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**C**OMPARATIVE THINKING AND THE  
STRUCTURES OF ADULT COGNITION:  
AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND  
METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGE FOR  
COMPARATIVE ADULT EDUCATION  
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*Comparative Adult Education:  
Reflecting on the Past*

Over 30 years have now elapsed since the first pioneering International Conference on the Comparative Study of Adult Education took place in Exeter, New Hampshire (USA) during June 1966. Due to a recurring lament about the lack of research in the comparative study of adult education and the lack of an organizational structure to assist the process, the conference and subsequent publication (Liveright, Haygood 1968) took a first step by developing and testing during the conference a conceptual framework. Generated was a map or schema to frame understanding of the total adult education enterprise in a country with stress on the cultural context in which it had evolved and manifested, and how it now operates and functions. This contribution provided a structure for comparisons.

The International Expert Meeting on Comparative Adult Education held in Denmark during 1972 made further advances by defining comparative adult education as a field of academic study and reviewing methods for research in this realm (Agenda for Comparative Studies 1972). Periodic meetings continued in Oxford, England in 1987 and Frascati, Italy in 1988 where findings were shared on research studies which had been undertaken between two or more countries. These earlier conferences were small in number. During 1987, spear-

headed by Alex Charters, the group loosely organized to form the Committee for Study and Research in Comparative Adult Education (CSRCAE), a group limited to about 14 individuals in order to function effectively.

In 1988, however, it broadened its membership to any interested educator of adults engaged in the study and research of comparative adult education. This group organized a 1991 gathering which was held for the first time in a developing country – Nigeria. The University of Ibadan (under the leadership of J.T. Okadara, head of the Adult Education Department) was host. An important sub-theme of this conference (see Charters, Charters 1991) was the importance of maintaining contact with comparativists in other areas of education and implications for comparative adult education of recent research in other disciplines. Consequently, CSRCAE organized and presented a small enclave of sessions at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Congress on of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies in Prague during 1992. During that year membership increased, attracting individuals with an interest in comparative research and was functioning more as a Society than a Committee. So, through a vote of its membership, the name was changed to the Society for Comparative Adult Education and later in 1993 to the International Society for Comparative Adult Education. The Society offered its first assembly in Bamberg, Germany in 1995 and a second in Radovljica, Slovenia in 1998.

The essence of this chapter has its roots in a session delivered at the Nigerian Conference (Boucouvalas 1991) on the importance of the researcher in the research process. A plea was issued to better understand and develop the transcultural aspects of selfhood which enable one to not only perceive but identify with the greater whole of which cultures are part. This perspective is vitally important in researching similarities and dissimilarities across countries, cultures, political systems, value systems, and ideologies. The paper was followed up at the 1992 World Congress with a session on the self as an important instrument of attunement in comparative adult education and as integral to

developing more competent comparative researchers (Boucouvalas 1992). The material for this chapter experienced a fuller gestation, however, at the Bamberg conference (Boucouvalas 1995) and was fleshed out further at the conference in Slovenia (Boucouvalas 1998).

## 2

### *Moving Toward the Future*

Perusing through the papers and proceedings of all Comparative Adult Education Conferences since Exeter in 1966, as well as the materials on the World Congresses on Comparative Education, and other sources, one will witness increasing attention over the years to conceptual and methodological issues.

While methodological tools and indicators are still in need of further refinement and are necessary to sound research, alone they are insufficient. The „self“ of the researcher is an equally important aspect of development and refinement. To borrow from the Bamberg symposium, „Comparare Humanum Est?\": liberally translated, it approximates the question of what it means to compare in the human realm.

