INTRODUCTION

Comparative social policy has witnessed a massive expansion in recent decades as globalization has opened up the space for geographically more diverse cross-national research, allowing larger numbers of countries to become available to research and to ‘know’. At the same time the dominance of Western and Eurocentric assumptions within both policy and research creates the paradoxical situation that in many ways the diversity of our understanding of such complexity is becoming diminished. We take this internationalization of knowledge production, where researchers frequently cross cultural and epistemic boundaries, as a (largely missed) opportunity for a more diverse and culturally sensitive academic discourse. Reliance upon Western conceptual tools within a universalistic approach, we argue, decouples concepts from contexts and leads to decontextualization in comparative social policy research.

In this chapter then, we take a translation perspective to scrutinize some of the key theoretical and methodological issues in comparative social policy. The translation perspective brings back some of the taken-for-granted assumptions into debate and subjects them to more thoughtful consideration. For example, language has been largely dismissed by comparative social policy scholars, and even more so the interplay between language and conceptualization. Translation also sheds some new light on issues such as equivalence of meaning, country selection criteria, conceptualization and contextualization, and issues around research design and methods. Rather than relying on dualistic dilemmas (such as similarities vs differences, quantitative vs qualitative research), we wish to outline a critical and reflexive comparative social policy research agenda based on new methodological and theoretical thinking. We wish to problematize the assumption of a dislocated and decontextualized methodological and theoretical work, and instead map the ways that can allow for multiple sites and forms of knowledge production and academic practices that are more able to elaborate the widely diverse social and epistemic practices that comparative research witnesses. We also share some of the
concerns of Smelser (2003) about the problems of internationalization of knowledge. As he argues, ‘(t)he vast predominance of comparative social science thinking continues to be generated in the West, and brought to the rest of the world by our own scholarly work and by the mentalities of those \textit{from} those societies who have learned western social science’ (Smelser, 2003, p. 648; emphasis in original). Translation in this sense seeks ways that can offer equitable dialogue between divergent cultural and epistemic communities, and the possibility of ‘talking back’. Importantly, translation is not just about linguistic practices; it takes us well beyond issues about languages; it is a broader research agenda with sensitivities to culture, context, diversity, inequalities, ethics and politics.

The chapter is in two parts. The first part gives a theoretical mapping of some of the core issues a translation perspective raises for comparative social policy. The second part outlines four key dimensions of a critical comparative social policy agenda – an elaborative approach, sensitivity to standpoint, the necessity for a critical agenda, and a reflexive methodology.

PART 1 ‘TRANSLATION’: THEORETICAL EXPLORATIONS

‘Translation’ as a concept has long travelled from its origin in linguistics and translation studies to a situation in which ‘today an increasing number of scholars are aware of both the conceptual complexity and the politico-ethical significance of translation’, in terms of its ‘complicity with’, or as we would prefer to state, inseparability from ‘the building, transforming or disrupting of power relations’ (Sakai, 2006, pp. 71–2). ‘Translation’ as a concept has thus travelled to various disciplinary fields such as policy studies, cultural studies, anthropology and post-colonial studies. Each field has developed its own emphasis of the notion of translation and in this chapter we focus upon the theoretical and methodological challenges these offer to comparative social policy.

Although there are a variety of interpretations of what ‘translation’ is, common to all has been the assertion that ‘social facts are meaningless outside those situations in which they are manifested. The translation perspective therefore, puts an emphasis on actors being involved in a continuous translation process through which society and our understandings of it are constantly created and re-created’ (Johnson and Hagstrom, 2005, p. 369). Translation as a metaphor, we believe, has important insight into comparative social policy research as a form of knowledge production and as a reflexive practice of people, policies and politics in and across cultures.
For policy scholars, translation is a capturing metaphor of the immense mobility of the policy process; moving/ translating from decisions to practices; from normative to practical expression of policy; from research to policy, or, within the rise of the transnationalization of policy, the issue of policy transfer, the travelling of social policy ideas, discourses, policies and institutions from one context to another. As Cowen (2009) puts it, as policies, concepts, ideas, discourses or institutions move they morph. It is this concept of ‘moving and morphing’ that has inspired policy scholars to shed new and critical light on issues such as the policy process and policy transfer. Richard Freeman (2004, 2009), who has taken the translation perspective the furthest in policy studies, argues that translation offers three important insights into the policy-making process. First, the theory of translation highlights the constructed nature of policy; that policy-making is a dynamic and iterative process involving multiple speakers and listeners, writers and readers; it is an act of communication, in which language plays a crucial part. It is in this sense that the translation perspective affords policy-making as a meaning-making and claim-making process (Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007). Second, Freeman asserts, translation sheds light on the policy process in terms of the dual processes of ‘representation’ and ‘association’. He argues that ‘what we call translation, or the replacing of terms in one language with those in another, is also a substitution of one set of relationships or associations with another. These may be similar to the original but can never be identical. To translate, therefore, is to make new associations, to reassociate or perhaps to reassign’ (Freeman, 2004, p. 7). This informs a number of crucial agendas central to the understanding of the policy process, such as institutionalization, policy transfer, policy learning, implementation and many more. Finally, translation can also frame our understanding of the policy process in terms of discourses, complex systems and governance. For Freeman, this is where translation is explicitly political; it is, he asserts, discourse that brings power back into the theory of translation – inserting the crucial questions of what gets translated and by whom. For Freeman, since networks are forms of associations, translation is the essential mechanism that binds together and forms systems and governance.

