

Chapter 3

Preparing for research: metatheoretical considerations

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In Chapter 2 a distinction was made between international and comparative librarianship and the scope of these two fields was outlined. In a sense we were running a little ahead of our material, since any such delimitation rests on certain basic assumptions. These assumptions, of which we may or may not be aware, can be broadly labeled metatheoretical. They underlie methodological decisions and the design and selection of research methods and techniques for specific projects. Such assumptions do not apply only to research, but are also worth bringing to the surface in the context of international activities and relations in LIS. International initiatives that are undertaken without reflection on the assumptions held by the partners risk unanticipated difficulties. Wertheimer (2009) recently illustrated this in a discussion of the influence of North American educators on LIS education in Asia and pointed out that a critical understanding of library contexts in other countries is necessary.

In this chapter¹, the main emphasis is on the assumptions underlying research in comparative librarianship. To a somewhat lesser extent they are also relevant to research and professional practice in international librarianship. Extensive use is made here of literature from other comparative fields, especially comparative education, which was a major early influence on comparative librarianship.

Metatheory, methodology and method

Hjørland (2005b:5) defines metatheories as “...theories about the description, investigation, analysis or criticism of the theories in a domain. They are mostly internal to a domain, and may also be termed ‘paradigms’, ‘traditions’ or

¹ This chapter is a revised and expanded version of a SOIS Research Committee Brown bag lecture on “Methodological decisions in comparative studies” given at the School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee on March 12, 2010, and subsequently further developed in a paper entitled “Internationalization of LIS education: practical partnerships and conceptual challenges, co-authored with Johannes J Britz, and presented at the IFLA-ALISE-EUCLID Pre-conference on Cooperation and Collaboration in Teaching and Research: Trends in Library and Information Studies Education, Swedish School of Library and Information Science, Borås, Sweden, 8-9 August 2010.

‘schools’.” Elsewhere he explains that

...metatheories are broader and less specific than theories. They are more or less conscious or unconscious assumptions behind theoretical, empirical and practical work. Metatheoretical assumptions are connected to philosophical views, and are often part of interdisciplinary trends, which again can be connected to the Zeitgeist (Hjørland 1998:607).

Guba and Lincoln (1994:105) used the term ‘paradigm’ for essentially the same thing, defining a paradigm as “a basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways”. They emphasized that consideration of paradigms precedes considerations of methods. In the literature we find a number of variations in the hierarchy relating paradigms (or metatheories) to methods. Dervin (2003:136-137) distinguishes between metatheory, methodology and method, placing metatheory before methodology and method. She characterizes methodology as “reflexive analysis and development of the ‘hows’ of theorizing, observing, analyzing, interpreting” and method as “the specific ‘hows’ – techniques, guided implicitly or explicitly by methodological considerations”. In this view, methodology serves as a bridge between the very general, higher-level assumptions of which researchers in our field are often unaware, and methods, the specific practical procedures they use to collect, analyze and interpret data. Similarly, Pickard (2007: xv-xvii) proposed the following “research hierarchy”:

- Research paradigm (positivist, interpretivist) →
- Research methodology (qualitative or quantitative) →
- Research method (survey, case study, Delphi study, etc.) →
- Research technique (questionnaire, experiment, interview) →
- Research instrument (human, pencil & paper, etc.).

Here I follow Dervin’s tripartite division, relating it to Pickard’s five categories as set out in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1: Research hierarchy according to Dervin and Pickard

Dervin (1999)	Pickard (2007)
Metatheory	Research paradigm
Methodology	Research methodology Research method (or strategy)
Method	Research technique Research instrument

An iceberg can be used as an analogy to illustrate the relationship between metatheory, methodology and methods. Due to the difference in density of ice and sea water, only about one tenth of the volume of a floating iceberg is above the surface of the sea (Figure 3-A).

