relate to us based on their models and the same way how we relate to them (Matthes, 1992).

Instead of inducing the other (the stranger) to relate to us based on their models and vice versa, Matthes highlights the experience of al-

terity as an important aspect to be considered. When the social scientist uses a globally widespread conception of society as a form of organization and as a category, the other does not simply disappear. On the contrary, new and diverse processes addressing the problem of alterity emerge, implying revisions, as well as new definitions of what is familiar or characteristic of our culture and what is strange to us (Matthes, 1992). The other (the different), seen from outside, is not simply a measure to be contrasted to another measure that would be that which is our (the familiar). On the contrary, the familiar and the strange exist in a relation of mutual reference. In other words: in order to exist the us there needs to exist the other.

This relation between the familiar and the strange or between us and the other should be object of central concern when we refer to the comparison or when we conduct comparisons (Matthes, 1992). However, Matthes also criticizes an attitude that is almost inherent in comparative sociologists that consists in determining that the comparison is based on the other's experience, assigning to it a cultural connotation as a kind of experiment of contrasts. Rather than explaining how we proceed when comparing, first we must ask ourselves what, in reality, motivates us to make comparisons (Matthes, 1992). When we do not ask this question, what happens is an operation of equating the other to that which is ours based on the dissolution of contrasts and not on the comparison itself. And by proceeding this way:

We model the 'other' within a conceptualization that is familiar to us and that we understand as being culturally neutral (clean), and thus we perform a mental operation of 'equation,' of dissolution of 'contrasts.' Accordingly, we follow the cultural pattern that is familiar to us, which takes the 'other' (the different) as 'contrast,' but, at the same time, does not tolerate the 'contrast' (Matthes, 1992, p. 95, our translation, emphasis in the original).

Matthes highlights that we need to go back and include deliberately all the previous steps in the analysis process that will serve as base for comparison. But that is also not enough. Our view needs to be focused on what is on the other side of the comparison. When that which is our and the other constitute a relation of reciprocity, it is necessary to thematize the conditions and implications of this relation on both sides. The comparison as cultural producer of alterity is reciprocal and, therefore, the reflection on this process must also be reciprocal, with no attempt of dissolution of contrasts and asymmetries:

'Reciprocal' does not mean that the asymmetries should be denied or hidden in the cultural and also sociological comparison. On the contrary: precisely because the conventional comparison in Sociology works with categories generated from projections, which at the same time serve to define what the 'other' to be included in the 'comparison' is, it ends up obscuring the vision to these asymmetries (Matthes, 1992, p. 95, our translation, emphasis in the original).

Above all, it is necessary to assure in a disposition for reciprocal comparison a sociological view that include both sides, that reflects on that which is ours – that is particular to a group, country, or culture –, that is sensitive to the relation between ones and others and to the asymmetries of this relation (Matthes, 1992). Thus, in the process of contextual reconstruction it is possible to develop a comparative reflection that – instead of being based on typed projections and previously determined concepts – develops statements with their own explanatory power (Matthes, 1992).

The Pursuit of Understanding Through Comparison: lessons from two research projects

Tenbruk's and Matthes' critical analyses on how the comparison is conducted in many empirical studies and the development of a deeper understanding of this operation represented, among other questions, an important contribution in the research that will be presented in this section. The understanding that it is not a simple search for parallels (Tenbruk) or a mental operation of equation and dissolution of contrasts (Matthes) led us to reflect not only on the choice of research instruments and data analysis procedures, but also on the experience of alterity and on the construction of a mutual understanding *with* and *about* the other.

The comparison process is not motivated solely by the choice of a theme and of specific methods for the type of study that is intended. It is also guided by assumptions that orient such choices, which may be founded on academic, political, economic, cultural, or social interests. In this sense, it is necessary to reflect upon the assumptions that motivate a comparative study.

