

Comparative Youth Transition Research: Methods, Meanings, and Research Relations

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Youth transition research across countries faces a particular set of methodological problems, some of which are common to comparative research generally and others which are specific to the topic of youth transition. This paper examines the scope of such research with respect to focus and level of analysis and then develops two major themes: the problem of equivalence (across countries), and motivation and purposes. The treatment focuses on the methodological tensions arising under both these headings, addressing such issues as the cross-cultural meaning of common transition terms (usually English), research relations (the traditional dominance of Anglo-American perspectives), and method (cultural anthropology versus the survey). The European political context for conducting youth transition research is then brought into the picture. Finally, from a standpoint of 'sceptical eclecticism' the paper seeks solutions to the problems raised in terms of model collaborative strategies, and methods embracing both 'descending' (population sampling) and 'ascending' (case-study) research approaches. It is concluded that a paradigm for the most effective comparative youth transition research will contain elements of both.

Introduction

The idea of comparison across nations seems, at first sight, straightforward. We are bombarded with league tables telling us how one country fares against others. Education, training, and labour-market entry data are no exception: post-compulsory participation rates, formal qualification levels and distributions, and youth unemployment figures are the staple fare of official statistics, government bulletins and European Commission reports. At one level such youth transitions data may be seen as having utility. They can help inform policy debate about how well different countries are doing in the human-capital formation stakes, how well youth labour markets are surviving, and how many young people are engaged in training as a preliminary to employment. It is when we wish to import such data into the discourse of *social scientific* enquiry that doubts may begin to surface. Besides matters to do with the accuracy of records and the definitions of

what distinguishes, education, training, and employment in different countries, we have to confront problems of *meaning*. How do we interpret the concepts of human action that the figures represent? Increasingly, it has been recognized that official statistics may tell us as much about the way societies choose to represent themselves as where they are located in a common universe. The distinction between their *objective* as opposed to their (culturally) *subjective* features, beloved of nineteenth-century positivism, is no longer seen as clear-cut (e.g. see Kitze and Cicourel, 1963).

Post-compulsory education and training participation and achievement data are central to the burgeoning field of youth transition research, with its particular focus on the relations between education, training, and employment. In the early 1980s the European Centre for Research and Documentation in the Social Sciences (Vienna Centre) reviewed, through national reports and collaborative studies, youth transition across the boundaries

of Eastern (communist) and Western (capitalist) Europe (Grootings, 1984; Adamski and Grootings, 1989), and later, the relationship of youth to new technology (Fürst-Dilic, 1991). In the mid-1980s the European Union's Task Force for Human Resources launched the PETRA programme with a major emphasis on vocational preparation (now replaced by the Youthstart programme). In the early 1990s the European Science Foundation established the Network on Transitions in Youth. Most European countries now carry out surveys or utilize administrative data to monitor the changing forms and outcomes of the transition process.

How should we view the data on which these research initiatives are based? Transitions data are products of individual choices and social imperatives in distinctive socio-cultural systems operating at particular points in historical time; they manifest features of the arrangements each country has developed for managing the transition from schooling to paid work. What sense can we make of such statistical information for a given country, without understanding what it represents in terms of the transition routes available and how their end product (usually, but by no means always, some kind of accreditation), is valued in the local labour market? Moreover, can we sensibly separate the action (staying on at school, going into a training course) from aspiration – what young people hope, or are expected, to do in their adult lives? In other words, young people's patterns of behaviour in charting a course from the classroom to the workplace are embedded in a complex nexus of historically specific and culturally diverse traditions and values, characterizing each society.

In comparisons across countries such problems of meaning are compounded and – following classic Weberian strategy for researching social life – the need for societal understanding becomes a virtual pre-requisite for any proper scientific interpretation of findings. Furthermore, we need to ask a secondary question that is too often overlooked in social science research: who is making the comparison and for what purpose? The standards of comparison (staying-on rates) implies a particular view of what the ideal model of youth transitions should be. Thus, if extended education for all is a 'good thing', then countries that have a lot of it are superior to others. But who defines what is a good thing?

These difficulties confront research conducted across boundaries within one society, let alone comparative research involving more than one of them. We recognize that all research is comparative to a certain extent. But following Grootings (1983), who in the report of the first Vienna Centre project referred to earlier provides one of the few explicit discussions of comparative youth transition research, we shall restrict the term 'comparative' to studies of countries. Social scientific research strategy pursues explanations and understandings of the social world by seeking patterns amongst individuals, groups, processes, and structures, and across space and time. Comparisons that cross national and cultural boundaries pose, nevertheless, a distinctive set of methodological challenges and pitfalls. Given that the problems involved are well-rehearsed in the literature, we do not intend to re-visit all of them here, merely to highlight the central issues that have to be confronted in conducting comparative research on youth transitions. Ultimately, we propose to steer a third course between what Sztompka (1990) describes as the 'traditional ethnocentrism' of transnational/intercultural research and a 'radical relativism/theoretical anarchism' that rejects all attempts to make generalizations across national and cultural boundaries (see Archer, 1990, for a trenchant critique of relativism). Our position, best described as 'sceptical eclecticism', sees the validity of different research methods and perspectives in terms of their utility in addressing particular research questions. The intention is less to formulate a blueprint for the design and conduct of comparative youth transition research than to provide signposts to the strategy and approaches that are likely to be most effective.

We start by considering the scope of comparative research dividing the discussion between *focus* and *level of analysis* (Section 2). We then develop the two over-arching themes of the paper as related to youth transition research: the problem of *equivalence* (Section 3) and *motivation and purposes* (Section 4). We then consider issues to do with the changing context in which European youth research is likely to be undertaken (Section 5). Finally we bring together some elements of what we believe could be an effective comparative research strategy for the future (Section 6). To illustrate our argument we draw on comparative studies in which we have been involved,

especially a study of youth transitions in England and Germany (Bynner and Roberts, 1991; Bynner and Heinz, 1991; Evans and Heinz, 1994; Chisholm and Liebau, 1993; Chisholm, Büchner, Krüger and du Bois-Reymond, 1995).

Focus and Level of Analysis: What do we Want to Achieve and How?

Social scientists are attracted by the theoretical potential of comparative research, which can be viewed in terms of quasi-experimental designs directed at assessing the influence of the macrosocial and macropolitical variables which constitute the nation-state on postulated social and economic outcomes (Allerbeck and Kaase, 1989). In a sense, comparative research simplifies the complexity of social analysis by assuming constancy of what are judged to be the major influencing variables (Przeworski and Teune, 1970). We may decide, for example, which European countries can be seen as similar to or different from each other in terms of their institutional arrangements for education and training, and investigate the relationship of these arrangements to the economic well-being of the country as a whole.

