

Cross National Comparison and National Contexts: Is what we Compare Comparable?

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Foreword

This publication¹ comes out of the *Strategic Program for Research on Globalization and Internationalization: welfare, work, legitimacy and globalization*, at the Stein Rokkan Centre for Social Studies at Bergen University Research Foundation. This program is designed as a University of Bergen research network, and its primary area of activity is the study of changes in *welfare and labor market institutions* as they are played out in the debate on globalization and internationalization.

Issues of distribution, regulation and fairness are central to the program, which incorporates research in sociology, political science, economics, history and philosophy. One basic premise for program research is that focusing on welfare and labor market institutions can provide important insights into other areas of society and that it can also shed light on other globalization issues, such as the status of the nation state and conditions for democratic governance.

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Abstract

The theme of this paper is how to engage in conceptual traveling while simultaneously avoid conceptual stretching: At the one hand we need concepts general enough to grasp essential features of the national contexts under investigation, yet at the other hand we run the risk of using concepts broad enough to grasp everything – and thereby nothing.

This is a major challenge if we understand comparisons and concepts as basic tools in social sciences. Insufficient tools do not only complicate the research process e.g. by lacking or inadequate information, it also cause difficulties in terms of explanations and presentation of analysis. The likelihood of translations-errors, over- and under-interpretations is a continuous risk in comparative oriented research. That is, we either lack the conceptual tools necessary to get a grip on what is really «out there», or we frame the phenomenon differently than in its original context.

Dilemmas like these are to a great extent to be explained by essential features of social science, where the researcher not only is part of the context being researched but also has to deal with the interpretations of the units under investigations. In the paper I concretize some of these challenges by examples from my own comparative oriented research, and discuss different options in dealing with them.

Sammendrag

Dette notatet handler om hvordan å drive det Sartori (1970:1034) betegner som *conceptual traveling* og samtidig unngå *conceptual stretching*: Begreper må være generelle nok til å kunne brukes på tvers av enheter, uten at begrepene av den grunn blir så løse og upresise at de sier alt og ingenting. Dette er en høyst aktuell utfordring all den tid vi forstår komparasjon og begreper som grunnleggende samfunnsvitenskapelige verktøy. Dårlige verktøy skaper problemer for forskningen, i form av ufullstendige data, mangelfulle analyser og fremstillinger.

Den overordnede problemstillingen kan formuleres på følgende måte: *Er det «det samme» som sammenlignes ved komparasjon på tvers av nasjonale og politiske kontekster?* Som en utdypning vil jeg først diskutere begrepsbruk i sammenheng med mitt pågående doktorgradsprosjekt. En kort gjennomgang av potensielle oversettelsesproblemer i forhold til sentrale begreper som «velferd» og «velferdsstat» bidrar til å konkretisere og aktualisere problemstillingen. Samtidig blir behovet for å koble det fagspesifikke og det generelt vitenskapsteoretiske synliggjort: Kan vi i det hele tatt kan gjøre gode eller «rette» fortolkninger av verden, eller iallfall vite at de er gode eller «rette»?

Dette spørsmålet fører frem mot paperets hoveddel: forbindelsen mellom problemstillingen og vitenskapsteoriens term om den hermeneutiske sirkel. Mens «hermeneutikk» har å gjøre med fortolkning av meningsfulle fenomener og beskrivelser av vilkårene for at forståelse av mening skal være mulig, viser «den hermeneutiske sirkel» til forbindelsene mellom det som skal fortolkes og forskerens forforståelse. Ved å ligge i skjæringspunktet mellom flere sentrale vitenskapsteoretiske diskusjoner kan termen være en mulighet til å komme bak mer fagspesifikke debatter og gi alternative innfallsvinkler til spørsmålet om hvorvidt det er «det samme» som sammenlignes ved tverrnasjonal komparasjon. På bakgrunn av den vitenskapsteoretiske gjennomgangen i essayet blir oversettelsesproblematikken på ny trukket frem og diskutert. Hvilke forskningsmessige utfordringer står prosjektet mitt ovenfor og i hvilken grad fungerer vitenskapsteorien og hermeneutikken som svar på disse utfordringene?

Avslutningsvis tar jeg opp igjen den innledende problemstillingen *Er det 'det samme' som sammenlignes ved tverrnasjonal komparasjon?* Konklusjonen er nei, strengt tatt ikke og jeg summerer opp den teoretiske, praktiske og forskningsmessige betydningen av dette.

Introduction

To compare is a basic activity in science as well as in everyday life. The focus of this paper is social science however, that more systematically has developed comparison as a primary method and source for knowledge. To a great extent social science deals with *interpretations* and *meanings*, and hereby comparison can be viewed a basic tool to get grip on the social world. In relating one phenomenon to another, the researcher achieves a different kind of understanding than if viewed in isolation. Persons as well as policy areas, institutions and states are in principle comparable; and number of units and level of abstraction can vary substantially. In other words: a comparative approach is broadly compound as well as broadly applicable.