Translation has a strong association with the ‘cultural’, ‘reflexive’, ‘ideational’ ‘constructivist’ turn in policy studies. The translation perspective has, as Johnson and Hagstrom (2005) argue, allowed for a ‘deepened problematization of the policy concept’, challenging assumptions about policy as essentially a mechanical, chronological and rationalistic process. For them, ‘policy is a bearer and generator of meanings’ and policy transfer is ‘an imitation process where meaning is constructed by temporally and spatially disembedding policy ideas from their previous context and
using them as a model for altered political structures in a new context’ (ibid., p. 370). For Johnson and Hagstrom translation is a deeply agentive process, where ‘translators’, or ‘brokers’ play a key role, and in that sense, translation implies a strong sense of agency. They also assert that ‘all translation is local’, and despite all the global processes and influences, translation processes are always anchored in local contexts. As a result, translation emphasizes the specific rather than the general, diversity rather than uniformity, and divergence rather than convergence. For them ‘the translation process often should be regarded as a battle between competing interpretations vying for supremacy’ (ibid., p. 375). In that sense, translation is always a political project, with a need for a critical research agenda to uncover what gets transferred, who gets to translate and who are the losers and winners within a particular policy transfer situation. For Herbert-Cheshire (2003, p. 456), talking about rural policy in Australia, translation is ‘a continuous process through which individuals transform the knowledge, truth, and effects of power each time they encounter them’. For her, the translation perspective allows for the overcoming of the assumed duality of response to state power, namely, compliance or resistance. Instead, she argues, translation implies that ‘contestation and negotiation become the norm as all those enrolled in the actor-network of the policy arena continuously accommodate, re-shape and occasionally reject the will of the state whenever they encounter it’ (ibid., p. 468).

Translation in the hands of policy scholars has also problematized the notion of policy- and knowledge transfer, the travelling of ideas, discourses, policies and institutions. Monaci and Caselli (2005) very insightfully argue that:

the metaphor of translation suggests that the production, circulation and sharing knowledge among different socio-cultural contexts should be analysed by investigating how its users change their cognitive and normative attitudes, stressing the role of the cultural categories of those who ‘en-act’ and bring into being the knowledge transferred to local contexts of application by mobilizing, mediating, distorting, exposing, ignoring and so re-creating it. (Monaci and Caselli, 2005, p. 56)

Indeed, the translation perspective has been remarkably influential in recent years in the field of ‘knowledge transfer’, interested in processes of translation between policies and frontline practices, and between research and policies. The translation perspective has gained such a currency in this field that ‘knowledge transfer’ itself morphs into ‘knowledge translation’ in recent years. This shift signals a move towards softening up the rather mechanistic assumptions about how knowledge or policy travels unidirectionally between the ‘sender’ and the ‘receiver’ and replacing
the approach of ‘knowledge transfer’ with a more interactive, collaborative, multi-directional and complex approach to ‘knowledge translation’ (Lapaige, 2010). Finally, ‘translation’ also sheds light on important and critical dynamics of transnational policy transfers, in so far as, as Clarke (2005, p.8) puts it, ‘the Anglophone domination of policy expertise and policy network, the passage of concepts into and out of “Policy English” may be a site of significant articulation and variation’. As we will argue later, the translation into and out of English represents one of the most important invisible ‘black boxes’ in contemporary comparative social policy research. It is this complexity that a focus on translation offers, and that this chapter argues for the importance of, as we seek to develop understandings of social policy in the context of globalization, which this edition takes as its starting point.