My basic position is that research is more than a set of techniques to generate valid and reliable data. While important to the rigorous systematic work for which we all strive, one can use the most rigorous techniques and methods and still remain a technician rather than a scholarly inquirer. Why? I would like to propose that sound method is not restricted only to strategies one employs which are *external* to one's self. Part of the methodological rigor involved in comparative analysis is a commitment of the researcher to self-knowledge and self-awareness. So, an examination of the strategies and approaches we use in our research includes an examination of our „ontos“ (to use the Greek word for being-in-the-world), that is, a deeper understanding of the „self“ engaged in the comparison. This is a huge agenda for future dialogue, particularly since both

cultural and transcultural dimensions to selfhood are important: This chapter is one small step which will focus only on epistemological matters: one's thinking when comparing, rather than one's broad ontology. The research on adult cognition provides a frame since it suggests similarities in the structures of human cognition regardless of culture, and thus enables us to start with a common ground. The structures which frame our thinking are infrequently discussed, if at all, in our methodological dialogues, but so very germane and fundamental to the sophistication of the research and the depth of treatment.

### 3

#### *Beginning the Dialogue. Adult Cognition as a Conceptual Framework*

The body of knowledge offered by the arena of adult cognition affords a framework to help us begin such a dialogue. Streamlining the literature from adult cognitive development for purposes of discussion, we can talk about three modes of thinking, developmental in progression, as: discrete, relativistic, and dialectical. **1. Discrete thinking** is categorical in nature and offers thinking in either/or terms. Perceived reality is often absolute. **2. Relativistic thinking** takes into account the contextual nature of the observations and claims and deeply considers the context as part of the analysis. **3. Dialectical thinking** apprehends the greater whole of which different, sometimes seemingly antithetical, pieces are part and promotes understanding of complementarity.

This framework, of course, is simplified for purposes of initial dialogue. Future work could augment this framework and deepen the dialogue, for example, with Kegan's (1994) work on the orders of consciousness which provide a world view from which one thinks, or from my own research in consciousness studies.

### 4

#### *Importance and Relevance of the Dialogue*

A discussion on the importance of understanding our mode of thinking is meaningful for us both as consumers of research, as well as researchers ourselves. As consumers of research we are at least somewhat familiar with the practice of trying to uncover the assumptions underlying a researcher's or any author's approach when reading their findings, results, or claims. Often, these assumptions are tacit and may be hidden even to the authors themselves, but with concerted effort we can come to understand the underpinning of a position.

Identifying assumptions even in one's own life benefits from the process of critical reflectivity and often results in „transformative learning“, as currently heralded in the adult learning literature. I have proposed elsewhere, however, (Boucouvalas 1997) that this is only the beginning to where transformation theory in adult learning could go and grow. A transformation of consciousness itself is the larger whole of which our efforts are part. Although thinking is only part of what consciousness is about, I would like to propose that understanding the *structures* of one's thinking is as important as uncovering tacit assumptions. Uncovering assumptions deals with the *contents* of consciousness. The framework of adult cognition helps us understand the *structures* of consciousness which generate and hold the content, and restructuring is what transformation is all about.

Analyzing the thinking inherent in another's research and writing necessitates that we first focus on ourselves. Recognizing not only how we frame research questions, but also the frame of mind and mental framework from which we approach inquiry is an important start. Awareness of our assumptions was a beginning. Attention to thinking could help provide a deeper analysis for our research. Although outside the scope of the present chapter,

perhaps one future challenge, then, may be to generate guidelines which might help to determine the appropriateness of the thinking to the particular comparative research quest (for example, systematic observation could mean different things within the framework of the different modes or levels of thinking).

Let us begin, however, by reviewing discrete, relativistic, and dialectical thinking along with the research basis of the knowledge claims. It should become clearer, then, how a research problem in comparative adult education might be framed and approached differently depending upon one's thinking. These „levels“ of thinking appear to transcend culture and relate more to the structures of human cognition, although more research is certainly needed to corroborate that claim.