Figure 3-A: ‘Iceberg Model’ of the dimensions of research in international and comparative librarianship



Metatheory corresponds to the submerged part of the iceberg, and comprises the less visible sociological, teleological, ontological, and epistemological dimensions

of social science research. They are pictured as below the surface since key assumptions concerning where we are coming from as researchers (sociological dimension), what we want to achieve through our research (teleological dimension), what is an appropriate object for study (ontological dimension), and how we can come to knowledge of it (epistemological dimension), are often left unexamined and unchallenged.

In the much smaller part of the iceberg which is above the waterline, we find *methodology*, which is concerned with decisions relating to research strategy (e.g. the choice of quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods approaches and, in comparative research, the strategy or logic of comparison). Since in contemporary social science research ethical considerations do often receive explicit attention, the *ethical dimension* is also pictured here.

At the very tip of the iceberg is *method*. This refers to the specific procedures and techniques which can be applied in comparative studies, but which are not peculiar to them. They form part of the general ‘toolkit’ of LIS research, but for each project they should be selected in light of methodological decisions.

Metatheories

Positivism

At the level of metatheory there exists a plethora of paradigms, traditions and scientific theories, which, when not blissfully ignored, are likely to be found confusing by librarians without a background in philosophy. Much as Monsieur Jourdain, the lead personage in Molière’s play *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, was surprised to learn that he was speaking in prose, so many librarian-researchers may be surprised to find that they are positivists. Positivism comprises diverse strands and may be used as a general label to refer to a cluster of related schools of thought and approaches such as empiricism, scientism, determinism and reductionism. Budd (2001:95-102) subsumes it under “deterministic scientism”.

Characteristics of positivism that have been much criticized are reductionism and

determinism. Reductionism implies that theories explaining highly complex human phenomena can ultimately be explained in terms of much more general laws such as those of physics. An extreme example of reductionism would be to explain Handel’s *Messiah* in terms of electro-chemical reactions taking place in the composer’s brain. (The reactions were of course necessary for the functioning of Handel’s brain, but cannot explain the result.) Determinism implies that general laws can be formulated to apply to human behavior and institutions and that, if the conditions specified in the laws are met, certain effects must follow. Such deterministic thinking is widespread in policy and strategizing in LIS. For example, it underlies a great deal of aid to developing countries and particularly the emphasis on access to information technology and the Internet, in the belief that connectivity will automatically lead to benefits such as economic development or democracy. The notion that widespread use of social networking services such as Twitter will spell the end of dictatorships is an example of naive technological determinism (Economist 2011). In the most recent edition of his text on comparative politics, Landman (2008: xix-xx, 13-18) appears to take an unabashed positivist stance, although not without some nuances. Although many social scientists have distanced themselves from it, positivism still exerts a considerable influence, in part because it is so pervasive that we are not aware of it. Budd (2001) has critically traced the influence of positivism in LIS and has analyzed illustrative examples. Hjørland (2005a:133) refers to positivism as “the invisible philosophy of science” and points to the empiricist and positivist undertones of the evidence-based practice movement in LIS (pp.142-143).

In international and comparative librarianship, the influence of George Bereday’s (1964) manual, *The comparative method in education*, which embodied the unself-conscious positivism of his time, exerted a strong influence. This is evident in the writings of early theorists in comparative librarianship such as Danton (1973), Simsova and Mackee (1970, 1975), Collings (1971), Krzys (1971) Harvey (1973), and Krzys and Litton (1983). The systematic and prescriptive ‘recipe-book’ approach found in some of these works (particularly in Krzys and Simsova) is based on an approach which emphasizes the use of formal hypotheses and which has the ultimate aim of formulating scientific laws, as found in Bereday.