Such research is characterized by the tension between the two competing aims of comparative work: the search for universals and the elucidation of uniqueness (Scheuch, 1990). The former seeks law-like relationships between variables deducible from a general theory. The latter views each country holistically as a complex system of interacting individuals and institutions; generalizable statements are restricted to types established from any commonalities that can be established between cases (Ragin, 1987). Lijphart (1975) locates the central problem of comparative research in the small number of units of observation and analysis (cases) combined with a high number of potentially explanatory variables. In addition, there is no clear or direct relationship between the aggregate data that comprise each of the small number of cases (typically, nation-states) and the individual data that together make up the 'case' for comparison.

Focus

Comparative researchers themselves approach the difficulties to do with focus in different ways. For Inkeles (1989), seeking empirically to uncover and describe 'national character', the focus is on valid, reliable, and systematic cross-national comparison requiring the availability of large representative samples in order to collect standardized data. Yet he also acknowledges the problem of establishing equivalence of meaning for such data. In contrast, Joppke's (1992) comparative analysis of the development of debates about nuclear energy explicitly sets out to construct a general framework for gaining a systematic understanding of political process. The method used is historical-reconstructive and inductive, not at all statistical and logico-deductive; meaning is thus central to the analysis. Finally, it can be argued that identifying regularities at the macro-level of comparative analysis – for example, universal trends towards extending education and training participation – is not in itself adequate as a basis for interpretation. Macro-level convergences are paralleled by divergent social and cultural realities; as a result, historical trends and contemporary practices produce partly overlapping and partly separate patterns of change (Petmesidou and Tsoulvis, 1994). In other words, the overall patterns may look similar, but they can mean quite different things on the ground to those concerned, as Dubsky (1993) has pointed out with reference to the extension of youth transitions in post-communist central and eastern Europe.

The distinctions introduced so far cut across Kohn's (1987) widely quoted four-fold classification of comparative research, in which he distinguishes between the nation (-state) as object; as context; as unit of analysis; and as an element of transnational research. The latter two categories imply a large sample of countries, each of which is either measured on a number of dimensions (nation as unit of analysis) or treated as an instance of a global system such as capitalism or communism (transnational research). In youth transition research the closest we get to the transnational mode, in the sense meant by Kohn's typology, is when vocational preparation systems are treated as exemplifying general types such as the 'dual system', the 'schooling system', and the 'mixed system' (Evans, 1990). Using the

nation-state as a unit of analysis is rare except in econometric studies of such topics as the financial returns on education and in the reports on national performance produced regularly by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Comparative research that approaches the partly overlapping categories of nation-state as an object, and as a context, tends to focus on comparisons between small numbers of countries – often just two. Nation as object studies are typified by comparisons between different transition arrangements, their outcomes and the experiences young people have of them; they may focus on describing vocational preparation systems or transition processes and constructing typologies (for example: Cantor, 1989; Collins, 1993; Derenbach, 1990). Where nation-state is the context in which the study takes place, the aim is to test the generality of hypotheses across countries, i.e. the emphasis is on replication (and refutation) of findings and conclusions across different contexts. In complementary fashion, the research might be used to generate hypotheses through the process of comparing common empirical relationships across countries. These kinds of studies contextualize such relationships in terms of each country's unique set of characteristics. They ask: which relationships stand up how and where, and where they do not do so, why this is so? For example, what roles do specific kinds of education–employment transition routes play in the processes of social and cultural reproduction under given institutional arrangements (see Rose, 1991; Brown *et al.*, 1995).

Level of Analysis

Most countries can be compared spatially as whole entities or in terms of smaller administrative units such as towns. Similarly they can be compared temporally, i.e. at particular points in time or across a period of time. These define what Teune (1990) refers to as the 'space–time-coordinates' of the comparative study. They also bear critically on what comparativists like Kohn (1987) and Scheuch (1990) mean by 'context': this has cultural as well as physical components. We may be interested in pursuing theory at the level of the nation-state, with the goal of generalizing relationships between countries

as complete entities. In this case the context is the whole complex of institutions, together with the population, that comprises the nation-state and the culture in which these are embedded. The preferred strategy to encompass the maximum range of variation is the nationally representative sample. Alternatively, we may focus attention more narrowly at regional level, studying sub-populations in labour markets, cities, or local communities. These have the advantage over the nation as a whole in exhibiting a degree of institutional homogeneity with respect to the people living there. While being part of national systems, schools, training agencies and employers within the same local administrative framework also form locally based networks to which individuals primarily relate. This indicates both a degree of continuity from one level of analysis to the other and discontinuity through the unique set of circumstances and actions that the local community represents. Ideally comparative study should embrace both.

Temporally, we may compare nations at particular points in time (cross-sectional study) or across time, either through repeated inquiries at fixed intervals (time-series or continuous study) or following up cohorts of individuals (longitudinal or panel study). The problem with cross-sectional comparisons is that each set of observations is no more than a snapshot of individuals operating within an evolving policy framework at a particular point in time. Hoffmann-Nowotny, and Imhof and Romano (1989), in the context of comparative studies of migration, point out that the global complexity of social change brings methodological problems. Such inquiries use data from societies going through different kinds of changes at different paces, but the patterns of the data themselves cannot display the relationships between these two elements. Countries are often out of step with each other in the way they evolve policy to address shared economic problems. In the early 1980s West Germany mimicked Britain in developing training schemes directed at young people who were unable to get an apprenticeship. Subsequently, Britain, in developing a national youth training scheme (YTS) looked to the German dual system as a model. To have any hope of capturing the nuances of policy change, and especially how individuals are affected by them, the

time dimension has to be addressed in the design of comparative study.

The Problem of Equivalence

When comparative research establishes similarities in relationships between countries it is taken as supporting the idea of universality or ultimately generalizability of the theory under test (Scheuch, 1990). When the relationship fails to replicate, research strategy divides along two lines. In Øyen's (1990) terms, 'purist' social scientists see the solution to the problem as one of elaborating the theory through the inclusion of more variables. They view the countries being compared as no more than instances of a categorical variable, 'country', with each country being represented by one of the categories. 'Comparativists' on the other hand emphasize the uniqueness of each country and the need for case study to elucidate the origins of the differences. Kohn takes a middle position in seeing elaboration in terms of variables as being the ultimate goal, but one that is difficult to achieve without broadening the methodological base first:

I do not contend that cross-national differences cannot be lawfully explained – quite the contrary – but only that lawful explanation of cross-national differences requires more explicit consideration of historical, cultural and political-economic particularities than does the lawful explanation of cross-national similarities (1987: 717).