Strategies of Youths from São Paulo and Berlin to Deal with Segregation and Discrimination through Hip Hop

As stated by Matthes (1992), the reasons for conducting a comparative study should be object of analysis even before the construction of the sample or the identification of variables. The motivation for the research *Música, Identidade e Experiências Discriminatórias: um estudo comparado entre jovens negros em São Paulo e jovens de origem turca em Berlim* [Music, Identity, and Discriminatory Experiences: a comparative study between black youths in São Paulo and youths of Turkish origin in Berlin] resulted from awareness developed from prior experiences of training, work, and research in the two cities, which showed similarities regarding the lifestyles and musical preferences of these youths, as well as similar strategies in coping with ethnic and racial segregation and discrimination. It was also motivated by academic interest in developing an empirical study that enabled a deeper understanding of the questions that motivated such research, through critical analysis, reconstruction, and deconstruction of the youths' discussions and re-

ports. As poetic-musical movement, hip hop has expanded worldwide and provided, mainly through rap, a space of struggle and recognition for young people in various regions of the world. The pursuit of understanding concerning this movement's cross-cultural character, as well as the local manifestations produced from the constituent elements of hip hop, prompted this research, which started to be outlined in 1997 and was presented as a doctoral dissertation in February 2002 (see Weller, 2003; 2011). After delimitation of the theme and reflection on the reasons for a comparative study, methodological procedures for the development of the research were established. The choice of comparative study of qualitative nature was guided by interest in entering "[...] the world of experience lived" (Denzin; Lincoln, 2006, p. 22) of these young people, seeking to know the collective worldviews and orientations that permeate their actions in the context of the hip hop movement. In this study there were 15 discussion groups⁵ and 15 biographical-narrative interviews⁶ with youths from both cities. Participation in activities organized by the young people in their respective neighborhoods, visits to different locations frequented by the youths from Berlin and São Paulo, and access to audiovisual and printed material produced by and about the interviewees also constituted an essential aspect in building the relationship of reciprocity and trust between the researcher and the youth groups that participated in the research. The analyses and interpretations were based on the comparison of empirical data according to the documentary method⁷ (see Bohnsack; Weller, 2013; Bohnsack, 2014) and not on previously developed theories or on information about youth cultures disseminated in the media.

According to Karl Mannheim (1950; 1952), it is necessary to consider that there is no neutral interpretation and, consequently, no neutral comparison. It concerns a process that is associated with the researcher's theoretical and methodological training and geographic and social belonging. In the analysis process, our knowledge and experience gained throughout life cannot be disregarded. However, the documentary method exerts a form of control over the theoretical knowledge and the position that the investigator or researcher occupies in the social sphere, to the extent that the social environment and the implicit knowledge of the groups under study are analyzed through comparison with other cases. Thus, the comparative analysis has a role of methodological control of the comprehension of the foreign or distant reality, that is, of control of the affirmations or generalizations about the reality observed.

Based on the comparative analysis of the groups interviewed in the cities of São Paulo and Berlin, it was observed that the worldviews are not necessarily connected to the local or cultural context, transcending, therefore, ethnic, cultural, and geographic boundaries. In a same neighborhood there are groups with distinct orientations, with different views on the musical and political praxis in the hip hop movement. In other words: the *modus operandi* that guides the musical praxis and the political and social actions of the groups is not the same.

We found young people that associate their practices and discourses to their own generation. We also met young people who see rap as a form of coordination and implementation of their sociopolitical aspirations and who have a social-combative orientation. Hip hop also has a key role in the development of practical actions against the prejudice and harassment in relation to those that are *different*. Regardless of the positions assumed by the groups, it was observed that hip hop provided the establishment of new forms of collectivity, which, in some ways, came to replace the connections lost with the sociospatial migration and segregation. As members of a collective, they became heirs of this set of common narratives that constitutes the group and that generates this creative potential of both those with generational orientation and those with social-combative orientation. Succinctly, we can affirm that through comparison it was possible to build an understanding that what black youths in São Paulo and youths of Turkish descent in Berlin have in common is not only the passion for music and the adherence to the hip hop movement. As blacks or children of migrants from northeastern Brazil, as descendants of migrants of the second or third generation, they experience similar situations of discrimination and social exclusion. However, by analyzing the strategies for coping with discrimination and social exclusion, we observed that they are linked to the experiences lived by the young people, as well as to the historical particulars of racism and of the exclusion mechanisms that exist in both societies.