Postpositivism

Postpositivism is variously regarded as a reaction to positivism, an adaptation of it, an alternative to it or an umbrella term for all the alternatives. It is helpful to see postpositivism against the background of the major paradigmatic shifts that occurred in the natural sciences (the model that positivists in the social sciences were trying to emulate) in the first half of the 20th century. In physics Einstein's theory of relativity, Planck's quantum theory and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle all contributed to a realization that a mechanistic and deterministic approach to understanding the universe was no longer appropriate. Given the complexity of dealing with human beings and human society, this was *a fortiori* true of the social sciences. Postpositivism shares with positivism the assumption that a single reality exists that is external to the observer, but it is much more nuanced in its truth claims: simplistically stated, in the social sciences truth is not absolute but probabilistic and provisional; observers can be influenced by what they observe. It is therefore important to counter potential error and bias by rigorous and standardized research techniques as well as by triangulation, the use of more than one research technique in a study to ensure that the phenomenon is looked at from more than one angle (Guba & Lincoln 1994:110, Pickard 2007:9-11). While there remains a heavy emphasis on quantitative methodology, postpositivism accepts qualitative approaches to some extent.

Interpretivism

What is the alternative to positivism? In the social sciences we often find *interpretivism* used as an umbrella term for a variety of alternative metatheories put forward in opposition to positivism. Interpretivism is often linked to qualitative research, and differences between interpretivism and positivism are highlighted in some social science research methodology texts when qualitative and quantitative methods are compared (e.g. Mouton & Marais 1990:159-171; Guba & Lincoln 1994, Mason 1996). However, the choice between quantitative and qualitative research strategies is essentially a matter of methodology and will be dealt with later.

Weber (2004), following Sandberg (unpublished), has contrasted the sets of metatheoretical assumptions held by adherents of positivism and interpretivism. For example, while positivists see the researcher and what is being researched as separate, interpretivists see them as inseparable – what we observe is bound up with our life experience. For positivists objective reality exists outside the human mind, whereas for interpretivists knowledge of the world is the result of an intentional process, on the part of the researcher, of making sense of the world. Positivists conduct surveys and experiments and make heavy use of statistical methods, whereas interpretivists make use of ethnographic methods, hermeneutics, phenomenology, etc. It should be noted that Weber is at pains to debunk what he sees as spurious differences between the two.

Multiple metatheories

While Lin (1998) argues for combining positivist and interpretivist research, many are convinced that positivism in the social sciences is obsolete or overtaken (Gregor 2004). Whether this is true or not, a huge and confusing variety of alternative and partly-overlapping metatheories is on offer in the place of positivism. Often they are referred to as epistemologies, although their scope may well extend to ontology and other dimensions. Creswell (2009:5-11), who used the term 'philosophical worldview' to refer to metatheory, described four successors or alternatives to positivism: postpositivism, constructivism, an advocacy/participatory worldview and a pragmatic worldview. Mertens (1998:7-15) offered a threefold division into positivist/postpositivist, interpretive/constructivist and emancipatory paradigms. A rather older, but useful, classification of metatheories is that of Guba and Lincoln (1994), who distinguished between positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and related paradigms, and constructivism. They systematically characterized these four paradigms in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology. They also analyzed the metatheoretical positions on practical issues such as the aim of inquiry, the nature of knowledge generated and how it accumulates, and the 'voice' or overt role of scientists. In a research method text for LIS, Pickard (2007:6-13) adapted the

scheme of Guba and Lincoln and reduced their four metatheories to three ‘major research paradigms’, positivism, postpositivism and interpretivism (the latter essentially combining those of critical theory and constructivism). Pickard produced a table, offering characterizations and analyses adapted from those of Guba and Lincoln. An expanded version of Pickard’s table is reproduced as Table 3.2 and her characterization of research paradigms (metatheories) will be referred to in this chapter.