The fundamental problem of equivalence resides in what Sztompka (1990) refers to as the *incommensurability* of the concepts under investigation. The use of English as the major *lingua franca* for international research communication might be viewed as unproblematic by many, but English terms can still take on different meanings depending on who is using them and where they are employed. Words have histories. In English, the term 'youth' can denote the generic reference to a phase of life, attached to a set of social positionings, personal development tasks, and processes of maturation. It is also a specific term for a young man – a youth – carrying the connotation of immaturity expressed in unpredictable, irresponsible, and perhaps raucous/uncouth behaviour (see Springhall, 1986; Bynner,

1991; Mauger, 1993; for a historical account of the invention of youth in Germany see Roth, 1983). The youth phase is structured very differently across European societies (Le Bras and Preel, 1995; Cavalli and Galland, 1993); and sociological interpretations themselves approach the youth phase from different angles according to the social realities and the corresponding theoretical traditions from which they are derived (Chisholm, 1993).

Unsurprisingly, youth transitions research goes hand in hand with cultural traditions and policy perspectives. In Britain, the idea of youth typically relates to a short period of life when young people engage with such institutions as the youth service or youth training – usually well before 18, when voting rights are gained. The England and Wales Youth Cohort Study reflects this conception in covering the age period 16–19 (YCS, 1988, 1995); the Economic and Social Research Council's '16–19 Initiative', Britain's last major programme of youth study, similarly set the upper age bound at 20 (Banks *et al.*, 1992). The idea that youth can be an extended period of life reaching into the late 20s, and defined in terms of a 'moratorium' on adulthood, as argued in the US context by Erikson (1968), does not fit well with British conceptions of youth. There is little acknowledgement of a right to a period for fairly unconstrained growth, learning, experience, and experimentation before adult roles and responsibilities are fully taken on. Nor is any need seen for a comprehensive youth policy to accompany it. Yet such notions are wholly unremarkable in Nordic countries, in Germany, and in the Netherlands (Chisholm *et al.* 1990; du Bois-Reymond *et al.*, 1995; Stafseng, 1992). Britain shares with Italy the distinction of being the only European Community countries without specific ministerial responsibility for youth (Chisholm and Bergeret, 1991).

Concepts translated into English experience similar semantic disjunctions, and indeed may seem baffling. For example, the French terms *insertion* and *précarité* translate badly into English, in that both arise from a set of specific understandings and practices concerning the mutual rights and responsibilities between state and citizenry in the French polity. In the case of *insertion*, the term 'integration' is too imprecise, and the phrase 'entry to employment' is too detached from the idea of an

expectation for an active role played by the state in enabling entry to employment to occur. *Précarité* can be translated by using a string of terms that describe the attributes of insecure and poorly-paid employment. Yet the word equally connotes a sense of vulnerability to social exclusion, whose antecedents are not individualized in terms of personal attributes, but rather are seen in terms of a collective responsibility that has failed to facilitate the conditions necessary for social integration, i.e. employment on reasonable terms. Similar issues arise when comparing understandings of the terms 'skills', 'competences', and 'qualifications' between different national traditions and practices (Jobert *et al.*, 1995).

Comparable meaning of concepts is one aspect of equivalence; the equivalence of the indicators used to operationalize them is another. National educational performances based on quite different systems of accreditation are frequently simply assumed to be convertible into a single scale: A-levels in England and Wales as equivalent to the German *Abitur* (whose standards in different *Länder* are a perennial subject of debate) and to the French *baccalauréat* (the significant differences between *filères* notwithstanding). Whilst we can resolve some of these disjunctures by learning the cultural semantics and then using the original terms (i.e. retaining the French words when writing in English), this does not resolve the empirically urgent question of which data (indicators) are collated under which labels (concepts). Sorting this out is not in principle impossible, but it demands rather more time and preparatory research steps than are often available or practicable. One very common problem across the board of comparative research is, therefore, that of information impoverishment/loss as a result of *post hoc* construction of joint data-sets. Youth transitions researchers typically take great pains to produce data of good technical quality. This may at times reduce the joint data-set's interpretative potential. Such problems are magnified when the data derive from studies with different purposes and from highly divergent contexts.

Seeing comparability as lying in latent constructs rather than in manifest variables, and using structural equation modelling methods to model their relations (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1979), has been proposed as offering a possible solution to incom-

mensurability (for example by Kohn, 1987). In this approach the indicators may be acknowledged to differ between countries but the underlying constructs, e.g. cognitive ability, family social class, as assessed in the different countries, are considered to be functionally equivalent. The difficulty with the approach is that although the latent construct may match the requirement of one component of validity – internal consistency of indicators – it cannot adequately address the problem of meanings. These reside within the indicators themselves; and no amount of statistical manipulation is going to remove the cultural component they contain. Perhaps a more profitable strategy would be to concentrate effort on reaching agreement about definitions of key indicators and the concepts they are agreed to operationalize. This will not solve the cultural meanings problem, but – at least at the operational level – will have the stabilizing merit of consensus. Taking a leaf out of CEDEFOP's book on the meaning of vocational qualifications across Europe, a glossary of key terms would be of immense benefit to youth transition researchers.

If we were to begin such a process of reaching agreement on key concepts and their indicators, we might start with the most central concept of all: youth transitions. What do we mean by this term and what shape might its empirical description take? First, the concept of transition is dynamic in character, in that it is identified with change in individual and social positionings and perspectives over time: we are talking here about the social construction of biography. This would suggest that studying youth transitions demands longitudinal designs and strategies as a matter of course, and including a strong element of biographical enquiry (as proposed, for example, in Heinz, 1991a, 1991b; Hoerning and Alheit, 1995; Simeoni and Dani, 1995). Secondly, youth transitions embrace not only moving from education/training into employment (or unemployment), but also trajectories of change in personal, family, and civic life as well, all of which are interacting with each other. This underlines the case for a holistic life-course approach to the study of youth, encompassing the relations between personal agency and structure in all life domains (as proposed, for example, in Chisholm and Bergeret, 1991; Jones and Wallace, 1992; Coles, 1995).

Ironically, even the notion of transition to employment may be losing its salience for young people's life-patterns and experiences. As education and training participation extends, and uncertainties about likely occupational destinations increase, the old transition route of 'education-(training)-employment' gives way to numerous false starts, labour-market 'test runs' and cyclical 'revolving door' trajectories between education, training, and employment over extended periods of time (Gershuny and Pahl, 1994). In this scenario, the first move from the classroom to the workplace – if it can be clearly identified at all – begins to lose significance. Longer-term processes of life-course mobilities become more important foci of research interest. At the same time, such general processes of change are not occurring at the same pace or in identical ways in all European countries.