Yet there are also important practical and methodological challenges associated with a comparative research design. The starting point for this paper is how to secure *conceptual traveling* while simultaneously avoid *conceptual stretching* (Sartori 1970:1034): What needed are concepts broad enough to be applicable across units, without being so general that they say everything – and thereby nothing. The distinction between traveling and stretching touch upon the vary basis of how to achieve, as well as produce, knowledge: It highlights central aspects of the relationship between the researcher and the «reality» being researched, and between our understandings and our research. Not only is the social scientist a part of the social reality to be interpreted; the other actors taking part are also continuously interpreting this reality. And when it comes to cross-national research, the social scientist is also bringing his or her cultural and cognitive «baggage» to the reality being analyzed.

Based on this my initial question goes as follows: *Do we compare the «the same» phenomenon when we compare across national and political contexts?* In order to elaborate this the first part of the paper is focusing on some challenges I meet in my own research. The aim of this is twofold. First it serves to concretize some of the rather general points being discussed later on. This is also the reason why I deal with my considerations regarding cases and design in some length. Second it serves to throw light upon the relevance of linking specific disciplinary approaches or -traditions to general scientific subjects: How are we to make accurate and relevant interpretations of the social world, or at least know whether they are accurate and relevant?

In order to deal with this, the second part of the paper is aimed at relating the initial question of cross-national comparability to a hermeneutic approach, or more specific to the term «hermeneutic circle» (Gadamer 1960, Krogh 2000). While «hermeneutic» has to do with interpretations of meaningful phenomenon and the conditions which on meaning is made possible, «the hermeneutic circle» links the social world under investigation with the social scientists' basic assumptions and understandings. These terms are helpful in moving beyond more disciplinary debates and offers alternative approaches to my initial questions. This also contributes in throwing new lights over the problem of translation-errors both in my own project and more generally. Based on the foregoing discussions I conclude by saying that actually we

are not comparing «the same» in cross-national comparisons and sum up the theoretical and practical implications of this.

People, not their eyes, see²

My theme and questions then to a great extent focus on use of concepts, in that concepts are tools to understand the world. We see through concepts so to speak. Occasionally this and the continuous consideration between traveling and stretching (Sartori 1970) have resulted in disciplinary controversies over whether comparative oriented research is possible or at least relevant.³ But what does it really mean to «see through concepts» and how are we to move beyond more disciplinary discussions?

Basically, seeing through concepts implies that our views of the world necessarily build upon certain assumptions. Every society and social system requires a certain extent of shared perceptions etc. For example; a concept and phenomenon like the «welfare state» requires a (at least minimal level of) shared perceptions over what are ought to be societal responsibilities and tasks – and what does not. The concept also intersects and calls for other concepts like rights/duties, public/private, individual /society etc. Eventual problems first occur if we apply our understandings of «the welfare state» on other (welfare-) states, a point soon to be elaborated. In doing so we run the risk of ending up with «empty» concepts; that is we ignore central aspects of a phenomenon because they are not included in our conceptual apparatus. Also we run the risk of over- or under-interpret what is really «out there». That is, that due to our conceptual understandings we stress a phenomenon more or less than in its initial context.

Strictly speaking the questions «*Do we compare the 'the same' phenomenon when we compare across national and political contexts?*» and «*Is what we compare comparable?*» have quite different meanings. Two phenomena are never identical – and if they were there were no sense in comparing them. Although they may have *features* that make us interested in comparing, either because they seem «unexpectedly» different or similar. This has been characterized as *most different* and *most similar system design* (Przeworski and Teune 1970). A most different system design implies that the similarities we find when comparing units that differs sharply in most aspects are highly relevant; they are *despite of* rather than because of. Several (potential) explanatory factors can be excluded or kept «constant» already at first place, in contrast to a most similar system design. Here we compare units being as similar as possible, based on the assumption that the differences then appearing are highly significant. In other words, choice of design is closely related to what we intend to explain; similarities across differences, or differences across similarities. Regardless of design however abstraction is an important precondition for all comparison. When comparing we stress some aspects at expenses of others: Specific similarities or differences are viewed as relevant while others are being ignored or defined as irrelevant. Then it is crucial to questioning what is underpinning the abstractions.