Within the three or four major paradigms or metatheoretical groups, the various authors accommodate a host of paradigms, many of which have received attention in the literature of LIS, for example hermeneutics (Hansson 2005), critical realism (Wikgren 2005), phenomenology (Budd 2005), critical realist phenomenology (Budd *et al.* 2010), constructivism, collectivism and constructionism (Talja *et al.* 2005), and critical theory, including feminist theory, queer theory, and various ‘post-isms’ such as post-modernism and post-colonial theory (Leckie *et al.* 2010). Sweeting (2005:30-31) provides brief, acerbic characterizations of Marxism/critical theory, dependency theory/world systems analysis, post-structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism, and neoliberalism as applied to the history of education. For useful discussions of “postfoundational” approaches (postmodernisms, postructuralisms and postcolonialisms) in comparative education, see also Ninnes and Mehta (2004) and Ninnes and Burnett (2004).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter (and the competence of its author) to describe and disentangle these various metatheoretical approaches. Each of them has persuasive advocates and articulate critics. Each of them comes in many different flavors. The purpose of this chapter is to raise awareness of the assumptions that we all, often unknowingly, bring to the research process. As suggested by the Iceberg Model, our assumptions can be categorized in terms of a number of dimensions. Therefore, in the sections that follow, five dimensions of metatheory are discussed and related to the three major metatheories as grouped by Pickard, with particular reference to their implications for research methodology in international and comparative librarianship. The dimensions are: sociological, teleological, ontological, epistemological and ethical. This approach is derived and

adapted from the five ‘dimensions of social science research’ distinguished by Mouton and Marais (1990:7-20). They identified five dimensions: sociological, ontological, teleological, epistemological and methodological. I have adapted the sequence of the dimensions slightly and added a sixth, the ethical dimension, which Mouton and Marais (1990:10) subsume under the sociological dimension. The methodological dimension is treated in Chapter 4. Table 3-2 sets out the characteristics of the major metatheories. It is closely based on Table 1.1 in Pickard (2010:7), who prefers the term ‘research paradigms’. In order to bring it into line with the five dimensions that are discussed in this chapter, I have changed the order of rows and added rows for the sociological and ethical dimensions, which should be considered conjectural. I replaced the word ‘stance’ with ‘dimension’ and renamed Pickard’s ‘purpose’ the ‘teleological’ dimension. My changes and additions are in *italics*.

Table 3.2: Characteristics of major research metatheories (adapted from Pickard (2010:7))

	Metatheories		
Dimensions	Positivism	Postpositivism	Interpretivism
<i>Sociological</i>	<i>Single paradigm</i> <i>Risk of cultural bias</i> <i>Asymmetrical multinational projects</i>		<i>Multiple paradigms</i> <i>Cultural relativism</i> <i>Symmetrical multinational projects</i>
<i>Teleological (Purpose)</i>	Prediction/control/ explanation Framing of general laws.	Prediction/control/ explanation Generalizations.	Understanding/ reconstruction Transfer of findings.
Ontological	‘Realism’ Belief in a tangible social reality, existing inde- pendently of those ‘creating’ the reality. A social reality can exist just as a natural reality exists.	‘Critical realism’ Belief in a social reality but acceptance that knowing this reality will always be inhibited by imperfections as a result of human fallibility.	Belief in multiple constructed realities that cannot exist outside the social contexts that create them. Realities are time and context bound.

Table 3.2: Characteristics of major metatheories (continued)

Dimensions	Metatheories		
	Positivism	Postpositivism	Interpretivism
Epistemological	Objectivist/dualist Investigator and investigated are independent of each other.	Modified dualist/objectivist Acceptance that independence is not possible but objectivity is seen as the goal and demonstrated by external verification.	Transactional/subjectivist The results of the investigation are a product of interaction between the subject and the investigator. What can be known is the result of the interaction.
<i>Ethical</i>	<i>Sharp distinction between investigator and subjects</i> <i>General ethical principles</i>	<i>Intermediate position, with emphasis on general ethical principles.</i>	<i>Immersion of investigator in the life-world of subjects can present ethical challenges.</i> <i>Ethics more situational and culturally determined.</i>
Methodological	Experimental/Manipulative Hypothesis testing, variables identified before the investigation. Empirical testing is conducted in order to establish the 'truth' of a proposition. Predominantly quantitative. Analysis by variables.	Modified experimental/Manipulative Hypothesis testing but more emphasis placed on context. Quantitative and qualitative. Analysis by variables.	Empathetic interaction Investigator interacts with the object of the investigation. Each construction of reality is investigated in its own right and is interpreted by the investigator. Qualitative, including hermeneutics and dialectic interchanges. Analysis by case.