For post-colonial scholars translation is a core concept – and is understood both literally and metaphorically – highlighting the power surrounding textual and geographical translation through the often violent restructuring of the worlds (concepts, images, words and practices) of the colonized. Translation here becomes a re-ordering, which makes the colonized more comprehensible and manageable to their masters (Kiberd, 1995). More than this, however, is the sense that what are translated are not only words, labels and images but the colonized person herself – where the colonized self becomes translated into colonial object – servant/person of colour/Latino, and in so doing becoming alienated, displaced from themselves. Rather than translation being deterministic and unidirectional, in post-colonial studies translation is also contested, with the processes of translation inevitably including the possibility of retranslation, of redefining and resisting, of ‘talking back’ to dominant understandings – of taking back the possibility of self-naming. To bring this debate back to the research process, such a perspective calls for the people, both Western and non-Western, who find themselves ‘translated’ as ‘Western researchers’, to become not simply reading subjects, but also writing subjects. Drawing on the work of Barbara Godard, Simon (2000) suggests that research should be understood as writing, ‘extending and developing the intention of the original text’ (Simon, 2000, p.32) – a transformative act where, in the context of the divide between the Global North and South, the need for ‘rewriting’ dominant global understandings is critical.

In drawing upon these different facets of translation, we shall focus upon the implications for the process of comparative research as a practice of knowledge production, and suggest that the range of issues that these different takes on ‘translation’ shine light on call for a reconfiguration of the comparative research process. Comparative social policy is inevitably located in between different languages, diverse geographic locations,
substantive policies and global, national and local scales, including a diverse set of ‘worlds’ and practices. We argue that the act of comparison between these diverse worlds that is at the heart of comparative social policy is inevitably work of social, cultural and political translation. While, as this introduction has discussed, one might map a translation turn in the social sciences, we would argue that translation has always been at the centre of comparative social policy and comparative research. However, this recent focus on the processes of translation draws attention to the ways that certain translation practices are complicit with hegemonic modernist Eurocentric discourses. We agree with Dale (2006) that that there are ways that a focus upon comparison, and we would argue, particular forms of translation it rests upon, has assumed and reinforced modernity (Dale, 2006). A focus upon translation considers how, within such intercultural encounters, power operates to determine who gets the right to name the world and whose language is translated to whom.

A translation framework offers a sensitivity to those processes that are taken-for-granted within comparative research. Wilson (2001), for instance, talks about how the massive upsurge in cross-national social policy data sets and the emergence of ‘mega data’ leads to problems such as obscuring culture, eliminating cultural and political differences, and seeing data as culture-free. As she puts it:

Any translation may reinforce the limitations of the original data by ignoring cultural differences. It may also reinforce unequal power relations by its implicit acceptance of the position of those who created the data, or those who will be using them when translated. Ethical questions may arise here since so much of social policy already deals with deprived groups and as globalisation multiplies the force of social exclusion, . . . Translations then become contested not on the grounds of cultural difference, but because they represent manifestations of contested power relations. (Wilson, 2001, p. 5)

The problematization of this double-edged nature of translation calls for two lines of enquiry. The first critical project is to map out the ways that ‘the homogenizing ambition of Anglo-American as a universal language serves to embed a form of globalization where translation functions as a colonization practice, embedding a neoliberal discourse through monolingualism’ (Venn, 2006, p. 82). This monolingualism, silencing as it does alternative ways to name the world, confines the possibilities of creating discursive spaces that can be articulated to challenge dominant understandings. At the same time insofar as translation is an inevitable aspect of any intercultural exchange a process of translation has the potential to become a contested space, where more sensitive translation practices might, in contrast, afford new insights and new ways of knowing that
have the potential for different worlds to encounter each other in spaces of mutual recognition, offering additional directions of translation from South to North, from margin to centre, from particular to universal and where dominant discourses might themselves become modified through the process.

This chapter then tacks back and forth between these twin projects that emerge out of a consideration of translation. It is structured around four themes and their implications for comparative research. Taken together they outline a particular direction for comparative research that is elaborative, positioned, politicized and reflexive.

PART 2  TRANSLATION AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS

2a  Translation as Elaboration – New Directions for Comparative Social Policy

Any comparative project must face the epistemological problem of creating spaces where different worlds are able to meet in dialogue. These world-meeting spaces are usually multi-lingual contexts in which language becomes something that actively needs working with. Interestingly, mainstream comparative social policy has paid very little attention to the issue of translation and multi- and inter-lingual work within the research process. This notable silence gives the impression that translation is a priori to the research, and functions solely as a technical matter providing a tool for unified terminology, satisfying the criteria of equivalence of meaning and thereby allowing the research to commence. Translation within this silence becomes an invisible process that the translator/researcher unproblematically engages with. However, we argue that in order to be able to overcome the ‘Anglophone domination’ and ‘Eurocentric assumptions’ within comparative social policy this assumption that translation work takes places a priori to the research process needs to be challenged. As Buist puts it, “equivalence” of meaning is a product of translation, not its prerequisite, and what constitutes “equivalence” has to be negotiated in the process’ (Buist, 2006, p. 366). Buist is arguing that the challenge for comparative research, that is, ‘translating a concept from one cultural context to another cultural context, without distorting the content and meaning of the concept, and without losing valuable and characteristic information through the translation’ (Oyen, 1990, p. 9) is best met not through ascribing an intangible conceptual universal in an abstracted form, free of all cultural associations. Rather, such comparisons should
strive to be excessive embodied encounters whereby the degree and form of equivalence is the product of the research process, and where instead of conceptual equivalence comparative work seeks conceptual elaboration that functions through equity of respect (Dale, 2006).