Challenges related to abstractions and translations, as well as over- and under-interpretations are highly relevant for social sciences. To a great extent these sciences are based on the assumptions of human activities and the results thereof are *meaningful*

phenomenons but nevertheless in needs of interpretations to be understandable (Gilje and Grimen 1993). In that social science can be viewed as an interpretative and meaning-oriented process, and thereby as a hermeneutic process. Another important characteristic is the scientist being part of, and also needs to deal with, a social world where the social actors to be researched upon, already have their own notions and interpretations of causal relations, problems, solutions etc. By that, social sciences, in contrast to for example natural sciences, is characterized by a kind of *double-hermeneutic* (Giddens 1993). But before dealing with hermeneutic more generally, it will be useful to concretize these initial issues by relating it to my own doctoral research.

Two states, four welfare programs and various levels of controversy

The ongoing thesis, with the preliminary title: *National Politics and Global Ideas? Welfare, Work and Legitimacy in Norway and the United States* deals with the parliamentary debates over four contemporary welfare programs; two in Norway (*cash for care* and *transitional allowance*) and two in the United States (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)). Despite different national contexts the policy debates seem to point towards arguments, principles and ideological cleavages not to be captured solely by traditional welfare typologies (Esping-Andersen 1990). Apparently then we deal with ideas and perceptions traveling across countries and welfare-regimes. Briefly we can assume that by analyzing how different arrangements are being debated in different national contexts we are also able to «unveil» deep-rooted values in these contexts. Even though Norway and the United States stand out as «most different» cases in several aspects, this is especially the case in terms of welfare models or regimes. Here the U.S. is viewed as something near to the prototype of the *liberal welfare regime* which «*in their contemporary forms reflect a political commitment to minimize the state, to individualize risks, and to promote market solutions*» (Esping-Andersen 1999:74–75). Norway on the other hand (as well as the two other Scandinavian countries) is virtually synonymous with the social democratic welfare regime, characterized by universalism, comprehensive risk coverage, generous benefits levels, and egalitarianism (ibid:78). Another hallmark is de-commodification, or the effort to minimize dependency upon market.

In both countries however contemporary political debates are often accused of being if not actually non existent, than at least dull and based on temporary cases rather than larger ideological or value oriented questions. This is also the case when it comes to welfare issues and -policy. People are said to engage only in issues that gain their own (economical) interests and in other respect acknowledge status quo. If this is the general picture however, my project demonstrates that there are plenty of pieces that do not fit in.

In Norway prior to the implementation of the 1998 cash for care reform, there were comprehensive and heated debates among politicians, mass media and the public in general. Very briefly cash for care is a universal reform were all parents to children age one to three years old can choose to receive 3000 NOK (approximately \$430) per

month in order to achieve more flexibility and freedom of choice in organizing child care. The only criterion for taking use of the program is not simultaneously taking use of state sponsored childcare services, which in practice mean all Norwegian kindergartens. Except from that, the parents are free to organize their childcare needs and spend the payment as they like to.

Not since voting over EU membership in 1994 has the political temperature been higher and the cleavages clearer than when it came to cash for care. Quite contradictory to the general consensus oriented and rather modest political climate characterizing Norway it was like *everyone*, and not only the parents involved, had very strong opinions on this issue. Why, I started to wonder, did everyone get so involved in a program that after all is optional and matters to a relatively small group of the population for a relatively limited period of time? Probable, I figured out, it had something to do with the cash for care reform challenging not only the traditional «work line» (*arbeidslinjen*) in Norwegian welfare policy but also fundamental cleavages and values over the relations between public – private, individual- society, gender roles and notions of equality etc.

This called my attention to United States and the 1996 welfare reform. Here in moving from AFDC to TANF, or «from welfare to work», *wage work* became like a mantra for ending welfare dependency, idleness, teenage pregnancies, out of wedlock births, or what is also been labeled «the culture of poverty» (Murray 1984, Mead 1986, 1992). Despite welfares` controversial status, the 1996 welfare reform is in general viewed a success among mass medias, politicians and the general public. Mostly this is due to more than 50 percent reduction in the number of welfare recipients in the first five years after the reform and a marked increase in employment.

Why is it then, my next question turned out, that in the late 1990`s the «women-friendly» Norway experienced a welfare reform not aimed at increasing gender equality through labor, while simultaneously the more «traditional» United States implemented a reform where «wage work» was the key word. Could it have something to do with the programs being directed to different groups? That is, every parent with children age one to three are principally eligible for cash-for-care, even though the majority of users turn out to be two parents families. On the other hand, only poor single-parent families – that is poor single mothers – are eligible for TANF. To what extent do different social groups meet different political expectations and experience various level of choice (or lack thereof) when it comes to how to organize towards state and market? Do for example married or cohabitant parents (mothers) have larger rooms for maneuvers than single ones, and if so how and why?

In order to meet these questions I realized that two welfare programs, one from each country, were too scarce. What were needed were other welfare programs within each country that pointed in *opposite directions* than the original ones. In order to make the comparison relevant and be able to answer the questions I am interested in, they also had to be directed to individuals based on their parental and/or marital status, and I wanted women to constitute the clear majority of users. As far as possible I also searched for variations in level of controversy: Having two relative controversial welfare programs and adding two relative uncontroversial ones, opens for contrasts and create a kind of «most different system design» – also within each country. That is how transitional allowance and earned income tax credit entered the thesis.