The sociological dimension

This dimension is concerned with *who* does the research and with the context in which the research is conducted. Mouton & Marais state that "[S]ocial sciences research is a *collaborative* human activity" (p.16, original italics). Here I use the term 'sociological' very broadly to encompass not only social but also economic, political, cultural and linguistic factors. The choice of a research topic and the way it is researched are influenced not only by the researchers' origins, interests and background, but also by their work environment, academic environment and the contacts and opportunities they offer.

Disciplinary and paradigmatic influences

Social scientists work within a research community which has shared goals and values, exercises control, and recognizes contributions. The community operates within economic, political and ideological frameworks. Disciplinary paradigms that are accepted in the researcher's environment, the academic reward system, and the availability of funding all exert influence (Budd 2001:138-139). Kelly, Altbach and Arnove (1982:506) observed that "comparative education has often been tied to foreign assistance programs and the intellectual and ideological orientations of the aid-giving agencies". They also provide an interesting description of the 'clientele' of comparative education research (pp.524-526). In the context of British grant funding for comparative research in education, Cowen (2006:562-563) wrote scathingly about government ministries' requirements for research that is "robust and relevant", implying that what is required is research that will support governmental policy agendas and not raise too many awkward theoretical questions. Cowen placed this in the context of government policy on university research and what politicians regard as "good academic production". The discussion by Rubin & Babbie (1993:77-86) of the political aspects of social work research, from a US perspective and a decade earlier, remains of interest, while Punch (1994) dealt quite comprehensively with the 'political' aspects of qualitative social research.

How does this apply in LIS? Applying the theory of the intellectual and social organization of scientific fields of Richard Whitley (2000), Nolin and Åström (2010) have characterized LIS as a ‘fragmented adhocracy’, a field characterized by multiple paradigms, which is dependent on other disciplines for theory and methodology, and within which there are multiple sources of authority. The implication is that LIS researchers have a relatively free hand as to what to study and how, but at the risk of undertaking idiosyncratic work, the results of which are of little use to other researchers.

For PhD students, sources of funding, the strengths and traditions of the graduate school, the influence of professors and mentors, and the possibilities of publishing the research in a respected journal may well influence methodological decisions. Pressures to produce a report or complete a PhD project, or sometimes sheer convenience, may determine the choice of a research problem or of the countries being compared. In the USA PhD students from other countries commonly undertake studies in which they compare some or other aspect of librarianship or information work in their own countries with conditions in the USA. It would seem that this is often done without regard to how theoretically fruitful such a comparison may be.

Ethnocentricity

A further question in these cases is whether the faculty who supervise foreign students undertaking comparative research are able to look at the research problem from a perspective other than that of their North American environment. This raises the issue of ethnocentricity. In a text on research method in comparative education, Phillips and Schweisfurth (2008:93) wrote:

A problem faced by comparativists at every stage of an investigation is that of ethnocentricity. It is important to recognize that we come with many preconceptions based on long personal experience of a particular way of looking at things in education, and thus try to create a kind of neutrality in attempting to understand other systems of education and the issues that are of interest or concern to them. Seeing

things through an ethnocentric filter can have distorting effects as far as our understanding of educational phenomena in other countries is concerned.

We can substitute ‘LIS’ for ‘education’ and ‘educational’ without loss of meaning. No researcher comes to international or comparative studies in LIS with a blank slate. As a trained LIS professional the researcher will have been socialized into a profession with particular ideals and values. For example, in addition to having absorbed from childhood some pervasive notions of patriotism and American exceptionalism, an American librarian may have internalized laudable values and assumptions about freedom of expression, the role of the public library in promoting democracy, universal access to education, free and equal access to information, etc. These assumptions give rise to expectations as to what she will find when visiting or studying libraries in other countries. Thus she may be dismayed by the low rank afforded that iconic value of American librarianship, freedom of expression, in countries where more utilitarian or existential concerns (such as survival) are more pressing. In other countries the hierarchy of values may be different. For example, in many cultures loyalty to kinsfolk, clan, cohort or tribe may give rise to situations which westerners would see as nepotism. When the expectations of the visiting scholar or consultant are not met, ‘culture shock’ may result (Asheim (1966:2).