The emergent nature of conceptual comparison offers a radically different directionality for the research process – a direction where conceptual translation is both the outcome and the purpose of research, where comparison does not seek equivalence but rather an elaboration of terms, where each term offers a reflexive mirror to the others. De Sousa Santos (2004) takes this standpoint and calls for translations that allow for mutual intelligibility amongst the experiences of the world (ibid., p. 179). He takes as an example of such a process the translation between the Western concept of ‘human rights’, the Islamic concept of ‘umma’ and the Hindu concept of ‘dharma’ (De Sousa Santos, 1995). This process mutually elaborates, where the understanding of each concept is enriched through its encounter with the others, where, as Price puts it, ‘rather than fixing the definitions, translating a social scientific concept would rework the earlier concept, superimpose itself’ (Price, 2008, p. 355). All too often comparative works fix and ‘lock in’ definitions early on in the research process, which not only delimits the scope of the research, but also excludes potential new insights, limiting what knowledge can emerge. Indeed, often mainstream comparative social policy works with the assumption that conceptual work – definitions of key concepts – comes first and provides the framework within which the research operates. Empirical evidence has to fit within those frameworks, and often information that does not fit within it gets rejected or sidelined. This model implies that the conceptual framework imposes itself on the contexts and the analytic framework somehow sits outside of an understanding of cross-national social policy. Contrary to that, translation sees comparative social policy as a process of conceptual elaboration seeking to create different connections and different forms of comparison where multiple translations of terms between different contexts create depth of meaning. Translation then, collapses the false dichotomy between ‘contextualization’ and ‘conceptualization’, the separation of ‘understanding’ and ‘explanation’ (Carmel, 1999). Concepts are, from this perspective, always located, making conceptual work deeply embedded in context.

An illuminating example of how the conceptual and the contextual can be integrated into a coherent research design is offered by Wrede et al. (2006). In their research looking at eight Western countries’ maternal health care systems, their aim was to problematize the notion of the ‘Western birth process’ and the assumed convergence of institutional arrangements in Western countries, and to study the process, rather than the outcome, of maternity care. They argued that instead of looking at
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macro-level typical outcomes, such as morbidity and mortality of mothers and newborns, the research needs to be able to capture the diversity of different national practices, not least because even similar outcomes can be reached by very different practices. Their methodology had three core aspects. First, the conceptual work was spread throughout the research. They argued that ‘our goal was not simply to find skilled researchers to answer our questions. Rather, we aimed to attract scholars who would help us shape the research questions themselves’ (ibid., p. 2990). Second, they argued that contexts are always multi-dimensional, operating at different levels (macro, meso and micro), and the process of conceptualization involves an approach that works with all the different levels as they are related, but at the same time keeps them analytically separate. They argued, for example, that by researching maternal care, it is not enough just to rely on a single typology like ‘welfare regimes’ as an analytic framework, rather analytic frameworks always need to be more multi-level and multi-dimensional. This means that the research can work at different levels, with different analytical ‘touch-stones’, such as ‘hospital’ as an organization and site of practice, ‘midwifery’, in terms of training, ethos, hierarchical issues within health care, ‘health care funding’, and many more. Finally, they argued that culture matters, as concepts are socially constructed and therefore culture fundamentally shapes understandings and interpretations of policies, institutions and their practices. It is only through this cultural understanding that we can produce socially situated reflexive and locally sensitive knowledge. What they proposed is nothing less than a call for a ‘decentred comparative social policy approach’, in which de-centring is a ‘reflexive sensitivity to the national/local contexts and to the ways in which these shape data’ (p. 2989). Crucially, this research design allows for a new form of knowledge in comparative social policy; rather than creating a taxonomy of models, their research design allows for a dynamic and inclusive understanding and explanation of maternal care in different national contexts.