While cash for care was being heavily debated and then implemented in Norway, *transitional allowance*, a cash and service-based program for single parent, had undergone major changes without any public debate at all (actually it happened so quietly that I, not particular involved with the issue, noticed it by coincident a few years later when studying cash- for- care). From the implementation in 1964 and until 1998 being lone parents with limited income and youngest child under the age of 10, was the only criterion for receiving transitional allowance. More generous transfers though for a shorter period of time characterized the changes in 1998. All single parents with limited income and the youngest child under three years old were still eligible to transitional allowance, independently of eventual paid work. From then on however, wage-work or education is an absolute claim for until two years more of further transfers, as long as the youngest child is under the age of eight. Or in other words: «*The new system maintained that recipients of allowance should be more active in the labour market and that no one should receive allowance for more than three years (with the possibility of an extension of two more years if the recipient was in education)*» (Fjær and Syltevik 2002:x). What makes major *restrictions* in a mean-tested program for single parent only so unproblematic or uncontested compared to a contemporary universal program where people can choose to *receive* money? After all the Norwegian welfare state have always joined a very high level of popular support, and in general people want more, not less universal welfare programs (Hatland et.al. 2001).

Maybe finding a relatively uncontroversial U.S. welfare program would help explaining this apparently paradox? This turned out to be a difficult task however, especially when searching for welfare in the American sense of the term. Yet if searching for «welfare» in the broader Norwegian /Scandinavian meaning of the term, I would overcome this obstacle and be able to go on with my questions. As long as I had one «U.S. oriented» reform (transitional allowance; mean tested and for low income single parent only) in the Norwegian context, I figured out, I could also apply a more «European oriented» one in the U.S. context. Even though EITC is not part of the safety net associated with welfare, it has been characterized as «A real Antipoverty Program», it lack the stigma of public assistance, it is continuously being expanded and indexed for inflation, and it enjoy high level of support and popularity. Being a federal tax relief as well as a supplementary earning it is designed to solve the paradox of the «working poor», while simultaneously making low paid work more attractive than welfare.

Among my basic assumptions then is that in analyzing how different arrangements are being debated in different national contexts allows «unveiling» deep-rooted values in these contexts as well as highlighting the relation between the cross-national at the one hand and the national at the other. Yet, as with comparative cross-national research in general the project faces some basic challenges related to the introductory issue of *stretching* versus *traveling*. Being a Norwegian when doing research and data selection in the United States for example may contribute in me seeing and stressing differently than an American.⁴ This of course may have the advantage of alternative approaches and creative analysis, although it can also result in observations, interpretations and presentations that either over- or under-interpret what is «really» out there. The Norwegian concept «*velferd*» is not equal to the U.S. concept «welfare», and contradictory to the Norwegian «*velferdsstat*», the concept «welfare state» is not

common usage in the United States.⁵ So at the one hand concepts are indispensable tools when interpreting and understanding the social world, while at the other hand they are closely linked to cultural and cognitive views and beliefs. We need to be aware of these contextual differences in order to avoid «emptying» the concepts in use. Empty or imprecise concepts imply inferior tools for research: Not only will we have difficulties to translating from one context to another; it will also be difficult to get an adequate understanding of any context at all.

According to Sartori however this does not imply that we have to give up comparison, neither that comparative methods are inferior to other methods of research. Yet, «*the wider the world under investigation, the more we need conceptual tools that are able to travel*» (Sartori 1970:1034). It is important to start with clear and well-defined concepts, because we cannot measure anything if we do not hold clear perceptions of *what* we are to measure. Simultaneously our concepts are not to be so specific that comparison becomes impossible. In other words, all research continuously need to consider between generality and contents, which can be characterized as moving along a *ladder of abstraction* (Sartori 1970:1040). This lead back to the initial question of whether it is the «the same» phenomenon we compare when comparing across national and political contexts. What is the value of hermeneutic, that is interpretations of meanings and descriptions of the circumstances under which this is possible, when it comes to the translation-problems being emphasized in the foregoing pages. Is it a supplement to more discipline-specific theory?

Hermeneutic as a basis for scientific knowledge

We do not ask «What's that?» of every passing bicycle⁶

Hermeneutic is not a «method» in the conventional sense of the word, offering a «recipe» on how to perform certain scientific related activities. Rather it can be viewed as a common scientific basis (Krogh 2000:237). Thereby a hermeneutic approach is no substitute for specific disciplinary approaches. The point is rather that a disciplinary approach itself does not guarantee precise and relevant knowledge either. This is central work in Hans-Georgs Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), a hermeneutic work often considered a break with Descartes' teaching (Krogh 2000:245).