Similar comments have been made by Danton (1973:145-146), Buckland and Gathegi (1991) and Stuart (1997). To counteract blind ethnocentrism, in the words of Phillips and Schweisfurth (2008:94), we need to be “aware of ourselves looking at” phenomena in other countries and to “neutralize as far as possible the preconceptions our individual backgrounds have formed in us”. Cultural relativism is a familiar concept to anthropologists, but not one to which librarians, even those employed in area studies departments, give much thought (Van Devender 2010:4-6). Landman (2008:45) discusses this problem under the rubric of ‘value bias’ and gives practical advice for avoiding it, while Raivola (1986:268-269) places ‘cultural bias’ in epistemological perspective:

The way individuals represent the world of knowledge and their concept of knowledge and truth are such an organic part of their

culture-bound thinking that they cannot recognize a different world or different truths (p.269)

according to Whorf, language shapes our ideas rather than merely expressing them (Currie 1970:404).

This relativist perspective is touched on again in later sections of this chapter.

Language

A potent part of our background is the language(s) we speak. Language can constitute a formidable, but often underestimated, barrier to international and comparative research. English-speaking librarians visiting Paris discover that a *librairie* is a bookshop, not a library, and that a *libraire* is not a colleague but a bookseller. A high school and a German *Hochschule* are quite different institutions. Such *faux amis* ('false friends') and other instances of spurious lexical equivalence hold pitfalls for unwary researchers conducting survey research in more than one country. Unsuspected terminological differences also impede communication between speakers of the same language spoken in different countries, as in US, British, Australian, South African, or Indian English. American researchers naively assume that all English-speakers will understand what is meant by K-12, while Indian librarians will blithely tell visitors how many *lahks* (hundreds of thousands) of volumes their libraries hold, without realizing that the use of *lahk* and *crore* (tens of millions) is restricted to the Indian subcontinent.

At a more fundamental level, in comparative studies we have to be aware of the role of language in shaping the way we think, so that people speaking different languages may not only delimit concepts differently, but also have different ways of thinking of space, time, number, etc. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (also known as the linguistic relativity theory) states that language influences perception and thought, so that speakers of different languages do not build identical images of the world:

Linguistic patterns themselves determine what the individual perceives and how he thinks about it. Because these patterns vary widely, the ways of thinking and perceiving in groups using different linguistic systems will produce basically different world views. In short,

Although this appears to make intuitive sense to those of us who have had the privilege of interacting with individuals from widely diverse language groups, this hypothesis has been widely criticized and it is generally rejected by leading scholars (cf. Pinker 2007:124-151). However, it has not gone away completely and a 'neo-Whorfianist' school has emerged which follows a modified version of the hypothesis (Kenneally 2008). The debate continues. Regardless of the outcome, language is a significant factor in comparative research. Hantrais (2009:87-90) provides a useful discussion of the linguistic context of concepts and points to the positivist nature of the notion that concepts are transportable across national boundaries.

What are the practical implications? Sable (1987) insisted on the importance of mastering the language of the country one intends to study. This is not really practical if the country to be studied is multilingual, or if many countries with different languages are to be studied. The use of multilingual teams or of fluently bilingual informants and interpreters will not solve all problems. In the case of survey instruments a technique that can be used is to have a translated document translated back into the source language by a different translator, and to compare the result with the original² (Harkness 2007). But the first line of defense is an awareness of a potential linguistic barrier.