The iterative process between conceptualizing and contextualizing is also well documented by Quilgars et al. (2009), who in their research on home ownership and security in European societies found that the research process itself was a process of elaborating on and developing an understanding of key concepts. They argued that in comparative research ‘there could be a danger of placing a pre-formed and uni-cultural understanding of some key processes on the research’ (ibid., p. 23), as this has the danger of reinforcing gaps in existing knowledge and lets ethnocentric biases go unnoticed. This may well mean that in the process of conceptualization we already lose a lot of context-specific and context-shaping knowledge. For Quilgars et al. (2009) statistical profiling helped in designing and defining
the concept of ‘marginal homeowners’, which in most countries excluded outright homeowners, while in Hungary, due to the high level of outright yet socially vulnerable home ownership, mortgage-free homeowners were included into the second stage interview sample. The implication is that context-specific features play an important role in research design, not just in terms of research methods, but also in terms of definition of key concepts.

2b Comparative Standpoints

The call to collapse the concept/context dichotomy locates understandings of concepts in the cultural, political and social milieu in which they emerge. Such a location helps us to analyse the ways that a globalized academic discourse can and does create problematic conceptual transfer. The danger, as scholars of neo-liberal governmentality point out, is that processes of ‘naming’, labelling, presenting and inscribing of complex social phenomena within comparative research misrepresent and invisibilize key historical patterns, since these processes involve assembling singularities out of heterogeneous and diverse social processes (Larner and Walters, 2004, p. 499).

An insightful example of this is given by the feminist Widerberg, reflecting on the unproblematic and widespread usage of the term gender:

I saw, when rereading my Danish article, how influenced we Scandinavians have been by the debates and research in the US. Through the internationalization of knowledge and the dominance of the English language as its mediator, we have been made to share understandings to a higher degree than we have been made to share actual social arrangements. We might live in countries and cultures that are quite differently organized, but our intellectual tools are very much the same. (Widerberg, 1998, p. 135)

She takes translation further by arguing that:

when we go deeper, we see that translating understandings of gender from one culture and language to another also implies eliminating certain concepts and contextual understandings expressed in the one language, and introducing instead, in the other language, concepts expressing other (contextual) understandings. ‘Going international’, wanting to participate and be understood in the international feminist debate, thus implies changing the voice as well as the story. However frustrating this issue may be when experienced in the process of translation, there are always insights to be gained, not least about the ‘positioning’ of understandings of gender. (Ibid., p. 133)

Widerberg’s last point is precisely that we should not withdraw from translation just because it silences certain understandings, but that such
processes cannot but reveal the positioning and location of dominant understanding of gender. Even as translation has been responsible for changing the voices and stories she is able to tell, it allows, insofar as other voices can be heard, the limits of dominant understandings of gender to be made visible. This ‘positioning’ and standpoint is taking us further than arguing that in comparative research the ‘observed phenomena are compared against a certain point of reference, which is either explicitly stated or implicitly assumed’ (see Clasen, Chapter 4 in this volume, p. 74). There is a wide consensus in comparative social policy debate about the need for more explicit reference points. However, the notion of ‘positioning’ and standpoint calls for a critical understanding of ‘reference points’. It is not just a technical issue of theoretical frameworks or chosen methods, it is a broader call for making the position of researcher more explicit, and to reflect on the situated and political nature of their own knowledge in relation to the studied phenomenon (Saukko, 2003).

For other scholars, linking issues of translation, language and politics ‘invite[s] us to properly define the social policy concepts we use while being aware of their origins and of the normative and political controversies they are likely to generate’ (Beland, 2011, p.12). Beland (2011) shows how unnoticed the fact went, in comparative welfare state research, that concepts such as ‘welfare state’ lack any consensual translation in French, where some prefer to translate it as ‘Etat-providence’, others as ‘Etat-social’, while yet others use the concept of ‘protection sociale’. As Beland argues, the crucial issue here is that each concept has its own distinct social, cultural and political connotations, therefore, it is part of the analytic vigour to understand and reference those connotations, and locate social policy language firmly in the national context in which it is emerging over time. But Beland’s call is not simply a call for ‘context matters’, or ‘history matters’. He argues that translation is a political act; by choosing a concept, we are choosing a ‘construction of the boundaries of state action’. A similar tale is told by Lendvai (2009) on the Hungarian translation of social exclusion, which in Hungarian can be either translated as ‘tarsadalmi kirekesztes’, an active verb, implying that somebody (society, the state, etc.) actively excludes people, implicating the need for state action, or ‘tarsadalmi kirekesztodes’, a passive term, which implies that people or groups happen to be excluded, with a lot less imperative for the state to be involved. Translation then becomes important and directly relevant in terms of deep ideological and policy consequences, which needs to be acknowledged throughout the research process. What standpoint should comparative research have here? Are we able to construct research practices where, for instance, the distinction between ‘tarsadalmi kirekesztes’ and ‘tarsadalmi kirekesztodes’ elaborates understandings of social
exclusion in order to focus on the degree of active exclusion – something that is perhaps less emphasized when discussed in English? By getting rid of the Hungarian terms, collapsing them into a single and just English term of exclusion, we are losing important insight into how social exclusion(s) are understood, institutionalized, made available to national discourses in Hungary and how they get ‘Europeanized’.