These problems of incommensurability were brought home forcefully in the Anglo-German study of transition referred to earlier (Bynner and Roberts, 1991; Evans and Heinz, 1994). Initially, the samples from each country were stratified in terms of four transition routes: academic; skilled; partly skilled; and unskilled/unemployed. It soon emerged that, whilst these four routes could be clearly distinguished for English young people, the third and fourth routes were difficult to recognize in the German data, because all young people were supposed, under West German institutionalized arrangements, to be either on academic or skilled transition routes. At the same time, the skilled transition route in the German context incorporated a variety of forms as well as the standard dual system apprenticeship with which this route is generally identified – e.g. various kinds of vocational schooling, *Berufsfachschule*. Apprenticeship training itself was highly stratified, with some occupations attracting large numbers of highly qualified applicants and others having problems in filling places and high drop-out rates. These varieties of the skilled transition route, characterized by 'niches, pathways, trajectories or navigations' (Evans and Furlong, 1996), lead to disadvantaging kinds of labour-market entry and prospects of a kind familiar to the English scene but associated there with partly skilled or unskilled/unemployed routes. It was only through much detailed discussion of the form and meaning of career patterns and examination of

individual cases – one of the most illuminating and rewarding parts of the study – that comparable definitions could be agreed. Subsequently, in order to facilitate appraisal of the linkages between 'problem trajectories' and the institutional supports provided to assist those young people caught up in them, sample sizes for each transition route were equalized across countries, although in reality, there were considerable differences in their distributions between the two countries (Bynner and Heinz, 1991).

A number of the findings from this study are directly relevant for appraising concept-indicator links and the problem of equivalence in comparative youth transitions research. We offer merely two examples here. First, in England the transition to employment is shorter than it is in West Germany; more English young people, even on the higher education route, experience paid work earlier and the idea of 'work' has more prominence in their lives. Secondly, young Germans orient themselves much more firmly towards vocational training and/or being a student as a preliminary to gaining adult worker status. Young Germans do not see themselves as having 'worked' until they pass through this crucial stage. Young English people who have left school tend to see themselves as 'workers' immediately: all paid activities are forms of work, however ephemeral and fragmented. Thus 'youth training', rather than being seen as preparation for employment, is typically seen as an inferior kind of paid work (Raffe, 1991).

These examples underline the point that differences between countries, emerging through what appear to be straightforward survey questions, are often manifestations of a complex mixture of objective and subjective components of social and cultural experience. These are located in a context defined by the nation-state's institutional arrangements for transitions (see also in this context Green, 1990).

Motivation and Purposes

So far we have stayed within the broad confines of methodology: what distinctive set of problems does comparative research strategy have to confront? But a deeper, and perhaps even more

challenging, set of issues resides in the origination of comparative study and the motivations of those who undertake it. This lies at the core of the social construction of the knowledge that the research produces. Comparative research on youth transitions is no exception.

Traditionally, comparative research meant constructing accounts of other societies or cultures from the outside, and then attempting to convey the essentials to the researchers' 'home' scientific community, either in their own right or in relation to the 'home' context. These accounts use conceptual and normative languages with which their home audience is familiar rather than those familiar in the 'foreign' contexts studied. In other words, comparative researchers are engaged in conceptual (as well as linguistic) translation exercises that involve the transmission of meaning structures; obstacles, and discontinuities that are an inevitable accompaniment to that process. For example, Fuchs and Klingemann (1989), reporting on a semantic mapping analysis of the political code 'Left-Right' in West Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, had to conclude that it was impossible to decide whether the reasons for the inconsistent patterns of their results lay in more diffuse political conflict structures in the USA or in the *a priori* inappropriateness of this binary code to US-American political culture altogether.

It might appear that quantitative studies using economic and demographic statistics or standardized survey instruments are less vulnerable to these kinds of difficulties, but this is not always the case. The disjunctures between concepts and indicators (Blalock, 1982) are magnified in comparative research, where tacit assumptions about what is meant by a term or a practice no longer hold. Education, training, and employment are notorious research blackspots in this respect, as the extensive explanatory notes accompanying international statistical compendia readily demonstrate (e.g. CERI, 1995; OECD, 1994). Similarly, research using survey data to compare the transition to employment in Britain in the 1980s with that in Russia and Estonia in the same period concluded that the data generated by the surveys simply could not be mapped across the different systems: much more extensive analysis of both the meanings attached to career routes and the questions needed to categorize them was

required before sociologically adequate comparative study studies could be effectively designed and carried through (Bynner and Koklyagina, 1995).

As we have seen, discontinuities associated with the communication and translation of meaning structures are central to the key methodological problem in comparative research—equivalence. But there is more to it than this, because comparative research has not, historically, been engaged in the production and exchange of knowledge between societies and cultures on equal terms. Szalai (1977) has described much comparative research as operating on a 'safari model', in which one research team conducts a study in several countries: design, data collection, and analysis are in the sole hands of this one team. This classical mode of research began its days in the context of linear developmental models of change, which provided the theoretical underpinnings to most social and cultural anthropological research. Studying non-industrial and non-western cultures in this kind of framework produced what might also be called a 'museum model' of research-based knowledge, one which, in its modernized form, might be termed a 'consumer tourist model'. Youth research has been no exception; indeed, young people themselves have often constituted the exotic object of adult researchers, and not simply amongst the youth subculturalists (Chisholm, 1995).

The museum model evokes a collation of strange artefacts assembled in accordance with the investigator's predilections for the unusual and the interesting; its successor, the consumer-tourist model, implies a process of sampling and selecting diversity, to satisfy the intellectual desire for enriched and improved explanations and understandings of social life. The former is characterized by static outcomes – exotic objects, materials brought back from elsewhere, for display. The latter implies a more dynamic process of going out into the world beyond, to experience the unfamiliar at close quarters and to get a purchase on that which seems useful, enlightening, and attractive, to take back home. The reasons for undertaking comparative research under both models, however, are not dissimilar. They include: seeking a deeper understanding of one's own society by accessing external points of reference; looking for clues on how to improve the working of one's own society by learning or borrowing from others; positioning or

ranking one's own society against others on various dimensions of performance; or, in line with Kohn's typology, the wish to test out a theory or method of investigation by applying it to different data in different contexts. None of these purposes is, necessarily and of itself, negative in a normative or scientific sense; they may be, to some extent, inevitable impulses for both researchers' and funders' motivations and reasonings. But they are neither neutral nor the only possible epistemological frameworks for comparative research, and for social research more generally (Habermas, 1968/1972).