«*Doubt*» is the essential feature of Descartes' project. By doubting everything that in principle is doubttable, one will end up with a «core» of absolutely truths detached from cultural, social and historical preconditions the arguments goes. This detachment will then serve as a guarantor for a reliable scientific base of knowledge (Skirbekk and Gilje 1987:274). The critic of Gadamer have to do with this project moving in wrong direction, as well as being impossible in practice: We never start from «scratch» so to speak, and this is not an ideal either. Quite the contrary, our biases are the very preconditions for achieving an adequate understanding: We have to start *somewhere* in order to understand the past or different political and cultural systems. According to

Gadamer then there is really no other or better starting point than the knowledge already there, even though it results from our biases.

This pragmatism reveals a parallel between Sartori and Gadamer : Being more or less «captured» in context-specific concepts and notions is not an obstacle but a *precondition* for being able to interpret other cultural, political or historical contexts. And while Sartori prescribes a flexible or revisable clarification of concepts, Gadamer stresses how out preconditions or biases continuously face critiques and corrections when meeting «the real world». This also shows the relevance of linking hermeneutic at a rather general level and comparison at a more specific or disciplinary level: A hermeneutic approach stresses how our conceptual and cognitive «baggage» is related to specific contexts; an important corrective to political sciences` analyzes across national, political and cultural contexts.

The hermeneutic circle

What then, the question turns out, when I in my own doctoral project compare different «realities» (i.e. political and national contexts) and according to hermeneutic theory am unable to detach from my own? The relations between the researcher with his/her pre-understandings and the reality being research upon are in the very core of the term «hermeneutic circle» presented in the figure below. Yet it is important to stress that in practice this circle is more of a continuous process than a static tool one choose to take us of or not. The transitions from one phase to another will thereby be more fluid than what the figure allows for. But the figure demonstrates quite well how we continuously adjust our understanding to the «real world» and achieve new and extended knowledge. This new knowledge in turn contributes to us having another view of the world than what we had at the first place, and so on.

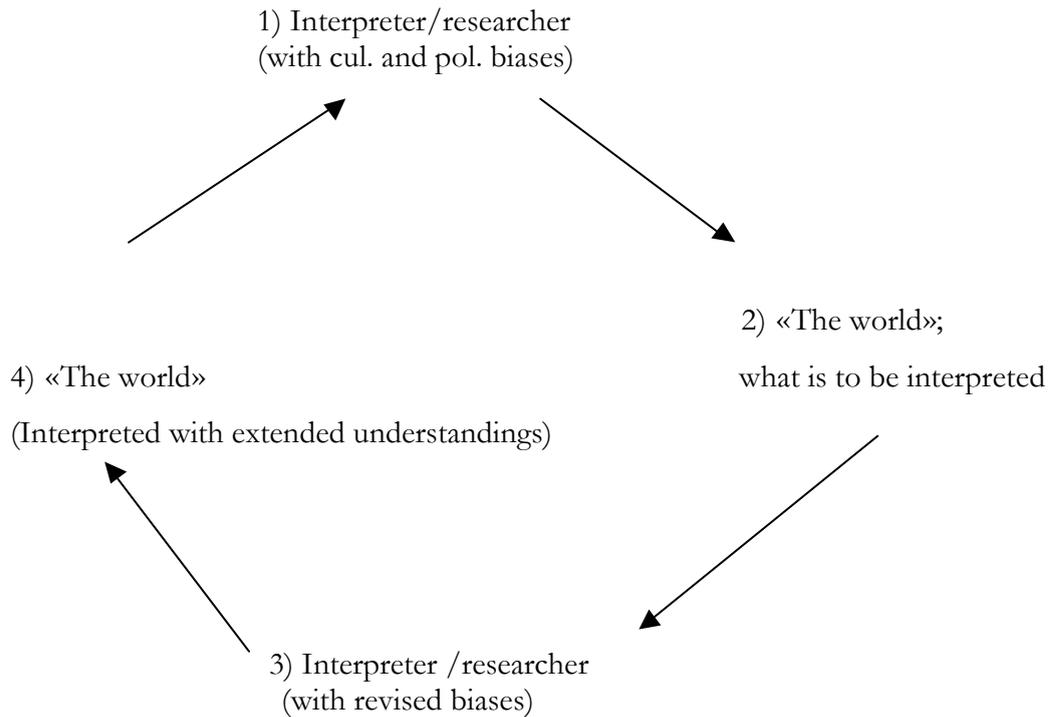


Figure 1. *Gadamer's version of the hermeneutic circle*⁷

This figure also demonstrates the importance of biases and pre-understandings. Rather than being obstacles, they are *necessities* for being able to enter the circle – and thereby for being able to make meaningful interpretations and statements of the surrounding world. The following discussion is based on the circles' two main components – that is what we are to interpret and what we interpret with – in order to find out how the interactions between these add the initial question of whether we compare 'the same' when comparing across nations.

