

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Nokkala, Terhi; Kosmützky, Anna; Blanco Ramirez, Gerardo; Cantwell, Brendan; Suspitsyna, Tatiana; Torres-Olave, Blanca

**Title:** Kicking off a Dialog on the Methodological Advancement of Comparative Higher Education Research

**Year:** 2020

**Version:**

**Copyright:** © The Authors, 2020

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Nokkala, T., Kosmützky, A., Blanco Ramirez, G., Cantwell, B., Suspitsyna, T., & Torres-Olave, B. (2020). Kicking off a Dialog on the Methodological Advancement of Comparative Higher Education Research. Unpublished supplementary material to Higher Education Quarterly Special Issue 'Towards a Methodology Discourse in Comparative Higher Education'; edited by Anna Kosmützky & Terhi Nokkala, 2020.

Terhi Nokkala, Anna Kosmützky, Gerardo Blanco Ramirez, Brendan Cantwell, Tatiana Suspitsyna, Blanca Torres-Olave

### **Kicking off a Dialogue on the Methodological Advancement of Comparative Higher Education Research**

*Unpublished supplementary material to the Higher Education Quarterly Special Issue 'Towards a Methodology Discourse in Comparative Higher Education'; edited by Anna Kosmützky & Terhi Nokkala, 2020.*

In planning the *Higher Education Quarterly* Special Issue 'Towards a Methodology Discourse in Comparative Higher Education', Anna Kosmützky and Terhi Nokkala wanted to initiate a dialogue among its authors that might allow for a critical investigation. The goal was to challenge the assumptions embedded in the research communities on both sides of the Atlantic and foster mutual insights and common purposes among people with positions based on different value systems.<sup>1</sup> As a group of US and Europe-based scholars of higher education with different epistemic traditions and disciplinary backgrounds, the authors' different approaches represent a spectrum of methodological and theoretical perspectives in higher education research. The purpose of the dialogue was to explore the most promising avenues for action in comparative higher education research. The decision to have a live discussion, rather than written contributions, stemmed from the knowledge that all authors are experienced scholars in international and comparative higher education research and having them speak with their own voice gives authority to their position, instead of relying on references of previous research. While all research stands on the 'shoulders of giants'<sup>2</sup>, in this dialogue we draw from our own experiences to search for common ground, to explore new ideas and perspectives, and to bring unexamined assumptions into the open. We do so by using concrete examples from our own careers to raise general issues in international comparative higher education research.

In preparation for the discussion, Kosmützky and Nokkala prepared a short input paper, sent to the participants in advance, highlighting four tensions related to positionality and embeddedness of higher education research, and researchers in different contexts:

“1) National contexts: There is a tension between the inherently national elements of higher education systems, such as certification, funding, and governance, and the international character of higher education institutions' work, and the embeddedness of higher education systems in international policies and transnational discourses that impact on them. From the perspective of international comparative research, this tension calls for an understanding of the specific characteristics and social dynamics of individual systems, while avoiding

---

<sup>1</sup> Not all authors of the special issue attended the ASHE conference and their voices are missing in this dialogue. Gerardo Blanco, who gave an insightful comment at the ASHE panel in which some of the early drafts of the special issue articles were presented, joined the conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Merton, R. K. (1965). *On the shoulders of giants: A Shandean postscript*. Harcourt.

methodological nationalism. How are such narratives and discourses linked to our comparative world outlook and our methodological core frameworks? What are their ideological consequences? Are there methodological experiences and recommendations that might help in solving this tension? Are there any ground rules that might guide comparative higher education in this?

- 2) Individual positionality: The national embeddedness of higher education impinges on our own positionality because our knowledge is necessarily always situated and bound to our core interpretative frameworks. How can we deal with our positionality in international comparative research when we work on ‘foreign’ countries? To what extent does our individual positionality and our career biographies determine our comparative cases and their foreignness and domesticity? How do our networks influence us?
- 3) Epistemic embeddedness: To what extent do disciplinary traditions and methodological trajectories influence our comparative questions, objects, and designs? How can such traditions stimulate each other and help us overcome blind spots reciprocally? What can higher education learn from its neighboring comparative (sub-)disciplines; such as comparative politics, comparative education, comparative sociology, respective their use of methods? How do we handle such ‘epistemic practicalities’ as unequal language competencies in accessing data from different countries, specific subject knowledge, and differences in contextual competencies?
- 4) Academia’s institutional structures: How does our institutional embeddedness impact our comparative objects and comparative research practice? How do we balance between our intellectual independence and the interests of our institutions, funders, and publishers? Can we get beyond the logics of our institutional environment; and explore perspectives for critical research? What can institutions, funders, and publishers do to support international comparative research? What might need to change in order to stimulate synergies instead of conflicts of interest?”<sup>3</sup>

The dialogue took the form of a one-and-a-half hour long discussion session on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2018 at the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) annual conference in Tampa, Florida. The discussion was recorded, transcribed, and edited by the authors.<sup>4</sup> The discussion highlighted some aspects that are not - perhaps due to the conventions of academic writing - often explored. These include the question of gates to the field and its gatekeepers, the location of vantage points and options of writing “from the inside,” the tension between positionality and having a common object, paths for innovation at the research front and the need for a certain conservatism in the training of students, and the relationship between personal

---

<sup>3</sup> Kosmützky and Nokkala input paper sent to the dialogue participants 18th October 2018.