Multinational research

Can a valid comparative study of two countries be undertaken by a researcher from one of the countries being compared? Or would it be better for such a study to be undertaken by a researcher from a third country? Such a *modus operandi* would reflect a positivist assumption that the appropriate place of the researcher is outside or separate from the object of study. Or should it be done by a team of re-

² A probably apocryphal tale has it that the American expression "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" translated back from Russian reads "freedom begets lustful living".

searchers from all the countries being studied? International comparative research may rely on teamwork, requiring collaboration by individuals with different ideologies and interests, or coming from more or less subtly differing research paradigms, or more fundamentally, national 'intellectual styles' (Galtung 1982:24-29). Hantrais (2009:15) distinguishes between asymmetrical and symmetrical social science research. In the symmetrical model, the research program was developed by a team of researchers in one country (often the United States), using "established concepts and technical procedures that it dispatched to other participating countries with a view to collecting, analyzing and interpreting data, without necessarily seeking the cooperation of researchers in the countries concerned". Such studies were vulnerable to cultural bias and critics labeled them as 'imperialist' or 'colonialist'. Under the influence of the UNESCO-sponsored European Centre for the Coordination of Research and Documentation in the Social Sciences in Vienna, a more 'symmetrical' model was adopted, in which "all national groups were expected to be equally represented and involved throughout the research process" (p.15). Very difficult problems were encountered in comparative studies involving countries in Eastern Europe (then still part of the Soviet bloc) and Western Europe, including "ideological and cultural differences in research practices, understandings of concepts and interpretations of findings" (p.15). In a later chapter Hantrais (2009:144-154) deals with the challenges of managing international research projects in more detail. The Eastward expansion of the European Union following the collapse of the Soviet Union has stimulated international comparative social studies research within Europe, and concomitant methodological reflection. An example is the European Social Survey, where a combination of multinational collaborative planning, centralized coordination, and decentralized execution by national agencies has achieved some success (Jowell *et al.* 2007).

In LIS Aarek *et al.* (1992) provides brief but insightful comments on the "multi-cultural research team" consisting of researchers from four Nordic countries, which undertook their research, also reported by Järvelin and Vakkari (1990, 1993), and comment that their project yielded knowledge concerning "the international comparative research process itself" (p.42). Such reflection is not common in our field, however.

The teleological dimension

According to Mouton and Marais (1990:8) the teleological dimension is concerned with purpose or aim: research is "intentional and goal-directed". Researchers' metatheoretical orientations influence their purposes and the goals they set for their research. Here I follow Pickard's (2007:7) three-part division as summarized in Table 3.2.

Positivism and postpositivism

The scientific goals of explanation, prediction and control were emphasized in traditional *positivist* educational research methodology texts (e.g. Van Dalen 1973:26-30). Explanation of phenomena by means of empirically determined regularities and relations of cause and effect ('scientific laws') allows us, it was thought, to make reliable predictions and enables us to exercise a degree of control over our environment (e.g. nuclear power generation) or at least prepare for what we cannot control (e.g. tropical cyclones). The *postpositivist* aim of generalization is somewhat more modest than that of formulating general laws.

Early advocates for comparative librarianship argued that comparisons of library conditions between countries, studying these within their social, political and cultural contexts, would enable librarians to gain a deeper understanding of professional problems, the functions of libraries and their role in society (e.g. Dane 1954b, Shores 1966, 1970; Collings 1971). Thus Dane (1954b:142) suggested that one of the benefits of comparative librarianship would be to enable librarians to re-evaluate their "philosophy" and "sharpen their thinking about some of the fundamental problems of their profession". A more 'scientific' aim gradually emerged: to enable us to build theories to explain the conditions under which libraries evolve the way they do, where 'scientific' generally referred to what was seen as the norm in the natural sciences. This aim was stated by J. Periam Danton in the definition of comparative librarianship cited in the previous chapter, where the ultimate aim is stated as "trying to arrive at valid generalizations and

principles” (Danton 1973:52). This implies that the social researcher adopts the stance of a neutral, disinterested observer whose only aim is to add to the ‘building blocks’ of knowledge, without exercising value judgments or wanting to intervene in the situation. Thus in a comparative study of institutional repositories in a number of countries, the aim might be to develop general principles describing the variables and mechanisms that account for their development or failure to develop. The study could contribute to a model or theory which could predict under which circumstances institutional repositories would function successfully. Such knowledge would be useful in providing guidance for their management.