What is to be interpreted; the social world as an interpretative object

As already mentioned, research within the social sciences is to a large extent a process of interpretation and search for meanings. The units under investigation are most likely social systems or -institutions like states, organizations etc. with distinct norms, values, rules and so on. Within these units there are actors (groups or individuals) with their own interpretations of the situations they are parts of.

Due to the initial issue of whether we compare «the same» in cross-national comparisons the question of which realities are regarded valid (and which one invalid) becomes highly relevant. Put another way; is it the researcher or the ones being researched who has the most «valid» or «realistic» reality? There are two major

traditions for approaching this question. One tradition, represented by Durkheim, states that the role of the researcher is to forget about the actors and search for the actual and latent explanations on why a society is the way it is. Another tradition, represented by Weber, states the opposite: The role of the researcher is to get grip on and build the research upon the actors' own interpretations and descriptions. Still there is also a third approach, represented by Giddens, searching for direct interpretations *as well as* reconstructions by the researcher. The following pages are not aimed at an extensive presentation of Durkheim, Weber and Giddens, but rather to demonstrate the importance, relevance and conflicting views of how an interpretative comparative method is to be carried out.

Durkheim: The actors as «disturbers»

A «durkheimian» approach is based on the actual and contemporary situation. No matter how multiple and complex this may appear it always builds upon a distinct, underlying structure. For Durkheim, these *elementary forms* are the focus of interest and a comparative approach is first and foremost the mean to achieve depth-based knowledge. In that the «durkheimian» approach is closely linked to natural science research: If the social sciences intend to be scientific, they need to overcome the focus of uniqueness and details: It is the societies themselves – or the *social species* – that are to be studied. Societal phenomena are *real* phenomena and thereby details and individuals becomes of minor importance. Quite the contrary the role of the scientist is to move beyond the apparently and manifest, and search for the latent and authentic (Durkheim 1972, Gilje and Grimen 1993). For Durkheim then only the scientist has access to what is «really there», and consequently to the comparability of the social world.

Weber: The actors as the primary source of knowledge

Contradictory to Durkheim, Weber claims that the societal complexity only allows for strictly limited generalizations within the social sciences. What characterize social science are the intentions of explaining historical and contemporary complexity, rather than unveiling social «laws» and regularities. Therefore a comparative approach is always valuable, but in order to really understand a society the scientist need to go deeper: Because a society basically is nothing more than the sum of its individuals, all meaningful research and analysis are to be rooted in these individuals.

Yet, eventual limited generalizations are possible through *ideal-types*, that is a kind of «model» on which the actual and complex world can be held up against. In that the ideal-types are tools to understand the «divergent» social world (Weber 1971, Gilje and Grimen 1993). Simultaneously, they become *comparative tools* as the scientist stress some features (similar or different) at expense of others. By this the ideal-types also contribute in making the question of whether or not we are comparing «the same» less urgent, or at least in placing it on a more general level of abstraction.

Summing up, both Durkheim and Weber view comparison as a feature distinguishing social science from for example history and philosophy. Both theorists also understand the social world as complex, but while Durkheim searches for the underlying and constant in this complexity, Weber focuses on and intends to explain the plurality itself. Based on this, Giddens` position becomes something in between.

Giddens: Actors interpretations and scientific reconstruction

Central to Giddens is how social actors contribute in constituting the social world they are part of. This happens through their concepts and understanding, and whether or not the actors are aware of it. An example: our notions and opinions over gender biases within the work-sphere influence directly upon gender-relations. If we see these relations as non-existent or unproblematic we will, according to Giddens position, think and act differently than if we see gender biases as existent and problematic. Thereby the attitudes and actions of actors are central in creating the social world, which in turn is to be interpreted by the social scientist. Both parts are equal in terms of importance validity and relevance, and contribute equally to the social phenomena to be interpreted and mediated. The role of the scientist then is to relate directly to the social actors in order to get grip on their concepts and understandings, while simultaneously interpreting this from his or her research-questions and knowledge.

This brief presentation of Durkheim, Weber and Giddens demonstrate how abstractions and selections are central to comparative research as well as social science in general. However, the three theorists have different views on what is to be the basis for this. Neither do they offer a clear answer to the question of whose reality to be the valid one in social science research; an important point for the further discussion.

What are the interpretative tools; biases and the knowledge at hands

Seeing is not only the having of a visual experience; it is also the way in which the visual experience is had⁸

When interpreting we necessarily begin with some ideas of *what* to look for. Principally this goes for any science, but is of special relevance for comparative-based social science. In what follows I will discuss some central components in the pre-understanding of social actors. Important questions are to which extent pre-understanding and -knowledge can be made explicit; that is what it is based on and its relevance for the question of cross-national comparability.