<sup>4</sup> We thank Marc Weingart for carefully proof-reading the transcript of the dialogue session and for his help in turning our spoken language into a readable text and Tobias Bochmann for handling the transcription process.

responsibility, “field” ethics and paradigm shift. Thus, these aspects are essential for kicking off a broader dialogue on comparative higher education.

**Anna:** Welcome, colleagues, and friends, to our dialogue session on advancements of comparative higher education. Terhi and I invited you for an informal conversation to share our experiences as comparative researchers and to exchange our perspectives on the ‘state of the field.’ We are looking forward to hearing your opinions and exchanging arguments.

**Terhi:** To get the conversation started, I want to remind us of the short input paper that Anna and I sent out before this discussion, outlining four tensions related to international comparative higher education research. The first one of these was the tension between the national character of higher education systems, and the international character of higher education as an activity and global endeavor of higher education institutions. The second was related to our own individual positionality as comparative scholars, the impact our own positionalities have on the way we conduct comparative research. The third tension is related to the epistemological embeddedness in particular disciplines that similarly has an effect on how we think about comparative research. Finally, the fourth tension has to do with how the institutions of conducting and publishing research impact comparative research; what kinds of things do they value or shun. We don’t have to address these tensions in any particular order. Please just start somewhere.

### **Boundaries and Flows between the Global and the National Dimension**

**Tatiana:** I can enter the conversation by adding another aspect to the tension between global and national perspectives. I would like to emphasize that comparative international research in education (CIE) is not merely a scholarly undertaking. I see it from an Actor-Network Theory perspective as circulatory networks of knowledge, researchers, students, universities, agencies that fund CIE work, politicians that harness public opinion to formulate education policy priorities, etc. In this Latourian view of the field, CIE is comprised of cross-national flows of scientific artifacts, people, ideas, and capital with the most powerful flows and nodes mapping neatly on the Global North, where we also are positioned. Perhaps ironically, this discussion of comparative international education research is happening at a time when internationalization and globalization have become subjects of polarized political and legislative agendas and the value of science is a target of the “post-truth” skepticism in the U.S. and some European countries.<sup>5</sup>

**Blanca:** I find that movement and that change interesting and capable of telling us something about why we see certain reactions to, for example, globalization, or the notion of reduced

---

<sup>5</sup> Suspitsyna, T. (2019). Comparative and international education research in a post-truth era. *Higher Education Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12214>

internationality. We are seeing this turn towards nationalist politics and social movements and I am still trying to make sense of how to approach it.

**Anna:** I like the idea of flows because I think that in comparative higher education we need to study more phenomena that go beyond boundaries, and with a perspective on flows we would not naturalize boundaries. Flow has a connotation of unidirectionality; and for me it must be multi-level, multi-directional. But we should not forget actors, structures, and historical path dependencies and we also should not forget certain materialities either. They enable and hinder flows at the same time and are crucial for their dynamics.

**Terhi:** In a way, many of the structures that have to do with higher education and higher education institutions are nationally bound one way or another, so we cannot just forget about the national dimension. While higher education institutions may operate globally, they are certified nationally. If we are talking about degree bearing courses or degrees, then they are certified or licensed through a process which is typically a national process. The legitimate institutions by and large belong to some nationally or regionally bound system.

**Gerardo:** I think the question is really about vantage points. Unfortunately, in educational research, the default vantage point has been from the outside looking in, and we are just turning the corner around the fact that we are never outside of the structures that we are seeking to understand. Of course, depending on where you are situated, it is global, national or local because it really depends on what your motivation at any given moment is. From an institutional perspective, higher education institutions often communicate more with other institutions across borders than they do inside their national systems. But I think that is not a matter of quantifying the intensity of these connections, it rather depends on what the question we are trying to address is. It is a matter of vantage points, but I think we need to move away from the default of trying to be outside, because whether the question is national or global, it still assumes that we are looking at it from outer space.

**Terhi:** That brings us to the second tension that we talked about in preparing for this discussion, namely, positionality. Our knowledge is always in a way situated knowledge or embodied knowledge, which raises a question about the consequences this has for comparative research. So in conducting comparative research, can we be embedded or situated somehow in different sets of knowledge? Is our relationship to ‘other sets of knowledge’ always different from the primary system in which we are embedded? It is possible to escape being more inside one system than inside another, whatever the unit of analysis or system? And what is the strongest influence on our positionality? Is it our background in Western science, our gender and ethnicity or is it our international experiences if we consider ourselves as transnational academics? This is perhaps our first question and then resulting from that, the second question is whether there is a path to objectivity in international comparative research or whether that is even desirable?

### **Vantage Points and Positionality**

**Anna:** Where is actually the vantage point? We typically place vantage points outside, but can they be inside? Our contributions are always structured by our positionality, because that guides what you see and don't see. No position is without 'bias', no-one fully sees the whole world. There is no universal observer and our knowledge is always situated knowledge and embodied knowledge.