The cross-national study of youth transitions between education and the labour market would not of course, on the whole, place itself in a tradition of cultural analysis allied to anthropology. In its orientation towards the use of cohort studies, surveys, and aggregate statistics, youth transitions research is more closely allied with macro-level comparisons between nation-states at different stages of economic development, in particular, between the developed economies which exist in market competition with each other. This is the second, rather more recent (largely post-1945) tradition of comparative research – that which corresponds to the 'league tables model' with which this paper began. It originated less in the theoretical and academic interests of social scientists, and much more in the political and practical considerations that were consequent upon the task of post-war reconstruction in Europe. US-funded programmes and the work of supranational organizations (UN, ILO, OECD, and UNESCO) in monitoring indicators of economic and social development are the foundation upon which this kind of comparative analysis is based. Indeed, one important reason for the vitality of youth transitions research is precisely because it is of strategic significance for economic policy and is thus a favoured candidate for funding, at least compared with many other forms of youth research. The ESF Network on Transitions in Youth was itself established to explore the potential for collaboration between those engaged in school-to-work cohort studies and similar cross-sectional survey inquiries in Europe. These were flanked by the analysis of youth labour-market patterns and trends.

Despite the self-evident methodological differences between the two comparative research traditions described here – the anthropological

study and the survey – at the level of motivation and purpose they share a common heritage and practice: research interests are pursued within a theoretical framework of comparative development, a policy framework of competition between economies, and a cultural framework of modified ethnocentrism. In Europe, everyone wants to learn from each other but to retain their uniqueness, and nowhere less so than in their established traditions of education, training, certification/qualification, occupational profiles, and employment mechanisms. There is a risk, in our view, that this perfectly reasonable aspiration could unwittingly lead to a reinforcement of some of the less appealing consumer tourism practices in comparative research. Spurred by funding imperatives directed towards the improvement of competitiveness – as made explicit, for example, in the UK Government's White Paper, *Realising our Potential* – it may be tempting to short-circuit the tortuous task of tackling the problem of equivalence in all its complexity. The top priority for the researcher in a highly competitive funding climate is to gain funding under terms which usually require the delivery of the research report in the minimum period of time.

Finally we need to examine one other feature of the comparative research terrain – the way the knowledge that has been produced is constructed. Conceptually, key reference points (theories, research strategies, data-sets) tend to be Anglo-American in origin. Communicatively, the dominant language of discourse reference groups and dissemination of results is English, with a smaller and separate Francophone community of cross-national discourse existing alongside. As Hannerz (1991) points out, we are not living in an 'egalitarian global village', but in a world 'structured as an asymmetry of centre and periphery' in which 'the periphery is more the taker than the giver of meaning and meaningful form' (p. 107).

Today's cultural imperialism, he adds, has more to do with the market than with empires; the difficulties encountered by transnational and intercultural researchers in persuading publishers to produce, for example, multi-language collections (rather than in English alone) are just one example. The dominance of English (and, to a lesser extent, French), as the *lingua franca* for comparative research

has palpable consequences for the ways comparative studies are designed, conducted, and disseminated. In effect, perspectives and strategies are prone to be guided by Anglo-American ideas and literatures.

Models of occupational choice processes provide an example (see Chisholm, 1987). Generously funded psychological research into the problems of transition to civilian life for the US veterans of World War II and the Korean War had spearheaded the formulation of the so-termed 'classic developmental stage models' of occupational choice and 'vocational maturity' (originally, Ginzberg *et al.*, 1951; Super, 1957). The underlying norm against which development and outcome were measured was, however, 'onward and upward', incremental, voluntaristic, and achievement-based career progression (as classically described by Wilensky, 1960). This norm is directly linked to North American values and, most particularly, for white middle-class men's practice during a specific period. Such models tended to dominate theory and research into occupational choice up until the late 1960s, when British sociological perspectives, stressing the structural determinants of occupational aspirations and labour-market placement gained more ground (e.g. Roberts, 1968). Effectively, these formulations were based on theories of segmented and relatively impermeable 'opportunity structures' in local labour markets in which, for most of the working population, the individual's scope for movement and progression was severely limited. In a labour market where 70 per cent of each age cohort left school at the minimum age of 16 to enter a job for which no vocational qualifications were demanded, such a model made good interpretative sense. Neither the American psychological nor British sociological perspective properly encompasses the diversity of labour-market structures and education/training and transitions systems, nor the role of vocational certification in regulating entry to particular occupations and their underlying cultural assumptions that exist across Europe. Nevertheless, they remain widely influential in the study of occupational choice processes on a much broader front. This influence may be well deserved, of course, but may equally have been taken up less critically than is ultimately helpful in other contexts.

This point is not simply a moral or ethical one about research practice; we are talking about

conditions that can produce poorer quality, i.e. inaccurate or even invalid research knowledge. The structuring of bibliographies in research reports also offers a good example of the partial and indirect nature of our knowledge access, the differential valuing of knowledge products from different language discourses, and relations of dominance/subordination between social scientific discourse communities. The references in this paper, for example, reveal very clearly the language discourses to which we ourselves have access and to which we explicitly refer: English, French, and German. If we look at the bibliographies of all the chapters in typical international collections of research papers, we see the linguistic dominance of English, followed at some distance by French, and then the 'also-rans' bunched on the far horizon. We might conclude that this scholarly community in fact draws on a series of multiple closed discourses rather than reflecting some kind of 'blanket hegemony' from an Anglo-American centre to a variety of European peripheries. To return to our metaphor of the consumer-tourist, we carry with us into the unknown the guidebook written by one of our own nationals on the country we propose to visit, the clothes and accessories recommended for the kind of travel we want to undertake, and a common set of preconceptions about the people and practices we shall be encountering. We are even likely to find ourselves sharing the same hotels and viewing the same sights as our compatriots. Language cultures are as pervasive in comparative youth transition research as they are in any other kind of foreign travel.