Central to the hermeneutic approach is that meaningful phenomenons only make sense (are meaningful) in context. A rather obvious example serves to demonstrate this point; when seeing 11 men in blue outfits and 11 men in red ones running after a ball at a lawn, we see it as a soccer match. In other words; we already hold an understanding of what a soccer match is about, and what it takes to make a situation count as a soccer match rather than something else. Without this pre-understanding, or if the men ran

around without the outfits or the ball, the situation would either appear unintelligible or we would see it as something else.

In this there are clear lines back to translation-problems, under- and over-interpretations: *Seeing as* is qualitative different from *seeing that*, although they are both parts of seeing (Hanson 1972). The context, understanding and knowledge already held help us make sense of what we are seeing, that is «it saves us from re-identifying everything that meets our eye [...] We do not as ‘what’s s that?’ ` of every passing bicycle» (Hanson 1972:22).

Three components in pre-understanding

To say that the members of different groups may have different perceptions when confronted with the same stimuli is not to imply that they may have just any perceptions at all.⁹

So what are we looking through then? Gilje and Grimen (1993) discuss three components in an actors’ pre-understanding; *language and concepts*, *notions and beliefs*, and finally *personal experiences*.

The concepts available through language are decisive when it comes to what we can see and do. In a way we see the world through concepts; they direct our observations and make us stress something at expense of something else. Most important here however is that different languages create different concepts available for the social actors. Thereby the social actors may have different understandings and see different things even though they principally are watching «the same» (Hanson 1969, 1972). Again we see how translational problems become particularly highlighted in comparative studies; a point to be illustrated by my own research. It may be obvious enough that US «welfare» is not translatable to Norwegian «velferd» and that we thereby, strictly speaking, are not comparing «the same» phenomenon. A more relevant question though is what we then are comparing, or how to understand the concept: As benefits to the poor, and if so to all poor or certain groups? As something entitled through citizenship? As specific programs or reforms, or eventually as an expansive and including state? Although TANF, one of the programs I focus on, most often is understood as the prototype of welfare within the US opinion, each of the above alternatives finds support within literature at the field... And where the majority of Americans see «welfare», it may happen that that I as a Norwegian see something else – and that this misjudging remains unsolved.

In that way there is a «doubleness» linked to concepts. At the one hand we need them to be able to see and interpret the surrounding world. They are central for abstractions; that is seeing that something in a certain respect is common or similar, although in other respects different and unique. Based on available criteria we distinguish important, from less important and unimportant. Concepts and pre-understanding are thereby fundamental scientific (as well as everyday) tools. At the other hand the same conceptual apparatus is decisive when it comes to *what* we are able (and unable) to see and our potential interpretations of this phenomenon.

This leads to the question of why the societal actors hold the concept- and knowledge apparatus they do, and thereby to the second component discussed by Gilje and Grimen; *notions and beliefs*. The notions and beliefs hold influences upon what is taken for granted or regarded unproblematic and what is not. Or put another way: the worldviews of the social actors are «impregnated» by their understandings (Popper 1981:88). Notions and beliefs are closely linked to political, social and cultural situations; a point also demonstrated by the foregoing example.

This leads to the third component constituting pre-understanding; *personal experiences*. Basically this has to do with factors such as nationality, age, gender, race, class etc. influence upon the thoughts and understandings of social actors. E.g. a person who grew up in the US will have other experiences than a person who grew up in Norway.¹⁰ Here the way an actor meets and experiences the actions of other actors is stressed as a factor of special importance: For example, people will have different expectations and attitudes towards public officers depending on their views on what ought to be public versus private tasks and responsibilities (Gilje and Grimen 1993:14). The society we are part of (i.e. «social-democratic» versus «liberal») in other words influence strongly upon our notions and orientations.

For social science research this last point represent a highly adequate challenge: Contextual factors influence upon the interpretative scientist as well as the actors being interpreted (which also have their own interpretations of the social world the scientist aims to get a grip on – that is a kind of double-hermeneutic). My own research serves to illustrate this point: If an American and myself look upon the same welfare program, for example TANF, we do not see «the same». Of course I will be aware of US «welfare» being something else than Norwegian «velferd»; an awareness that as far as possible should be reflected when analyzing US welfare debates. Yet I cannot be certain about in which extent this is possible – or exactly *how* welfare is understood within the US context.¹¹ This uncertainty then represents potential problems for translations and presentations. Consequently it also represents a scientific problem that together with our pre-understanding as far as possible should be dealt with explicitly.