**Blanca:** I was just thinking about that as I listened to Gerardo: how do we write from the inside? In some ways that is partly what we tried to address in our article in the special issue.<sup>6</sup> Here we're trying to write our experiences as we are: Transnational scholars who have been identified as being of color or have been minoritized, depending on the context, it's not one or the other. We tend to focus a lot on context as territory but not as a unit of time, and we easily forget that the moment in which you are writing matters as well. For example, I would not write something now the same way I thought about it when I was an international student. My vantage point is very different. Positionality statements in research outputs are often superficial, brief mentions of how the researcher's positionality relates to the research in question. I understand that not all comparative or international research should be about the researcher. But at the same time, we cannot escape the need for reflexivity given our nature as human beings, in and of this earth, and of the contexts that shape us, be they social, geopolitical, cultural, temporal, academic and so on. And I am not talking only about qualitative research but quantitative research as well, what questions do we ask of our data? What questions don't we ask? Those are framed inevitably by our reference point(s). One of the advantages of collaboration is that it opens up the possibility of moving beyond the principle of homophily, of surrounding ourselves with those who think or believe as we do, or who have been trained to approach phenomena as we do. But how often does that actually happen? For example, some of the best work I have seen in academic mobility comes from human geography, not from higher education. I think breaking that disciplinary boundary is part of changing the vantage point, but it is challenging. We say we are doing interdisciplinary work, but we tend to continue to recycle the same things over and over. That's what I think is part of the problem.

**Anna:** I would fully agree to that, interdisciplinarity often becomes a sort of 'interdisciplinarity light,' because we agree too easily on common perspectives and denominators instead of making use of disciplinary differences. When sociologists and political scientists and historians, and economists and so on sit at the table, we should all discuss the same topic from different angles, but usually we don't. We should take more advantage of bringing the new theoretical knowledge and fresh methods from our own disciplinary fields to the comparative collaborative work within the field from other disciplines instead of intellectually remaining primarily in the higher education field.

---

<sup>6</sup> Torres-Olave, B., & Lee, J. J. (2019). Shifting positionalities across international locations: Embodied knowledge, time-geography, and the polyvalence of privilege. *Higher Education Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12216>

**Blanca:** That comes down to doctoral training in some places, for example, in the US, training HE scholars largely takes place in higher education programs. My initial background is in English as a foreign language and then I got into Higher Education as a field at the master's and doctoral level. My interest in other fields stems from a personal set of interests and experiences rather than from it being something that was actively encouraged in those programs. Perhaps this is why American higher education as a field has always struck me as very insular. It seems to me it just keeps investigating a limited (albeit important) set of topics, like access and retention, but truly novel approaches and questions are rare.

**Tatiana:** I just want to continue that thought, my own background is similar. I started learning English as a foreign language and then I got interested in social sciences and education. My master's and PhD degrees are in those fields. Training is how we reproduce Western epistemologies all over despite our backgrounds. As graduate students we learn Western epistemology, and mostly positivist methods, we are told that this is what we need to do.

**Blanca:** And you continue that because you need to get tenure.

**Tatiana:** Exactly. And once you are tenured, then you are free to explore, but in the meantime, you have spent a dozen years of your life changing your identity to fit this model, and you are proud of it, because that is an accomplishment in a way. Then you also participate in maintaining this knowledge regime and that particular set of methodologies. For people who have crossed boundaries and established themselves in a different context; it is very hard to maintain links to whatever region and nation they started in. Research agendas and methodologies have changed in the meantime, while only the initial training and maybe sensibilities remain. That's why I think the training of graduate students and bringing together both international and domestic graduate students is so important. Another important point is engaging the whole peer-reviewed journal business, because peer-reviewed publications serve as what Latour called "obligatory passage points." In order to enter the profession, you have to go through these journals, but by going through them you sign up to the whole project. Say, your project applies an African epistemology that does not conform to the standard positivist social science, which dominates higher education research in the US. It will be difficult to find a publication venue for such a project among the mainstream Western peer-reviewed journals.

**Anna:** This is an excellent description of the problem. It is about educational training and it is about conservatism of journals and about a normalizing process that may kill innovative ideas. But how can we break free from that?

### **Gates, Gatekeepers and Diverse Access Points**

**Terhi:** Who are the gatekeepers who could change that and make space in Western science for the indigenous knowledge for example? Or, perhaps instead of gatekeepers keeping the gates, this is more a matter of mobilizing the community to exercise a shared agency that allows for more variety in ways of doing research and appreciating different experiences?

**Brendan:** I am skeptical, not of the possibility of alternative social formations, but of the possibility of radically open social formations that operate without gatekeepers in some forms of authority. I think there is a real tension between recognition of the possible correct state of affairs or the current way something is known as not the only possibility or even was necessarily inevitable. I cannot imagine complete openness in the science system.

**Blanca:** But does there really need to be a binary of full closure, on the one hand, and full openness, on the other? Because I think what we are partly lacking now is an acceptance of other ways of looking at things and how those ways speak to the usual topics. Presenting things as a binary completely precludes the possibility of something new taking form. I am not sure whether the answer is changing the gatekeepers either; nobody can give us the key. You have to make the way so that others can follow that way more easily than you did, and there have to be more people taking those chances. That is why it is so heartening to see new scholars in training in international higher education, they come from much more diverse backgrounds than was the case even ten years ago. Nurturing that diversity is important, as is encouraging them to try and fail and try again. Because the stakes are so high in academia, we don't have enough openness to failure which leads to stagnation. Cultivating an attitude that allows for experimenting and also failing is the only way forward.