2c The Politics of Comparison – Alternative Encounters in a Globalized World

Being infinite, the plurality of knowledge existing in the world is unreachable as such, since each way of knowing accounts for it only partially and from its own specific perspective alone. On the other hand, however, since each way of knowing exists only in that infinite plurality of knowledge, none of them is able to understand itself without referring to the others. . . . The possibilities and limits of understanding and action of each way of knowing can only be grasped to the extent that each way of knowing offers a comparison with other ways of knowing. (De Sousa Santos, 2009, p. 116)

Comparison is never a neutral act. Comparisons inevitably associate, constructing similarities and differences, equivalences and associations. De Sousa Santos, in taking the infinite as his starting point, liberates the possibilities of what can be compared, multiplies the possibility of what can be known and thereby opens up the possibility for critical understandings emerging from new encounters. At the same time, each comparison is inevitably partial, constructed, and thereby humble. From this perspective comparative social policy research is less the creation of a comparative object, and more the creation of multiple overlapping insights.

The comparative act is then not a rational choice based on initial analyses of similarities and difference; it is not simply a methodological issue of country selection – it is a political act that creates certain associations and allows for certain meanings at the expense of others. Comparing is placing a mirror to national social policies and looking at them from the point of view of the other national social policies. This ‘mirroring effect’, means that, for example, if we compare the Hungarian welfare state with the welfare state in the USA we see very different kinds of things than if we compare the Hungarian welfare state with the Swedish welfare state. Comparison and selection criteria matter, because they will give us different reflections depending on what we compare with what. Indeed, depending on the comparison applied in relation to the post-communist welfare states in Eastern Europe, hugely different academic claims have been asserted by even the most prominent scholars. In the context of European integration and EU enlargement, Vaughan-Whitehead (2004),
for example, argued that post-communist welfare states are ‘weak’, they suffer from ‘an underdeveloped social protection’, ‘have general problems of social cohesion’, and have ‘witnessed some adverse developments in a number of social fields’. He argued that post-communist states are ‘too keen’ to implement neo-liberal reforms in a much more radical way than could be expected from a ‘European’ state, thereby risking the future of ‘Social Europe’ in a newly enlarged European Union (ibid., p. 498). The standpoint applied here is the ‘European welfare states’, whatever that might mean. In contrast, in their influential book Kaufman and Haggard (2008), looking at Eastern European welfare states in comparison with Latin America and East Asia, find that post-communist welfare states compared to the other two regions are characterized by ‘a commitment to universalism’, ‘comprehensive social protection coverage’, and ‘limited liberalization’ in the field of welfare provisions. How is it possible to come to such a radically different interpretation about post-communist welfare states? Just to complicate the picture further, while much of the intra-regional comparative literature on post-communist welfare states has argued for diverse and diverging typologies of post-communist welfare states (Bohle and Greskovits, 2007; Greskovits and Bruszt, 2009; Lendvai, 2011), Kaufman and Haggard (2008) argue that Eastern Europe is a rather homogeneous region and shows substantial convergence as a region, compared with either Latin America or East Asia.

These examples demonstrate how choices of comparison result in different research outcomes. Different understandings are constructed through each comparative act. In this sense, choice of comparison is deeply political, and Eastern European welfare states can become many things: ‘European welfare states’, ‘developing or emerging welfare states’, ‘post-authoritarian welfare regimes’, ‘neo-liberal welfare states’, ‘hybrid welfare states’ and many more. In addition to offering the possibility of a meta-comparative dimension to the research process, comparative choices become decisions that are not only made explicit and open to scrutiny, but also creative and agenda led, emphasizing the political choices of the comparative research process.

2d Translating Method – Research Tools for Equitable Encounters

The sensitivities that our translation framework raises emphasize complexity within the research process. Linguistic and conceptual differences between research sites make the comparative act a journey across epistemological divides, with the researcher placed as an intercultural traveller. The acknowledgement that the researcher, whether doing quantitative or qualitative research is, like the research, located – culturally, socially, or
geographically – allows for such a journey to be one of open exploration. As Price, as a Western researcher, meeting theories that do not emerge so centrally from Anglo-American traditions, writes, ‘I encounter, embrace and am engulfed by other conditions, lives and histories . . . sensing, glimpsing then breathing in other ways of being, availing myself of them’ (Price, 2008, p. 356).