Changing Contexts

There seems little question that we are embarking on a new phase as far as the development of comparative research is concerned. There are at least three reasons for this judgement. The first concerns theoretical responses to contemporary patterns of social change at the macro level, in the face of which developmental and unilinear models are increasingly giving way to multidimensional dynamic formulations contextualized within processes of economic and cultural globalization (Sztompka, 1993). Whereas in the 'first modern era'

of western industrialization, tradition gave way to change as the principle of modernity itself, the key principle of the 'second modern era' lies in the shift from predictability to unpredictability. This is the case not only with respect to subjectivities and biographies, but equally in everyday and institutionalized social life (see Beck *et al.*, 1994). Comparative research can no longer behave as if its units of observation and analysis (cultures, nations, states) are insulated from each other and pursuing similar tracks of historical development. And it is becoming less and less plausible to approach youth transitions in terms of unitary and finitely bounded trajectories between schooling and the labour market, as we have already indicated above. If major commentators writing in the late 1980s (Przeworski, 1987; Scheuch, 1989) were able to argue that comparative social scientific methodology had seen no significant advances since the 1960s, then by the mid-1990s we would be compelled to conclude that the theoretical challenges now facing the field demand methodological innovation as a matter of urgency.

Secondly, in response both to theoretical developments and to increasing contacts between European researchers, stimulated through the growth of academic staff visits and exchange programmes from the 1980s, interest is growing in the kind of comparative research that engages with the dialectics of identities/boundaries, commonalities/diversities, macro-patterns/micro-textures, and so on. These interests focus on ambiguities and 'fuzzy relations' rather than certainties and 'law-like relations'; on complex interactions over time rather than on an array of frozen photostats. In tandem, we find ourselves responding to a newly emerging social and political context, in which the 'puzzle of integration' (viz. CYRCE, 1995) becomes the key problematic. For example, Mongadini (1993), in describing post-war European sociology as merely a ragbag of isolated experiences and national traditions, sees a positive opportunity in post-1989 Europe to collaborate more intensively in addressing common problems. He locates the key task for future sociology in the exploratory study of the construction of images of the 'other', i.e. the processes which are at the heart of social organization and different forms of cultural symbolism. In these terms, the study of youth transitions between education

and employment in Europe might, for example, turn more attention to the intersections between changing profiles of qualification demand, patterns of youth education, and training mobility across frontiers, and the construction of identities through new patterns of initial occupational socialization. What kinds of new routes and trajectories are emerging for whom, with what kinds of consequences for social and economic integration in the longer term?

Finally, and more pragmatically, we have already entered a phase which is likely to see significant medium-term shifts in the sources of social and educational research funding (viz. the EU Commission's Fourth Framework Programme together with the new third generation of action programmes in education, training, and youth). Whilst the social research communities of some western European countries such as Britain have, as we have seen over the 1980s, become dominated by demands for public accountability and the demonstration of policy relevance and benefits to business, over the coming years others are likely to follow suit. Central and Eastern European researchers have seen, of course, little short of a paradigm shift in the framing conditions for their work, in all respects. The past powerhouses of intellectual work – the Academies of Science – are in many places near collapse. Tight public spending controls will continue as the European Union moves towards monetary union at the turn of the millennium, transforming the organization and funding of research across the whole of Europe. In other words, social researchers will find themselves increasingly operating in a European funding market and responding to political priorities that are negotiated, at least to some extent, on a transnational basis. For very practical reasons, therefore, comparative research on youth transitions is likely to expand in scope and scale.

One question we might immediately ask is: are European social scientists prepared for what all these developments imply, not the least in terms of the competences required to participate in this new game? Nedelmann and Sztompka (1993) argue that to date, sociologists across Europe have rarely troubled themselves to get involved in joint debates and discussions at all.

On our experience, there are certainly hurdles of this kind to meet when trying to co-ordinate transnational projects. In a recent CEDEFOP study of

young people's needs and demands for vocational guidance and counselling covering the (then) twelve EU Member States, much time and goodwill was needed to coax the participants to 'step outside themselves' in order to consider alternative perspectives, methods, and interpretations. This was a prerequisite for a productive project design and the foundation for more integrated-expanded inquiry, rather than the additive-descriptive research strategies that still tend to characterize European comparative projects (Chisholm, 1994; du Bois-Reymond and Hübner-Funk, 1993). The problem was by no means one of principled unwillingness to work together on the part of those involved. Rather, the very definitions of the nature, scope, and purpose of vocational guidance and counselling in the transition process between education, training, and employment differed considerably between the countries involved. Such differences cannot easily be comprehended by simple descriptive accounts, as they are inextricably embedded in specific institutional arrangements for youth transitions, in national and regional economic contexts, and in conceptualizations of youth itself. In Scotland, for example, there is little systematic vocational guidance and counselling provision of any kind for young workers (i.e. young people aged 16+ in employment) and their needs are most likely to centre on information/advice to stabilize and improve their working conditions and prospects in their local labour market (Howieson *et al.*, 1994). In the Spanish Basque country, young people confront large-scale bureaucratic provision which cannot readily respond flexibly – but the youth labour market has collapsed anyway, to the extent that those young people with the lowest qualifications see little point in getting any information or advice that might be available. Prospects for stable labour-market integration in the region are very poor, so that mobility out of the area and perhaps to another country altogether is a more realistic transition trajectory (de Castro and de Eleijabeitia, 1994).

Strategies and Solutions

With such a formidable array of methodological, intellectual, and political obstacles in the way of good comparative youth transition research it is

easy to become pessimistic about its prospects. Our position of *sceptical eclecticism* rather seeks a middle way which recognizes the limitations of traditional practice, while using them to identify the critical areas for improvement. It parallels in some respects the alternative paradigm for all forms of scientific research proposed by Schwartz and Ogilvy (1979) (See Lincoln and Guba's (1985) use of it to legitimate 'naturalistic' as opposed to experimentally-based enquiry.) This stresses the need to move from simple to complex realities, from membership of single to multiple orders, from mechanical to 'holographic imagery' (reflecting dynamic processes of interaction and differentiation), from determinancy to indeterminacy, and from linear to mutual causality. Our own approach recognizes the validity of this conceptualization for comparative research while also acknowledging the critical role in *social science of statistical generalizability*.

The specific solutions to the problems we have identified need to be developed at two levels: strategic/political and methodological/technical.

Strategic/Political Solutions

Kaase and Miller (1978) reviewed the corpus of US-American/West German comparative social scientific research to assess what kinds of factors facilitate and hinder such research projects. They found that the existence of an egalitarian-collaborative network between the participating national teams was an important influencing factor for successful outcomes. However, establishing such a network places extraordinary demands on funds, on time, and on the 'mental resources' of the researchers involved. Overcoming these obstacles implies both new models of research training and professional development in Europe and new strategies for research design and analysis. We can begin to imagine the first part of this process taking hold for coming generations of European researchers, who will feel comfortable in more than one language and gain familiarity with more than one national-cultural context as the new programmes for research and mobility training start to produce 'graduates'. Exchanges and 'role-switches' between participant teams will generate the development of more intensive interrogation of insider-outsider perspectives, which in turn can contribute to theoretical and

methodological innovation – the second part of the process. An important consideration in the appointment of research teams will be their linguistic competence. This was a critical element in the appointment of research staff in the Anglo-German Research referred to earlier. We can thus envisage for the future more integrative-expanded European comparative research in which the conceptual apparatus is open to dialogue and reconstruction as a matter of course, and in which individual projects are not restricted to comparing their data *post hoc*.