University Students in a Changing World: survey research with Brazilian and Chinese students

The background of this research can be traced back to 2004, when members of the Brazilian Sociology Society (SBS) went to Beijing (see Dwyer, 2016). After this meeting, a bilateral agreement began to be conceived, with more visits of Chinese research teams to Brazil and of Brazilian researchers of the SBS to China. In 2010, a new work meeting that took place at the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea) in Brasília was definitive in leading to the cooperation terms signed later that year between the China Youth and Children Research Center (CY-CRC), the China Youth and Children Research Association (CYCRA), the Ipea, the SBS, and the National Youth Secretariat (linked, at the time, to the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic). From that moment the research started to be outlined, resulting in the following format: a comparative study of university students in China and in Brazil to be conducted in Brasília, Beijing, São Paulo, and Shanghai, the respective capitals and largest financial-industrial centers of each country (see Dwyer; Zen; Weller; Shuguang; Kaiyuan, 2016). Compared with the study presented before, it should be noted that this project was motivated not only by academic intentions of promoting international cooperation between research institutions, but also by political and economic interests of sectors outside the university in both countries,

involving different actors. The international cooperation between China and Brazil, especially in the trade sector, has brought new demands for Brazilian universities, not only in relation to the training of students for the labor market in international networks. The intercultural understanding about China, Russia, India, and South Africa cannot remain only at the level of common sense if we want to advance not only in the construction of commercial ties but also in the exchange of experiences in the field of basic and higher education⁸.

This comparative study on Brazilian and Chinese university students represented a pioneering initiative for establishing a cooperative relation between institutions and researchers in the field of youth. Considering the complexity of this project, interdisciplinary teams were established in both countries, with researchers from Sociology, Education, Demography, and Statistics⁹.

Regarding the research design and the development of empirical work, we decided to apply a questionnaire including questions about lifestyles, values, and perceptions concerning political, economic, and environmental issues, family history, academic experiences, and future projects of young university students. In 2010 and 2011 we worked on the preparation of a questionnaire that was developed by the Brazilian team and translated into Mandarin. In September 2011, during a congress in Recife, there was a new meeting with the Brazilian team and a Chinese delegation, in which details as to the instrument (questionnaire) and the construction of the sample were collectively discussed. In the first half of 2012, the printed questionnaire was applied in both countries. As to the methodological procedures, we applied *in loco* a total of 4,200 questionnaires for students of universities located in the São Paulo Metropolitan Area, Brazil's Federal District, Beijing, and Shanghai. In each city or region we selected three universities that, generally speaking, can be defined as of *high selectivity* (greater competition in the entrance exam), *average selectivity* (less competition in relation to the first), and *low selectivity* (less competition in relation to the second). In Brazil, the questionnaire was applied in two public universities and in four private universities that met the criteria previously described. The survey's target population was that of young university students aged up to 24 years (see Dwyer, 2016). From 2012 to 2014 the teams in both countries were involved in data analysis and in the preparation of a joint book that is being published in the two languages: Portuguese and Mandarin. The definition of the themes that were analyzed based on the table with the questionnaire data also occurred personally during a seminar in December 2012 in Beijing and in another meeting in October 2013 in Campinas. At the seminary in Campinas, some of the chapters that had already been written were also presented. During the discussions it was proposed the joint development of some chapters for the book, not to dissolve possible contrasts observed in answers of Brazilian and Chinese students but seeking to build a mutual understanding about them. Such level of mutual understanding would certainly be impossible without the meetings between Brazilian and Chi-

nese researchers over almost ten years. In all joint seminars, the talks were intermediated by Portuguese-Mandarin translators¹⁰. Despite the difficulties and failures that may occur during the translation process, both teams assessed that the use of English would result in even greater losses, leading many researchers to subsume details and to present a summary of the analysis.

Since the research involved different researchers and political actors, the pursuit of understanding – not only of one's own point of view but also of the point of view of the other – represented a constant challenge with many lessons for the team. According to Dwyer (2016, p. 33):

Each chapter, written based on survey data analysis, enabled discoveries capable of establishing a meaningful dialogue on public policies. This dialogue has the potential to contribute positively to the development of the relations between Brazil and China. Brazilian and Chinese authors explored a limited number of questions and, at the same time, discussed points that are already part of our research agenda and others that are significant for international cooperation. The authors worked, as expected, within the limits of their scientific traditions and according to their theoretical perceptions and political possibilities.

Articles published in the book *Jovens Universitários em um Mundo em Transformação* show significant points of view of the youths on different issues that became object of concern in both countries, such as the participation of young people in politics, entering the labor market, and their future projects¹¹. However, the analyses also showed limits that are characteristic of comparative research if we do not want to incur the risk of producing generalized statements and of strengthening stereotypes of a culture or social environment¹².