Interactions, reflections and revisions

«Now your thinking is to Norwegian»¹²

The foregoing discussion highlights how several factors influence upon our pre-understandings – and thereby upon what we do and do not see. Yet, the relations between what is to be interpreted and the interpreter are dynamic: It is mutual processes where not only the social world being researched but also the presuppositions and biases of the researcher, are being continuously questioned and adjusted. What exactly characterize these interactions will of course vary among the specific research-project and researchers, but here in the concluding part I will nevertheless deal with these interactions and its relevance at a more general level. The starting point however is a concrete example from my research stay in New York last fall.

A question central for my project is whether the same welfare programs influence differently upon different groups of women, i.e. through criteria for being eligible or more indirectly through what a specific program «symbolizes». In both cases, my assumptions go, this will affect women's «space» or rooms of maneuvers towards state and society. Anyhow, this question did not turn out very successfully when talking with US researchers. Either they answered «no» or «that depends on where she lives and the number of children she has». I did not understand the answers; neither did they understand my question. First when we all understood that we did not really understand anything, were we able to find a common frame for interpretation: My way of thinking and my questions were influenced by the universal Norwegian welfare state, and from that generalized from some women to US women in general. On the other hand; their answers and ways of thinking were influenced by the US welfare system with mean-tested and restricted welfare programs. Consequently, they were thinking of a specific group of women (so called «welfare mothers») not being quite relevant or representative for US women in general.

In linking this example to processes within the hermeneutic circle we firstly got a clearer picture of the interplay between our biases or pre-understandings and the social world to be interpreted and understood. To «meet with» the social world is in many ways a presupposition for clarifying the researchers initial assumptions. I.e. the initial misunderstandings resulted in us starting to reflect upon our concepts and ways of thinking. Consciousness and reflections are again necessary for being able to «adjust» ones initial understandings and biases.

Secondly the example demonstrates how a hermeneutic becomes relevant within comparative oriented research. In relating one phenomenon to another – like Norwegian «velferd» and US «welfare» – we get a different understanding of both than if seeing them separately. In that respect, and as should be clear by now, comparisons are to a great extent based on differences and abstractions. Strictly speaking then we never compare «the same», rather we focus on phenomena having characteristics that we view as important and comparable. We emphasize some aspects at the expense of others; that is we define some characteristics as more «important» and «relevant» than others. A hermeneutic approach turns out to be useful in getting grip on such processes and in questioning the basis for our abstractions. Simultaneously it highlights how and why the social scientist is unable to «equalize» own and others contexts.

Yet, as demonstrated through the paper such a conclusion does not weaken the importance of comparative social research. Rather the overall aim, from what has been discussed here, is being conscious and explicit when trying to conceptualize ones own and others contexts. This also implies that being aware that the context of others cannot be ones own (and the other way around), regardless of eventual questioning and adjusting of ones own understanding, Going back to Sartori we can say that conceptual traveling is an important precondition for avoiding conceptual stretching.

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Notes

¹ This is a translated and expanded version of my essay in theory of social science (*vitenskapsteori*) at Department of Comparative Politics, January 2003. I want to thank Petter Nafstad, Dag Stenvoll, Per Selle, Svanaug Fjær, Bente Nicolaysen, Stein Kuhnle, Tor Midtbø and Kari Wærness for useful comments on earlier versions of the essay.

² Hanson 1972:6

³ See for example (1973): «Is a science of comparative politics possible?». According to MacIntyre science deals with general knowledge. What makes comparative politics problematic then is the character of concepts applied. Yet it is important to note that the aim of MacIntyre is not to demonstrate «impossibility» but to highlight potential obstacles: Either we are unsure or unable to confirm that the phenomenon we compare actually is «the same» across contexts. Or eventually, we have to do with human rationality in general, which in the view of MacIntyre has nothing to do with science.

⁴ Of course all Americans do not have similar perceptions either, but at a more general level the argument goes to illustrate my points.

⁵ The very system is based upon the Social Security Act (1935) and has two main components: *social insurance* and *social assistance*. Only the last is associated with «welfare»; referring to TANF, food stamps and Medicaid. Underlying social assistance is the principle of public (minimum-) support, detached from eventual previous contributions. In contrast social insurance is based on the principle of previous contributions as the basis for public transfers and services i.e. retirement pensions and medical services (Medicare). These are services understood as deserved rights, mainly on the basis of work participation (Cook and Barrett 1992). While welfare (social assistance) is a highly controversial issue, there is a relatively high level of support for *Social Insurance* in the U.S. opinion.

⁶ Hanson (1972:22).

⁷ From Krogh (2000:249)

⁸ Hanson (1972:15).

⁹ Kuhn (1996:195).

¹⁰ Of course there will be differences within the U.S and Norwegian population as well.

¹¹ Again the argument goes as in footnote three; every comparisons – as well as general points – are based on abstractions.

¹² Professor in New York, September 2002

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