However, ‘technical fixes’ – even where these begin to depend more on human resources development rather than on further sophistication of instruments for handling data – do not alone promise satisfactory solutions. The power relations within and between international research teams, which we examined briefly in the previous section, merit awareness and continuous review. We need to immerse ourselves in the international literature emanating from other language cultures than our own, not only to extend the base of our comparative data, but to gain access to the widest possible range of conceptual apparatus and methodological understandings. Such International Sociological Association journals as *International Sociology* and *Current Sociology* perform an important service in this respect, though the medium of communication is mainly English. Ultimately we may hope to broaden our language base sufficiently to surmount even this last obstacle to full cultural access.

This might lead us to an optimistic conclusion for the future development of a European youth transitions research scenario, working to seek the ‘unity in diversity’ that has become a favourite watchword for the process of European integration itself. Hannerz (1991) sketches three scenarios for the longer-term reconstruction of peripheral cultures within what he terms the ‘global ecumene’. A homogenizing ‘saturation scenario’ posits accumulative colonization of peripheries by centres, during which process the former become ‘hooked’ on the latter by mechanisms of bombardment and seduction. With the assistance of market mechanisms, forms and ways of life at peripheries are reconstructed around dependence on that which was initially alien, and come to see themselves wholly or partially from the standpoint of the ‘central other’. More optimistically,

a ‘maturation scenario’ supposes that the cultures of peripheries are sufficiently powerful to engage in hybridization processes of ‘adoption–corruption’, so that peripheries reshape metropolitan cultures to their own specifications via ‘innovative acts of cultural brokerage’ (Hannerz, 1991: 125). In the third formulation, these first two scenarios co-exist to produce a ‘creolization scenario’ based on creative mixing undertaken by active subjects composing their own syntheses.

Translated into the context of comparative research cultures, it would seem unavoidable to conclude that if we want to engage in closer dialogue at the conceptual/theoretical level, then mutual familiarity with each other’s discourses and communities, on as equal terms as possible, is essential to the project that lies ahead. In practical terms, this is bound to involve an interlinked network of intermediary interlocutors – Hannerz’s innovative cultural brokers – since it is impossible and unreasonable to suppose that we can all gain direct access to all European discourses at least in their language of origin. In such a communicative process, apparent disadvantages can become advantages:

Being exposed to the intellectual products of the surrounding ‘major’ countries and challenged to integrate them into the national boundaries of their discipline, sociologies in ‘minor’ countries are continuously stimulated to intellectual innovation and the production of specific ‘national’ contributions. This in turn may have a stimulating influence upon the sociologies of ‘major’ countries (Nedelmann and Sztompka, 1993: 10).

But it is also unreasonable, not to mention lopsided, to leave it all to English as a *lingua franca*: this is not only a matter of hegemonic relations, it is also a matter of professional standards. Here, the political issue of power relations within and between international research teams in the generation of scientific discourse joins the intellectual and technical issue of generating good quality research, i.e. knowledge that is both empirically valid and theoretically creative. Good comparative research in this respect thus demands genuine collaboration: equality of treatment between perspectives, approaches, and interpretations.

Methodological/Technical Solutions

The final issues to consider reside in methodology: how is comparative youth transition research best carried out? Much of the previous discussion might lead us to conclude that all attempts at cross-national comparison, under what Ragin (1987) describes as the 'variables approach' to comparative research, are futile. We are confronted with uniqueness and incommensurability at every level of the comparative study, which might appear to make socio-historical case study the only viable research strategy to adopt. But that would be an overreaction to a problem that besets social science within countries let alone across countries. We need both the benefits of statistical inference in the interest of generalizability and cultural/biographical analysis in the interest of understanding (Alwin, 1995).

Many of the writers referred to earlier have suggested strategies for comparative research combining quantitative and qualitative components (e.g. Grootings, 1983; Ragin, 1987; Kohn, 1987; Scheuch, 1990; Sztompka, 1990; Teune, 1990). Our preferred methodology builds on their proposals, bringing together the different elements of strategy presented earlier. Fundamental to our approach is Charles Ragin's idea of 'dialogue' between variables and cases within a life-course research perspective.

Descending and Ascending Methodology

Van Meter (1990) describes representative sampling to assess the characteristics of societies as a feature of 'descending methodology'. He contrasts this form of sampling with that of 'ascending methodology', where samples are constructed from cases conforming to required characteristics. Such a distinction is in line with those of 'deductivism vs. inductivism' and 'nomothetic vs. idiographic' in epistemology, but the terminology has its own attractions. In the broadest sense, descending methodology is concerned with population *representation*, ascending methodology with population *construction* – with direct pointers to the needed features of research design and analysis.

Descending samples will be identified from population lists; ascending samples will be obtained from settings, where the required informants are to be found, or 'snowballing' from one to another

through the social networks to which they belong. In van Meter's terms, ascending methodology is needed to gain access to rare or deviant groups in comparative studies, who are not going to appear on any national or local lists. But the approach applies equally well to the construction of samples for biographical investigation. Groups or individuals can be sought who meet the requirements of emerging theoretical categories, with the emphasis on displaying different forms of experience.

Descending methodology is thus directed towards statistical generalization from samples of defined populations; ascending methodology focuses on study of individual cases and groups to elucidate processes and meanings. It is at the interface of the two that the most productive research insights are likely to occur.

Triangulation

How can we have confidence in data generated through the self-motivated – often opportunistic – choices of ascending methodology? The essential validation strategies apply at all levels of the research process (design, data collection, and analysis) under the general heading of *triangulation*. Thus, cross-validation of data sources by checking accounts of one informant against others, and by submitting all data elements and findings from different analytic methods to a continuous process of cross-national interrogation and debate, are the essential means by which validity is enhanced. Seen from this perspective, the problems of equivalence and incommensurability become less intractable, even manageable, within the framework set by the aims of the comparative study.