Considering the two experiences of research previously presented – with all their difficulties and limitations – we support the analyses of Mason (2015), that this type of comparison strengthens not only an intercultural perspective on issues that may be common in distinct cultural contexts but also a perspective of intercultural analysis among researchers themselves:

Comparative educational research across cultures will perhaps be stronger for its acknowledgement that it is not only research *about* two or more cultures, in the cross-cultural sense, but also, inevitably, research that is intercultural in nature, in that it is about perspectives *from* the cultures under study, and *from* the cultural perspectives of the researchers (Mason, 2015, p. 282; emphasis in the original).

The relations of alterity and the cultural production of difference arising from the comparison, when thematized by the researchers, enable a beginning of mutual understanding of cultural differences that exist in the multiethnic societies that characterize much of the contem-

porary national States, as well as greater capacity to understand the relations between individuals and nations in their particulars. In the process of learning *with* and *about* the other we also learn more about ourselves, that is, that which seemed familiar to us becomes strange by means of comparison. Accordingly, the importance of a comparative study lies in the capacity to unveil not only unknown situations and realities but also that which we did not know about ourselves.

Final Considerations: comparison in the social sciences and directions for research in education

As pointed out by Tenbruk and Matthes in the first part of the article, classical Sociology was challenged to revise its understanding about the comparison and the methods adopted. The absence of reflection on concepts, mechanisms, and starting points adopted in cultural comparison, generated, in many studies, an ethnocentric and colonialist perspective in relation to the other. In a recent article, Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connel (2016) highlight the importance of advancing to a postcolonial or decolonial perspective of comparison processes that considers the heterogeneity of the social knowledge produced in the post-colonial societies around the world. In a Mannheimian perspective, we could affirm that this is the recognition that there are distinct worldviews that cannot be apprehended based only on some points of view, general categories, or hegemonic theories (see Mannheim, 1952; Weller et al., 2002).

With the growing interest in conducting comparative studies in the social sciences and in education, the need for an understanding about the comparison and its challenges today, the reasons, and the kind of knowledge that is intended to be produced by means of the comparison still represent a central issue for comparative researchers. These considerations are also relevant for comparative research within a country, since cultural diversity also exists in the domestic milieu (see Jacob, 2005; Mason, 2015), especially in countries that have diversified migratory processes and a territorial setting as found in Brazil.

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Notes

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2 Among his best known works: *Jugend und Gesellschaft: Soziologische Perspektiven* (Youth and Society: Sociological Perspectives [1962]), *Geschichte*

und Gesellschaft (History and Society [1986]), *Die kulturellen Grundlagen der Gesellschaft: Der Fall der Moderne* (The cultural bases of society: the case of modernity [1989]).

- 3 The main works and collections organized by the author include: *Zwischen den Kulturen?* (Between cultures? [1992]), *Verständigung über kulturelle Grenzen hinweg* (Understanding beyond cultural borders [1993]), *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit: Berger-Luckmann revisited* (The social construction of reality: revisiting Berger-Luckmann [1997]), *Das Eigene und das Fremde* (The familiar and the strange [2005]).
- 4 The title of this section, in its version in Portuguese, is identical to the title of the article *The Operation Called 'Vergleichen'* of Joachim Matthes (1992), in which the author combines English and German.
- 5 About the methodology of discussion groups, see Weller (2006); Bohnsack and Weller (2013).
- 6 For further information about the narrative interview, see Schütze (2013; 2014).
- 7 Detailed presentation of the researcher's analyses of and interaction with the youth groups is beyond the scope of this article. For further information, see Weller (2011); Weller and Silva (2011).
- 8 A major initiative of cultural approach between China and Brazil in the last decade has occurred through the establishment of Confucius Institutes in Brazilian universities from the five regions of the country.
- 9 Mason (2015, p. 276) suggests that "[...] comparative education research that addresses different cultures should be developed by research teams that can rely on a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and fields of knowledge".
- 10 We thank the Brazilian universities and agencies that supported the research: Ipea, CNPq, Capes, Fapesp, Unicamp, and UnB.
- 11 The book has 12 chapters that were written by a total of 18 authors. Part of the chapters was written jointly by Brazilian and Chinese authors with the help of translators, among others the chapter: Family origin, academic career and projects of Brazilian and Chinese university students (Weller; Weidong; Bassalo, 2016).
- 12 Important reflections on these issues are conducted, among others, by: Schriewer (2009; 2014); Sobe (2012); Steiner-Khamsi (2010; 2012).

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