**Brendan:** However, in advising students, don't we have a responsibility to be a little bit conservative, as the students have to nevertheless survive in academia. Maybe they will create this new path, but maybe they don't, and the individual tolerance to failure also varies.

**Gerardo:** I acknowledge both realities; there are high stakes, and we should try to lower them. I think we can have a wider range of gatekeepers. Most epistemic communities have their own gatekeepers, so can we at least broaden those? Even taking a step by step approach to change, and continue doing work that is 'interdisciplinary light,' can we broaden the set of disciplines, engaging with disciplines that have traditionally not been acknowledged as informing our field of research? That would already constitute a step in the right direction.

**Anna:** So, you are advocating for more gates and more gatekeepers? Or perhaps rather than just more gates and gatekeepers, more access points?

**Tatiana:** What we are talking about is somewhat parallel to a paradigm shift. In the 1970s, all that social scientists knew was quantitative methodology. Then we saw the breakdown of the colonial empires, and the dismantling of the Man with a capital M. The traditional categories crumbled, and then we saw the rise of post-structuralism, which at first was opposed by many. Now it is accepted; and constructionism is an accepted methodology as well. Right now, we have at least 3,000 people in the United States who are members of the Comparative International Education Society; representing 110 countries and hundreds of institutions; and additionally, there are about 40 comparative international education societies around the globe and not all of them are English-speaking. Yet in the English language publications there is little interest in



what they have to offer. Therefore, I think there is a need for creating new frames of reference for the scholarly community; frames that recognize this multiplicity of perspectives. As individual researchers we also have a responsibility to contribute to the change. In doing a study, we attempt to fill gaps in the current literature, and in a way, to weave new knowledge in the body of the existing knowledge. By adding our scholarship to this growing field, we expand it, we turn it into existence, which means that other people will be part of it. I guess it is an incremental approach, but it is also recognizing that this is an inevitably collective enterprise.

**Blanca:** And it takes time.

**Terhi:** I wanted to go back to the idea of an organic way of thinking. This reminded me of something, Anna, what you said when you referenced the discussion about defining a case; and whether one has to choose in a binary manner either to be an insider or outsider. I wonder whether it is possible to entirely escape such categorizing; and to what extent human thinking is structured by categorizing things. We also like to find ourselves in categories.

**Anna:** That is an important question and there are various possible answers. I would like to draw from Foucauldian discourse perspective in this discussion. Foucault argues for a tentative or groping search and for moving in concentric circles. He was arguing for changing one's perspective in a flexible manner; in and out with regard to one's object and not merely sticking to a single vantage point. He is talking about a variable perspective, not a perspective that is from a vantage point. I think this helps us to move beyond dichotomies which merely are hegemonic techniques. I believe by moving inside-out, we can be insiders and outsiders at the same time. Or, as anthropologists would put it, move between degrees of insiderness and outsidersness. We discuss such perspectives in our contribution to the special issue.<sup>7</sup>

**Terhi:** But how does that relate to comparative higher education where one of the key questions is finding what your case is, what your unit of analysis is, and what you are actually comparing? One of the points is that researchers do not have to pre-construct their cases. A case is something that can emerge in the course of the research process.

**Gerardo:** Well, I think in some ways comparative and international education is moving in that direction; away from the traditional notion of the researcher being outside of a given national container, and objectively comparing context A with context B. Now you situate yourself as a researcher alternatively in context A and then in context B, and then you look at your experience from those perspectives. The categories may not be the same because it is not the same to be in one national context as another. While there are some risks related to such an approach, there is also something for us to learn; and having an open and honest dialogue about such pros and cons would be beneficial.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kosmützky, A., Nokkala, T., Diogo, S. (2020). Between Context and Comparability: Exploring New Solutions for a Familiar Methodological Problem in Qualitative Comparative Research. *Higher Education Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1111/HEQU.12255.

**Tatiana:** I think when the comparison is done across the Global North and the Global South, there is always a danger that by choosing or determining a unit of analysis, you in fact re-colonize another participant's space. Comparative work is an opportunity for researchers to engage in another community and explore the issues meaningful in that community, be it a family, nation, or a given locale like a town or a village; and to examine the space and the boundaries of that system. The discourse on international aid and development, and related policies are typically criticized for using concepts and categories created in the Western context; rather than arising from the contexts of developing nations.

**Blanca:** I agree with you; however, I would like to add some nuance. For example, in international collaborations, such as the CINHEKS project,<sup>8</sup> there can be research teams based in different countries, however, the people working in those teams may hold multiple identities and national backgrounds. So, the academics working in, say, a US research team, may not originally come from the US. So, research thus contains an element of action research participation. So, we have to be very specific about what we mean by local and indigenous community. For example, the point we are making in our article in the special issue is that while as a researcher from Mexico, I come from a dominant societal group in Mexico, I grew up as part of the middle class, had access to education in an urban context. I am not from an indigenous community. When I say I am an expert or that I have expertise in Mexican higher education or in Mexico, I am making a whole set of assumptions about who lives in Mexico. I was not, however, trained in Mexico in terms of my thinking on higher education. This may cause me to merely replicate the same thing because it makes sense based on my education, rather than actually adding something that is new or idiosyncratic to whatever the context the unit of analysis is.