## 5

### *Thinking: Absolutist to Relativistic to Dialectical – Promise, Potential, and Pitfalls*

The basic level of thinking entails what is called absolutist, discrete, or either/or thinking. The world, or one's perspective on whatever is the issue at hand, is framed in right/wrong, either/or terms. Reality or information is categorized into discrete boxes. This kind of thinking may be useful for understanding some things in the world, but for our purposes in comparative adult education research it lacks an understanding of (or at least a consideration of) the embeddedness or contextuality of the phenomenon under study. It becomes important to ask ourselves the question: Am I thinking in either/or terms without regard to the context and, if so, is it appropriate to the inquiry question I am embracing? It is equally important to remember that some adults because of their various internal and external circumstances in life never move beyond this mode of thinking. Another *challenge question* for

us, then, is: Are there any instances in comparative adult education research where either/or, absolutist thinking would be appropriate?

The next „level“ of thinking in adult cognitive development is relativistic or contextual thinking. Relating this to the realm of comparative adult education research, one recognizes that the context in which adult education occurs is an integral part of the comparison. The way one compares within this mode of thinking – and the results – are very different, than with the more absolutist mode. One would want to ask oneself the question: Am I taking into consideration the entire context within which this observed activity or phenomenon is occurring or has occurred? Political, cultural, social, historical, value, etc. contexts are only a few. This mode of thinking, while an advance over either/or thinking for much research, presents several potential pitfalls. The most obvious pitfall is to become mired in a relativistic trap where there are no „truths“ and anything goes. I would suggest, however, that such a stance may not be a fully matured relativism, but a transitional space of thinking in absolute terms where relativism is always right. Let us return to the previously raised challenge question then: Are there instances in which absolutist thinking would be appropriate in comparative adult education research? This question calls upon us individually as well as collectively to give serious thought to what we consider „truths“. In addition, another potential pitfall presents as follows: Although we might apprehend the contextuality of the observed phenomenon, we might knowingly or unknowingly, overtly or subtly, apprehend the phenomenon from the perceived „rightness“ of our own perspective. In conclusion, a final pitfall is the potential in our thinking of emphasizing differences as the groundwork, thus running the risk of polarizing phenomena. It is my position that if we come from a groundwork of viewing the commonalities in the human species that connect us with each other, the differences can be comprehended, compared, analyzed, and celebrated in a non-polarizing manner.

A purportedly final movement in adult cognitive development occurs when one is able to think dialectically. Phenomena previously perceived as different are now seen as complementary parts of a greater whole. It is the movement toward apprehending and comprehending that greater whole which enables one to perceive differences from the groundwork of the similarities inherent in our being members of the human species. So, for example, if we perceive each other and „connect“ with each other as human creatures beset with similar structural equipment to navigate life then our differences will take more of a peripheral than central focal point. Where relativistic thinking might still have the potential to yield fragmentation, dialectical thinking moves toward integration of the fragments, an effort it would seem that is sorely needed in our field and our world today. Alternate ways of thinking, contradictions, and ambiguities are accepted along with the recognition that thought processes are historically and culturally bound therefore constantly evolving and dynamic. Unfortunately, dialectical thinking is sometimes misperceived as an inability to take a stand or a position.

In life, as in research, one often uses multiple levels of thinking but it would seem that having a framework to remind us of that and to assist us in questioning how we think when we compare should prove useful. Thinking in either/or terms produces a very different kind of comparison than thinking contextually. Thinking dialectically moves us to thinking in terms of the similarities undergirding the human condition. Understanding the differences from the viewing point of our common identity as a human species leads likewise to a very different kind of research both in our approach as well as in our result. We must keep in mind, however, that adult cognition is a developmental phenomenon. Not all adults attain relativistic let alone dialectical thinking. At minimum, attention to the notion of how we think when we compare will help methodologically to move one to a deeper understanding of the self engaged in the comparison.

## *Thinking: Stages and States*

I have said that this trajectory is developmental in nature. The research basis of the knowledge claims has been evolving over the past few decades, particularly concentrated in a group of scholars and professionals who converge around the concept of postformal thinking. Beginning in the late 1970s/early 1980s this worldwide group of like-minded researchers began convening symposia (initially at Harvard University, but later rotated to other venues). Most embraced a cognitive developmental frame and were pursuing an understanding of how adults evolved cognitively beyond the Piagetian „level“ of formal operations, hence the term postformal.