Such intercultural research encounters are inevitably mediated through our choices of research methods, and as such, the question of what research tools are suitable in different contexts is critical. From the translation perspective two important questions arise. First, do different contexts require different methods? If yes, what are they? Second, what methods allow for a more equitable translation process? These issues touch upon the necessary research tools that enable us to create and pursue a more sensitive research agenda.

Contemporary comparative social policy is deeply divided between quantitative and qualitative, between exploratory and explanatory research and between variable-oriented or case-oriented comparative works. While we would agree with Wilson who argues that the emergence of massive international databases tends to eliminate cultural variations (as numbers are seen as more or less culture free), and thereby ‘obsures the power relations inherent in the production, translation and use of information’ (Wilson, 2001, p. 319), we are not positioning a translation framework within the qualitative camp. Rather, we take it as an open call to all epistemological, theoretical and methodological approaches. Reflexivity in gathering and working with ‘data’ is an issue in every comparative research. It has also been acknowledged by many scholars, including in this volume, that key methodological issues in mainstream comparative social policy are often either left unaddressed, confined to common sense, left salient or deal with overly rationalistic and technocratic principles. But, the neglect of methodological fine-graining is not just confined to comparative social policy. The sociologist Smelser (2003, p. 650) argues ‘we and our audiences are too hungry for results – in the form of substantive findings’, and within this hunger for results, methodological issues and details often get lost or become uninteresting. Although systematizing the methodological fine-graining is well beyond the scope of this chapter, we feel that there are clear methodological implications in the theoretical issues discussed above, and offer in this section a broad orientation for work in this area.

Although at some level the divide between quantitative and qualitative comparative social policy works is as deep as ever, there is an increasing appreciation of the fact that in capturing important knowledge about people, policies and politics in comparative social policy, there is a need
to enable methods to capture the increasing complexities of the researched phenomena. This methodological challenge is equally relevant for both quantitative and qualitative researchers. As Smelser (2003, p. 648) argues:

I believe at this stage of our thinking, most social scientists have come to endorse the valid view that the best methodological strategy in comparative study is to gain a foothold wherever you can. This means relying on multiple kinds of data and methods – quantitative and qualitative, hard and soft, objective and intuitive – and using and weighing all of them in an effort to improve our understandings and explanations.

Such a stance reflects well contemporary developments in comparative methodologies across the social sciences – that is, the rise of various forms of mixed methods and the search for more complex, enriched and reflexive forms of data collection and data analysis. As Smelser (ibid., p. 649; emphasis in original) argues, the problem of ‘equivalence of measures’ is a newly recognized issue for many scholars, particularly at the quantitative end of the spectrum:

very seldom should social scientists select and use the same apparent measure in multiple comparative settings. Taking the vast variation of almost everything in the panoply of world cultures and societies, there are few ‘near cases’, and those units thought to be ‘near’ are not really all that near. So the comparative rule of thumb should usually be ‘multiple measures for the same thing’... The paradox is that equivalence of indices is best achieved by seeking different indices for the same phenomenon in different settings.

For Smelser, the proposed way forward is ‘to systematise the context of comparison’ (ibid.), where the context is systematically worked with both at the level of generating indices as well as building explanations. One notable attempt to dialogue the conceptual domain with contextual sensitivities is Ragin’s (2000) so-called ‘fuzzy sets’ approach where case-oriented qualitative work, with dense and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, is used to ‘calibrate’ quantitative measurements. We are yet to see how these new methodologies travel to comparative social policy work, but one of the many calls of the translation perspective is for more equitable knowledge production and dialogic forms of research – bridging gaps rather than amplifying them – in the way that Ragin’s approach does.

In the call for more equitable and dialogic forms of research, openness and inclusivity are also important. Translation points to the danger of deciding, too early, that you know what something means, and of making decisions that provide closure to the research process. Such closures – whether theoretical or methodological – limit the possibilities of a continued dialogue across and between research sites, ideas and
participants. Where conceptual elaboration is understood to be the outcome of the research the focus shifts to understand ‘how’ the research finds out as much as knowing ‘what’ the research finds out. Implicit within this orientation towards transparency and reflexivity of methodological decisions is that research methods are not strictly procedural, but rather that the research is allowed to shift direction and method as understandings unfold and dialogues develop. Such a shifting of direction and methods is an inevitable part of a dialogic process, where decisions about sampling, what data to collect, how to collect and so on are not within the power of a lone researcher, but respond to the conversations between methodologies, people and ideas.

Translation also calls into question the cultural appropriateness of common research methods. Do interviews, questionnaires or focus groups mean the same thing in different cultural contexts? If we embrace the idea that concepts have meaning and are manifested differently in different contexts, then it follows that our ways of knowing (as researchers) about these concepts will also need to be different. To put it another way, if the architectures of the ways that social ideas are materialized in society differ, then why should we assume that the same methods would help us to elaborate them?