### **Higher Education as an Object, Researcher Education and Training, and Field Conventions**

**Brendan:** So far, our discussion has mostly focused on subjects and subjectivities and whether a subject should be pluralized, pragmatized, deconstructed and we spent almost no time discussing the object, such as what is higher education?<sup>9</sup> My question is, does the object matter? If everyone identifies subjectively as the higher education researcher in the room, I will make that assumption that that's true; that we are higher education researchers. Let me temporarily impose that upon you. Does that shared identity as higher education researchers mean that we have some common relationship with the object or that we have a common understanding of what the object is or ought to be?

---

<sup>8</sup> CINHEKS (Change in Networks, Higher Education and Knowledge Societies) was an international comparative research project funded by the European Science Foundation in the years 2009-2012. The investigation addressed the networking of higher education institutions in the United States, Germany, Finland, United Kingdom, Portugal and Russia. Authors Torres-Olave, Kosmützky and Nokkala first got to know each other in the context of the CINHEKS project. The experiences made during the CINHEKS project also ignited Kosmützky and Nokkala's interest in comparative methodology.

<sup>9</sup> Cantwell, B.(2020) Explanatory accounts in international and comparative higher education research. *Higher Education Quarterly*. DOI: 10.1111/hequ.12246

**Terhi:** I don't think it necessarily means that. If we take our own embeddedness in different contexts seriously, we cannot necessarily assume that how we understand higher education or higher education research or higher education institutions is the same for somebody coming from Finland compared with somebody coming from the US, or for somebody having a transnational identity. We can identify as part of a larger community, but we cannot assume that our understanding of the object is similar. Blanca, you raised CINHEKS as an example. My task as the Finnish partner for the work package three of the CINHEKS project was to conduct discourse analysis of the policy discourse in five countries. I wonder to what extent it makes any sense to even construct collaborative comparative research projects that way; meaning that a single person embedded in a single country context was responsible for a given research approach for all the countries involved in the project. Discourse analysis as a methodology is so dependent on local understandings. Yet we had one person responsible for discourse analysis for several countries and we argued that this is a truly international comparative project because the element of the cross-country comparison is in the hands of a single team or single person; rather the country-based teams being primarily responsible for the perspective of their respective countries. In traditional collaborative comparative research settings, a country team is responsible for their own country, and then try to write something across those cases. We perceived in the CINHEKS study that the basis for this project was comparative because we had teams that were responsible for particular aspects, such as policy discourse or survey data, for all of the countries. However, thinking of a research methodology that is so localized as the discourse analysis is, does it make sense to even try and construct that kind of a project?

**Blanca:** It is important to be humble and open about the limitations of different research designs; what they can and cannot do. In the CINHEKS project we debated the concepts and design extensively across teams and over many months of ongoing negotiation. For me, as a doctoral student, those were some of the most constructive and instructive aspects of understanding the multiple objects of study, for example, national policies or academic practices, because they made me really have to grapple with what the various teams meant even by a term as seemingly innocuous as "CV." We initially assumed its meaning translated unambiguously and that we were talking about the same cultural object. However, it turned out to be far more complicated than that, especially as an artifact for data collection (assumed to be publicly available in US institutions, not so in many European countries, for example). Thus, in making claims in research, we have to make explicit that this is a reality that we came to an agreement on, this is the positionality of the researchers and here is what you can and may not be able to claim based on this analysis.

**Terhi:** Coming back to the point about the importance of researcher training; it thus becomes our responsibility, an obligation towards the next generation, to expose them to situations where they are forced to realize that there is another reality.

**Anna:** Both of you, Blanca and Terhi, answered Brendan's questions from the national perspective, and I could also answer the question from a disciplinary perspective. I see myself as

a sociologist and I am in-between two fields, higher education and science and technology studies (STS). What I see is that both fields have a lot in common, but I also see the differences. In STS, no one talks about national boundaries. Disciplines have their own boundaries but they are not national. Science has other structures, like research groups and disciplines, and they are not national.

**Gerardo:** What if higher education as an object of study was like that? That seems to me a very important question. What if higher education is not a set of structures, a set of contexts, but what if we thought about higher education more as the study of a set of assumptions? I think that aligns more with the global perspective. The assumptions may be different, but they are something that we can actually study comparatively. What if higher education as an object of study does not have to be a material object, but rather a set of assumptions that gets transmitted to other generations, that gets enacted through material structures, resources, practices and so on? What if what we study is a set of assumptions rather than a set of objects? That is, not material objects, but an object of study. I think that opens up a whole new set of possibilities. It is almost like a study of comparative religion rather than comparative politics.