One will recall that cognitive development a la Piaget purportedly reaches a pinnacle during and after adolescence with „formal operations“ thought wherein one can think symbolically. Hypothetico-deductive reasoning and binary logic are born and prevail. Post formal thinking moves one into thinking that can sustain competing logical systems and accept the equal validity of more than one logical analysis and that contradictory conclusions can be equally right. While outside the scope of this paper to engage in an extensive discussion of this territory, one is referred to the list of selected references appended for further inquiry.

The simplified three-fold progression of: discrete, relativistic, and dialectical thinking represents in developmental terms the principles of mental organization by which one's life is structured and which gives rise to a world view which enables one to think easily in terms of contextuality because one has become aware of the degree to which one's thinking is shaped and conditioned by one's external and internal environment. Thinking relativistically and particularly dialectically, so to speak, is a demand of postmodern life, according to authors such as Kegan (1994) who bemoans his observations that

for a sizeable portion of the population we may be „in over our heads“ without the developed mental structure to handle the demands of postmodern life. For example, the diversity movement permeating many parts of the globe demands that we recognize and celebrate a multiplicity of perspectives, values, ways of being (relativistic thought) and moreover that we build organizations and societies that accommodate a larger vision where all may fit and harmonize somehow (dialectical thought).

While the development progression (of „stages“ of adult cognitive movement) is corroborated for the most part, we as a human species can still catch glimpses of a „higher order“ thinking, even if our structures have not developed to that point. Continual exposure to such glimpses, to role models, and to dialogue acts as a catalyst in encouraging the development of one’s thinking (an experience, of course, which needs to be supported by everyday living, life, environment, and relationships). As adult educators, of course, we may next want to ask the question: Can such thinking be taught or learned? Volumes have now been written on critical thinking, creative thinking, and even intuition. We are talking herein, however, not of the content of one’s thinking but of the very structure itself. Sinnott (1998), particularly, has emphasized the role that educators of adults could play in incrementally „teaching“ post formal thinking and eventually catalyzing transformation in the structures of cognition. As comparativists in the field of adult education, doesn’t it make sense for us to do our part in investigating, illuminating, and dialoguing about the manner and mode of our thinking when engaged in comparison? After all, awareness is the first step.

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*Note:* See also the works of Pat Arlin, Susanne Cook-Greuter, Deidre Kramer,  
Gisela Labouvie-Vief, Mel Miller, K. Riegel, and others.

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*T*HE END OF IDEOLOGY AND HISTORY  
DEBATE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF COMPARATIVE ADULT EDUCATION  
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*Introduction*

There has been a global debate in the academic word during the past decade on Fukuyama's (1989, 1992) thesis that capitalism and liberal democracy have now triumphed beyond any potential challenge after the fall of communism. Comparative adult education (CAE) scholars have not discussed its vital implications for the philosophical bases of their field. I have attempted to fill this lacuna. I contend that Fukuyama's foreclosure of the ideological debate and his declaration of the arrival of the end of history and the last man smack of politics and gross ignorance of history of other times and climes. He compares men and historical movements from the myopic perspective of capitalism, which he declares as the ultimate winner. I also discuss the need for a more comprehensive value system that can provide metatheoretical bases for all basic and applied social sciences including CAE.

Destutt de Tracy invented the term ideology as a hermeneutic device for analyzing general ideas into sensations. In the field of philosophy, it is treated as a substitute for metaphysics. Napoleon utilized it as a derogatory term to encompass as all philosophies whose appeal was popular. Economists use it to denounce all notions that do not result in added value. Sadly, in the Western popular media, the term ideology has been used very loosely to discredit any dissent from dominant opinion. More seriously, however, it has now come to mean any ideas or philosophical program (Runes 1955). Here, let me distinguish between the two phrases of this preceding general meaning. I mean by