At a deeper level, certain methods may well be inappropriate in a specific context. For instance, to use survey methods or composite index work on gender mainstreaming in Macedonia, where gender mainstreaming is not an indigenous concept, idea, or policy, may well not get the ‘data’ that is needed or produce meaningless data. Utilizing ‘forward and backward translation’ and ‘third party validation’ as methods in multi-lingual quantitative research to ensure that translations have the intended meaning cannot overcome and capture conceptual differences if placed in a survey. In other cases it may well be that before a survey is conducted detailed case studies are needed to fine-tune the survey questions. But method issues are not only confined to quantitative research. ‘Elite interviews’, a common method used in much comparative social policy research, might take very different shape and form in different national and cultural contexts. Often comparative works apply a standardized method framework, where the same numbers of interviews are fixed in each country. This raises the core issue of ‘standardization’ – of what gets standardized across research sites, and why. It may well be the case that standardized methodological procedures (number and types of interviews, say) create an inequality of data. A focus on elaboration suggests that research methods may well need to be different in different countries precisely to afford an equality of understanding. What is called for is less procedural standardization, and more standardization of outcome that ensures each research site is afforded equal scope.
Last, but by no means least, we take writing as part of the research act, where new knowledge and new insights become manifested through new forms of writing. ‘To write well is to make continual incursions into grammar, into established usage, and into accepted linguistic norms’ (Ortega y Gasset [1937] 2000, p. 50, quoted in Price, 2008, p. 351). Such incursions must allow the richness of the concept/context to be made visible, for the normalized research processes to be made transparent, and for the voices silenced through mainstream extractive research practices to be heard. Such writing must become alive with the dialogues of the research process, and embodied cultural richness that has emerged. One example of the ways that the sensitivities of translation can be kept alive within research writing is Buist (2006). In his analysis of the use of the term 文化 as a Japanese translation of the concept of culture, Buist deliberately chooses not to use romanized lettering, as it would ‘inevitably reflect the local variations in pronunciations of the characters’ (Buist, 2006, p. 366). We might go further to suggest that this use of non-romanized lettering within academic writing goes further than being sensitive to variation of pronunciation – it allows the term to remain ‘other’ (to a non-Japanese reading audience), and in so doing resists the temptation to understand 文化 as an equivalent translation of culture. It stands as an invitation – to consider, in an unprejudiced way what the meanings of 文化 are in a Japanese context. It is yet another site in need of thoughtfulness in the research process; how we come to represent both the obvious and the hidden diversity of social policy arrangements across countries, languages and cultures. It is here, where translation becomes a textual work, beyond but alongside all the methodological and theoretical issues discussed in this chapter.

CONCLUSION

Comparative social policy is inevitably located in between different languages, diverse geographic locations, substantive policies, transnational, national and local scales and very diverse sets of ‘worlds’ and practices. We argue that the act of comparison between these diverse sets of worlds and practices that lies at the heart of comparative social policy is inevitably work of social, cultural and political translation. Translation has the potential to open up many of the ‘black boxes’ of contemporary comparative social policy works. How and why do we select countries for comparison? Country selection, as we have argued, is not only a methodological and procedural choice, it is also a political act. By reducing it to the matter of ‘most similar’ versus ‘most different design’ debate hides and pre-empts
discussions on issues such as comparison as mirroring, labelling, naming, issues of partiality, and of ethnocentrism. Language, if it appears at all, is also often seen by mainstream comparative social policy as something to be standardized and validated before the research commences.

But language, and in the context of comparative research, multi-lingual context, are more than just unfortunate and impossible barriers to more effective cross-national research. Working with language more explicitly and more systematically allows us the possibility to enrich our understanding. A focus upon translation, according to De Sousa Santos, offers the possibility of both revealing the hegemonic relation between experiences, and at the same time a reconstruction of this relationship to offer the possibility of mutual intelligibility where the work of translation aims to clarify what unites and separates the different practices in order to ascertain the possibilities and limits of articulation and aggregation amongst them. Importantly, however, our take on translation is not simply a social constructivist call on ‘culture’, or ‘context’ matters. We have taken translation more broadly, as a call for a critical comparative social policy agenda, where hidden methodological assumptions are challenged, where new forms of conceptualization emerge and where the research process as a form of knowledge production and academic practice is scrutinized. The range of issues covered in the chapter, such as elaboration, positioning and standpoints, the politics of comparison, measurements, methods and textual representations all aim to offer sites for re-thinking the roots of the inherently ethnocentric bias in mainstream comparative social policy research. It is perhaps time to overcome this dominant theoretical as well as methodological ethnocentrism and allow new forms of dialogue to emerge.

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