**Tatiana:** I think the study of higher education involves both assumptions and materiality. In the process of enactment, you always have the agency to change the result, which can lead to a change in the practice. Social science, and any scientific field, works through consensus. Whether there is a loose consensus or a tight consensus depends on how stable the scholarly networks are around a particular issue or an area of study. What we are doing now is building that consensus around an unstructured set of ideas of what higher education is. We hope that when we solidify and demonstrate the result of that effort, we will attract more people to participate in this discussion. We will also say that research as a process is indeed messy and that there are many perspectives and complexities, and this is the combination of both social and material effects. You have to build a consensus among scholarly communities, which also means that you have to build those communities.

**Terhi:** This brings us back to the original question we had for this dialogue. Can we have some common rules for comparative research?

**Tatiana:** We can have a set of guiding principles. These can include being attentive to the context, inquisitive of the other voices, being accepting of non-Western perspectives; paying attention to research and discussions that are taking place in languages other than English, and so on.

**Terhi:** The question is then: Aren't we as researchers then imposing that context when we determine our case or selection of cases, and selection of what counts as a context? Thus, are we imposing that context by making assumptions of what the context is to our objects of study? It may be that what matters as a context is their understanding of what the context is and not our prescribed understanding of what the context is.

**Tatiana:** There is always a risk of that.

**Brendan:** If I think of the time, I have been part of this community, the number of gatekeepers and who the gatekeepers are has changed a lot in a short time. The possibilities have changed a lot. But some things haven't changed. Ten, twelve, fifteen years ago there would have been an interest in the educational experiences of immigrant students, and today there is an interest in the educational experiences of immigrant students. But the motivation for that interest, the theories and also who is speaking about the students, these things have changed. What hasn't changed, though, is that the people who are conducting this research, the principals of the conference here within the US field do not consider themselves comparativists or as being engaged in international comparative research. People who identify as being international and comparative researchers don't think that what they are doing is international or comparative research. Then the question that I have is, what is international comparative research, if the educational experiences of immigrant children are not international comparative research?

**Anna:** I would also say this is a result of the old-fashioned international comparative paradigm which argues that we only need to compare empirical phenomena in two different countries, but the world is more complex than that. If individuals are our objects, they cross country boundaries in many ways: as refugees, as migrants, as international scholars and so on. It makes no sense to limit it to a study of empirical phenomena in two different countries, and it makes perfect sense to combine both international and comparative in one perspective.

**Blanca:** So, in that sense I think that speaks to your question about whether the object matters. In this case it does, because you are changing a paradigm. You are saying it is too complex of a topic to be considered only as a national thing. To understand something like access or outcomes it would make sense to consider aspects such as, what was the context of migration? Did they migrate as children? What was their parents' educational level and socioeconomic background? Were they refugees? Were they highly-skilled migrants? And so on and so forth. These are drastically different experiences of migration. I think it also speaks to your comment about whether we as researchers are constructing the case. Yes; I believe we are, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. When you are constructing a case you are also saying, "Hey look, there is this aspect of reality that we haven't considered as a phenomenon in its own right. Let's see how it works or bring it to the foreground." That can give the phenomenon some legitimacy. I see your point about imposing our perspective on the object we study, but to me that has more to do with bad design (or intent) than with acknowledging the constraints of a particular method and finding room to play within those constraints.

**Terhi:** We have talked at length about individuals or groups and their experiences and indigenous communities. What if the comparative aspect somehow focuses on organizations? Or focuses on a given policy element that has a connection or embeddedness to, say, national or state level, or regional level. There is some sort of collective body that has some sort of geographical boundary. How does this discussion then translate if the objects of our comparison

are organizations or policy entities, and not individuals or groups sharing some sort of an identity?<sup>10</sup>

**Tatiana:** I am not sure whether I will engage this question properly, but I am going to make two points. On the one hand, as a researcher you are in the position of power by definition; there is always a danger of inflicting violence on your object of study. So, you have to keep this in mind. On the other hand, any analysis of supranational organization or a policy that affects large groups of people or just any group of people across a national context should probably involve people from an international context to balance your analysis. But I do not see a contradiction between assuming that the object of study can be defined in many ways by different constituents and our desire as researchers to fix it. In other words, I see an organization as an artifact, and as a collectivity, a collective body, and as an actor. For example, supranational organizations can be studied both as artifacts of capitalist, military, or political decision-making and as actors on the global scale.

**Anna:** Your question brought me back to something Blanca said earlier about embodied knowledge and positionality. I fully agree we need to factor the questions of positionality into the education we give to the younger generations, but also in our own research and writing, because we always have certain biases and we should reflect on those. Is it enough to start being mindful at the beginning of writing a paper from this perspective, reflect on it, or do we have to do more?

**Blanca:** I think it comes back to the training. For me, reflexivity is a long-term process; and an active practice, not something I exercise merely when I am engaging with the research object. There is also a fiction that we only have to care about positionality when we are actually doing research so that we don't harm the participant. While I don't disagree with those points, I think it compartmentalizes academic life. Here I believe it is important to talk about academics; encompassing researcher and teacher roles. I cannot separate my experience as a teacher, as an immigrant, and as a Mexican national. It is just foregrounded at different points in time based on the context, based on who I am talking to. But it is important to have that ability to look back and say what am I responding to, and honestly, I think we are more attuned to that because of how we are socialized as women. I think one may assume that everyone does this and I don't think that's necessarily the case. You have to have a longer and more active practice of reflexivity than just in the research moment just so that you can pull yourself back when you realize, "oh, that is actually something else and me talking to this rather than just me and the analysis."