Triangulation within the research design can be aided by the use of matching across countries in case selection. Random samples selected from population lists drawn up under agreed definitions from defined populations are in principle 'matched' and therefore comparable. Ascending methodology can usefully build up samples through the matching of cases within comparable types across countries. Most obviously, at the level of broad classifications like class and gender, we can ensure that all categories are represented. But in comparative youth transition research and for the purposes of biographical analysis, we may want to go much further

than this. We may wish to match in terms of the transition routes and experiences or even at the level of the type of occupation young people are going to enter. This approach was used successfully in the Anglo-German project referred to earlier, where matching of individuals across countries was undertaken first by labour market (expanding or contracting), second by career route and gender, and third, whenever possible, by occupational destination (Bynner and Heinz, 1991).

Triangulation of data is exemplified by the use of multiple alternative questions and assessing their comparability for cross-national purposes. The drawing up of glossaries of key terms is an essential step in the early stages of research design, with the glossary updated continually as the research proceeds. A valuable enterprise for youth transition researchers, as for any other group of comparative researchers working on a common topic, is to share information about such glossaries – preferably computerized – as an aid to each other and to new researchers. A common vocabulary, though never completely transportable across countries, can save much time and effort in the formulation of data requirements and the means of meeting them in a comparative research design. As we have argued earlier, there is scope for the development of such a glossary as a resource for youth transition research more generally.

Data analysis methods also need to be applied in a triangulating framework, rather than being used to provide once and for all answers to often uninteresting statistical questions like whether a ‘null’ hypothesis is ‘supported’. We have considered earlier ‘structural equation modelling’ (SEM), involving ‘latent variables’, as one possible solution to the problem of concept equivalence and stressed its limitations. However, the doubts we expressed referred to the continuing problem of the incomparability of meanings embodied in the manifest variables or indicators of the latent variables. Although complete universality of theoretical concepts across countries may continue to be elusive, when triangulating evidence points towards it, then structural equation modelling provides an appealing means of evaluating competing theories.

In this context, the triangulating evidence comes from the qualitative data generated within the ascending part of the research design. When the

results of statistical modelling fail to conform with everyday understanding, then they cannot be taken as valid until the disjunction is resolved. Campbell (1975) sets as a validation standard ‘qualitative knowing’, by which he means the intuitive acceptance of the reasonableness of explanations of human action. Only through such a dynamic interplay between statistical patterns and individual experience can generalizable and credible knowledge be produced (see also Cronbach, 1980). We come back to Ragin’s fundamental principle for comparative research – the need for dialogue between cases and variables. Such a dialogue is crucial to success in all variants of social science, but takes on added impetus in comparative research, because of the problem of equivalence.

With respect to the application of quantitative data analysis techniques to the data generated by ascending methodology there are more difficulties. Classical statistics demands random samples from clearly defined populations as a basis for statistical inference. This would appear to rule out data collected through matching techniques and other opportunistic sampling methods. Van Meter finds a solution to the problem by the application of ‘ascending hierarchical clustering methods’ directed at identifying ‘polythetic classes’ – overlapping groups whose members share common characteristics. These are accompanied by cross-classification analysis and social network analysis to analyse the relations within and between the groups. Such methods focus on the commonalities between individuals/ cases (and groups) in terms of the measured characteristics they possess, seeking ‘ideal types’ (in a Weberian sense), which can then be compared across countries. This contrasts with the descending hierarchical clustering approach in which a population is divided into successively smaller classes on the basis of population characteristics such as gender and social class, until an optimum grouping is reached; ultimately each individual ends up in a unique class of their own.

Effective application of ascending clustering methods relies on the availability of rich and varied data – of the kind produced in biographical enquiry – to capture the range of characteristics in terms of which the individual cases can be described. Biographical and ethnographic approaches to the analysis of the qualitative data

are similarly often directed at the identification of 'ideal types'. They provide another basis for triangulating one sort of evidence against others. They also draw into the methodological framework of the longer-standing traditions in microsociology of 'grounded theorizing' (Glaser and Strauss, 1968; Denzin, 1970, 1971) and its modern variants (e.g. Elder, 1991). This offers a broad palette of ideas and procedures for constructing theoretical samples, designing longitudinal and biographical inquiries, and using analytic induction methods in generating theoretically meaningful interpretations of data (e.g. see Lincoln and Guba's 1987 compilation of 'post-positivistic research methods' and the review by Voges, 1987, of life-course and biographical research in German social science).

From the perspective of developmental psychology, Magnusson (1990, 1993), argues for the use of case-oriented methods in the cognate area of longitudinal research. Cross-classification is used to analyse movement between clusters of cases across time. A collection of papers within the developmental tradition, *Straight and Devious Pathways from Childhood to Adulthood* (Robins and Rutter, 1990) gives many examples of combined approaches.

Concluding Remarks

Heinz (1991b) makes the point that the approaches described here as ascending methodology are particularly necessary for youth transition research, because of the complexity of choices confronting young people in negotiating the passage from school to work and the interconnectedness of actions in the different domains of life: family, education and training, work, and leisure. This leads finally to the kind of research design that is likely to prove most fruitful. To understand how countries' vocational preparation systems operate we need to engage with patterns of longitudinal relationships between structural, institutional, and personal variables, alongside biographies of individuals and groups, and ethnographies of institutions and communities. This means adopting a design which embraces both descending and ascending elements.

The balance between the descending and ascending elements of the design will vary depending on the focus of the investigation, but it is hard to

conceive a successful comparative study that could dispense completely with one of them. Thus national cohort and cross-sectional survey studies will confront problems of interpretation of differences (and similarities) across countries, and biographical and ethnographic studies will confront questions of representativeness and generalizability. One compromise solution, within the framework of Kohn's (1987) 'nation as context' type of study, is to sacrifice the representativeness gained by national surveys – opting instead for studies of clearly defined populations in more homogeneous areas, such as labour markets, towns, or smaller communities matched across countries. The descending elements of the design will be implemented through representative surveys of the young people in the selected areas; ascending methodology will be applied in the selection of theoretically significant groups and cases for biographical and ethnographic study. Such an approach has the attraction of being manageable, and more likely affordable, than the national study. But more crucially it provides the opportunities to study transitions in the complex social and cultural settings in which they actually occur. This gives us the basis for our conviction that youth transition research in a comparative framework is both desirable and realizable. Its development should be a social science imperative.

Note

1. The most delicate issue in the western European context is that of maintaining an acceptable balance between English and French as *linguae francae* for the purposes of transnational scientific discourse. This is a particularly sensitive issue for the humanities and social sciences, where language is so obviously more than a communication relay system for the expression and debate over content and ideas. It is against this background that recent measures to limit the use of English in French popular media (advertisements, music programming) and scientific discourse (conference languages, journals) need to be seen. What may appear as over-sensitivity can be interpreted as a response to the lack of sensitivity shown by the European anglophone research communities.

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