**Anna:** This reflexivity about one's own positionality is also a cultural thing, both nationally and disciplinary. Academic and disciplinary cultures in different countries vary in terms of how we reflect our own positionality in research. I remember reading your PhD thesis, Blanca, and your dissertation, Terhi. Both also had a section on reflecting on how our position and career impacted your research and what you saw in the data. But in Germany, the academic culture in the social

---

<sup>10</sup> Authors Blanco Ramirez and Cantwell had to leave at this point of the conversation for another engagement.

sciences does not even endorse having a personal voice of a researcher in the research process; it is focused on the researcher being a neutral distant observer.

**Blanca:** I also find this with students who have been trained more quantitatively. That's how they write, because they are trained to think "this is the truth." So, how did you come to create those items? What were the assumptions you were making about gender, for example? By assigning specific categories, such as 'men' and 'women,' you are creating a social reality. So it must be done thoughtfully, reflexive, or you may be missing out on something important.

**Tatiana:** That is why I welcome post-structuralist and social constructivist paradigms. I disclose my affinity for these paradigms to students trained in quantitative and qualitative traditions because this is how I see the world and because I believe that all research is inherently political. A researcher's decision to add to a particular body of knowledge or disrupt a particular body of knowledge is always strategic and consequential.

**Terhi:** Another interesting spin-off argument is whether as researchers we always speak from a particular paradigm perspective. Do you say, "this is my paradigm and this is what I share with my students and this is where my research always comes from"? But can it come from different places? Could you as a researcher, who, say, primarily identifies with the subjectivist paradigm do research from a quantitative, objectivist perspective; provided that you understand the methods, of course? Or is it that as a researcher you have to 'live your beliefs'? If I collaborate with somebody who is an economist, in a quantitative paper, I am not imposing my subjectivist research ontologies or epistemologies on them.

**Blanca:** My cynical answer to that would be to say, it depends on how badly you wanted to see it published and read by somebody else. Because some reviewers or editors may insist on purity of method or expertise.

**Anna:** I collaborate with people who come from a rational choice background. Their vision about human beings and society, the picture that they have of the individual as rational actor is very different from my own perspective. Yet, we still collaborate fruitfully, but we have to keep in mind that we build on different pictures of the human being and its actions.

**Blanca:** That's 'interdisciplinary'; rather than 'interdisciplinary light.' That's us as researchers talking about the same thing; sharing our assumptions about what 'the thing' is, and coming from very different points of view to the same situation.

**Terhi:** But in that case you cannot be political. And this comes back to our previous discussion of whether we make enough use of the disciplinary richness within the field. While we may have opinions about conducting research that aims, say, at empowerment of underrepresented minorities, or socially constructivist or subjectivist research; we cannot impinge on other disciplines to take up the same perceptions of the nature of reality or responsibility of wokeness

as part of their disciplinary conversation. So does interdisciplinary collaboration then mean that we are betraying these ideals?

**Tatiana:** You can choose to participate in an interdisciplinary project, but I don't believe that quantitative research is inherently apolitical. It can be even more political than qualitative research, because it assumes neutrality and objectivity. But I also wanted to address the issue of betraying oneself in a paradigm; which may happen also in other cases than interdisciplinary research. For example, a post-structuralist approach or a Foucauldian discourse analysis where the research aims at deconstruction and reconstruction of text and meaning and where it demonstrates the hidden values beneath a defective policy. There is a certain temptation, arising from the humanist enlightenment tradition, to assume we can offer an alternative which would be a solidified, complete, closed-system answer. And this is actually one of the criticisms of post-structuralist policy analysis; what is it good for? Policymakers don't see the relevance of post-structuralist, constructivist research; it is viewed merely as a jargon that doesn't make any sense.

**Terhi:** It is just words.

**Tatiana:** Just words, exactly; so it is easy for policymakers to question the purpose of that kind of research, especially when poststructuralist or constructivist researchers are talking about re-creating and re-imagining the social world. As products of Western schooling systems, many of us were trained in this Cartesian worldview: truth vs. falsehood, mind vs. body, civilization vs. nature. We want to reach for those easily delineated answers and see the accumulation of knowledge as progression towards the continuous betterment of society and higher education. That can be very seductive. I think if you really want to be consistent within your paradigmatic approach, you necessarily have to address these inner humanist demons in your scholarship.

**Blanca:** I am also getting very tired of disciplinary rules, because the problems, the phenomena do not fall necessarily into neat disciplinary categories.

### **Personal Responsibility, 'Field' Ethics, and Paradigm Shift**

**Terhi:** Here we are going back to the question of gatekeepers we discussed earlier: the publications, the funders, the institutional structures, the meriting structures; they do follow the disciplinary rules.

**Blanca:** So, we are looking for how to dance with the devil without losing one's soul. You have to know how to speak and that requires a very elevated type of symbolic knowledge. "How do I make this point to this agent? How do I make that point to another agent?"

**Anna:** How can I get in without breaking the rules?

**Blanca:** But, you know, we had this conversation in a panel discussion a few months back, and someone said, "Okay, you do that for years and years and at the end of the day you are exhausted because you are not doing the thing you actually want to do because you are playing the game."



It's a slippery slope. But at the same time, it is crucial to learn to be comfortable with ambiguity and with the fact that you cannot solve everything at once. Sometimes you are forced into giving up your ideals.

**Anna:** One simple answer would be Gerardo's point about diversifying the gates of scholarship, so that there are more open gates, more diverse access points, more ways in.

**Blanca:** And we need to teach this to our students. We can start with ourselves. If I am open to my students in ways that I did not encounter in my studies, then they can learn a different way of being.

**Terhi:** But what about when we act as gatekeepers ourselves, when we act as reviewers or as editors? Are we keeping those gates open? Are we open to indigenous knowledges or do we operate inside the traditional paradigm when we are the power?

**Anna:** How open are we to innovation? To what extent do we insist on canonical literature reviews and just repeat what is going on in the field just for the sake of it?

**Tatiana:** That is a great ethical question and it has to do with the values that we bring in. I think it is up to us as reviewers or editors to actually help the authors from different traditions and backgrounds to get entrance into peer-reviewed journals, which means providing very detailed reviews and working with the manuscripts to make concrete suggestions on how to make them publishable.

**Anna:** We also need to teach students the social norms that guide scholarly interactions, like how to address editors and reviewers. Scholarship is also a social endeavor, not merely a matter of objectivity and truth but also of networks, friendships, and power relations.

**Blanca:** For me that's why also having a more organic view of positionality makes sense. I am not only exerting positionality when I am interviewing a subject. I mean a participant. (I just had a positivist moment there.) We are in a position when we are reviewers, it is an intrinsic aspect of scholarship. And I should give a reflection upon my own positionality when I make decisions about whether a paper is publishable or not, and giving advice on how it can be improved.

**Terhi:** But the question is, if we teach students that these are the rules of the game, but isn't the game the Western game, the game of Western science?

**Tatiana:** In a sense we are, but we are also redefining the body of that science, by making the knowledge that has been brought from other perspectives recognizable and recognized by the Western readership. This paradigm shift will follow.

**Terhi:** Gradually, very gradually.

**Anna:** Is there a paradigm shift that comes gradually?

**Blanca:** Look at this room right now. Four women, a hundred years ago we would not be here talking about this.

**Tatiana:** There has to be a paradigm shift when there is enough evidence that the whole existing paradigm doesn't work, but first you have to convince people that the old paradigm doesn't work and that's what we are doing. I think our business is to show that the old approaches to comparative international education do not work; that there should be other alternatives; not one, but multiple alternatives. This is how we create the discourse and then we create the reality.

**Anna:** That is a nice and hopeful closing statement.

### **Short bios of the participants:**

Dr. Gerardo Blanco is Associate Professor in the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College (CIHE). His research is located in the field of international higher education and examines ideas and practices related to quality in higher education and their impact. He employs postcolonial and poststructuralist approaches to critically analyze mobility and competition in higher education.

Brendan Cantwell, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at Michigan State University, USA and coordinator of the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) program. His research interest is in the political economy of higher education and addresses topics including organization and governance, policy, and academic labor. Much of his work takes an international and comparative perspective. He is co-editor of *High Participation Systems of Higher Education* (with Simon Marginson and Anna Smolentseva, 2018, Oxford University Press) and co-author of *Unequal Higher Education* (with Barrett J. Taylor, 2019, Rutgers).

Dr. Anna Kosmützky is a sociologist and Professor for the “Methodology of Higher Education and Science Research” at the Leibniz Center for Science and Society (LCSS) at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). She came to comparative higher education through the above-mentioned large collaborative and comparative research project “CINHEKS” in 2009 and considers herself a comparativist who studies higher education and science in an international and global perspective.

Dr. Terhi Nokkala is a Senior Researcher at the Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER), University of Jyväskylä and holds a Title of Docent of Higher Education Administration at the Faculty of Management, Tampere University. Her research focuses on the interplay between higher education policy, organizational parameters and networks, and individual experiences in various aspects of higher education, with a specific interest in comparative methodology and discourse analysis.

Tatiana Suspitsyna is Associate Professor in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at the Department of Educational Studies at Ohio State University. She earned her PhD in higher education at the University of Michigan where she developed an interest in applying qualitative research methodologies to study international and intercultural dissemination of knowledge and organizational practices. She has since expanded her area of research to include discourse analyses of U.S. political and media narratives about higher education and internationalization from a postcolonial poststructuralist perspective.

Dr. Blanca Torres-Olave is an Assistant Professor at Loyola University Chicago, where she teaches in the Higher Education and International Higher Education programs. Her research explores academic and scientific labor, especially the growth of nonstandard and precarious employment. Her international research agenda is concerned with the complex relationships that university actors, especially those that engage in different forms of mobility, establish with the spaces they inhabit. Her work seeks to explore how university actors belong simultaneously to multiple social worlds and play multiple social roles at the local, national, and global levels.