Interpretivism

Turning now to the interpretivist metatheories, a very different aim characterizes critical theory and related paradigms, where the aim of inquiry is the critique and transformation of the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender structures that constrain and exploit humankind, by engagement in confrontation, even conflict (Guba & Lincoln 1994:113). An example from comparative education is the position taken by Hickling-Hudson (2006) on using a post-colonial perspective in researching Eurocentric education and its effects.

The advocacy and activism implied here contrast strongly with the neutral, uninvolved observer role envisaged in the positivist and postpositivist paradigms. Describing the “advocacy and participatory worldview” (which largely corresponds to Guba and Lincoln’s critical theory), Creswell (2009:9-10) points to its concern with marginalized individuals, social justice, participation and emancipation. Leckie and Buschman (2010: x-xi) describe critical theory as having both a scholarly purpose (questioning accepted beliefs, situating “human action and structures within culture and history”) and a normative purpose (uncovering unjust, unreasonable and irrational societal contradictions that make wars, poverty and servitude possible). They further suggested that critical theory should “encourage sophisticated adaptation and enable articulate responses to current issues facing the field”, for example responding to managerialism and neoliberal market beliefs (p.xi). They observe that “LIS is very interested in the betterment

of society”, citing such endeavors as national information policies, equitable access to information, and the inclusion of marginalized communities, where critical theory can provide useful approaches (p.xiii).

In the context of international and comparative librarianship this would translate, for example, to a post-colonialist perspective on such issues as the development of public libraries, book aid, digitization of cultural heritage, and the impact of international intellectual property regimes in developing countries, where the researcher would not be limited to an uninvolved, neutral stance, describing what exists, but would contribute to a process aimed at a more just and equitable outcome. Such an approach is illustrated by the African Copyright and Access to Knowledge (ACA2K) project, which studied the impact of copyright legislation in eight African countries:

The project’s objectives demonstrate that the intention was not to conduct abstract or theoretical research into copyright. The ACA2K project was, from the outset, geared towards practical, applied research. All project activities were conducted with a specific purpose in mind: to provide empirical evidence that could contribute positively towards copyright reform processes throughout the continent and internationally. The focus on capacity-building recognizes that this project is merely the beginning of a long-term engagement (Armstrong et al. 2010:8).

The language used here (‘reform’, ‘capacity-building’, ‘engagement’) implies that the research was also intended as an intervention in the situation being studied.³ The reference to ‘practical, applied research’ deserves further attention and I

³This is stated more explicitly on the ACA2K website: “...the ACA2K research project, based in Africa and being conducted by African researchers, does not pretend to be neutral or objective in its view of the international/global IPR context. The ACA2K project, and the ACA2K network of researchers, come from a developing country perspective and, because the project’s focus within the broad IPR context is specifically on learning materials access in relation to copyright frameworks, the project also comes from a human rights-based perspective, i.e., the right of access to knowledge (A2K). http://www.aca2k.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=55&lang=en, accessed 27 January 2011.

return to it below.

Under Pickard's broad umbrella of interpretivism we also need to consider *constructivism*. Here the researcher's aim is understanding and reconstruction. 'Reconstruction' refers to the multiple and evolving mental 'constructions' that constitute the knowledge of individuals and groups, including the constructions of both the researcher and the participants in the research. It implies that the aim is to develop "more informed and sophisticated constructions" and greater awareness of "the content and meaning of competing constructions". Thus the researcher is concerned not only with her own understanding, but with the understanding of the participants, and her role is not that of expert but rather that of a fellow participant and facilitator. Activism and advocacy also come into play here (Guba & Lincoln 1994:113). No obvious examples of international comparative LIS come to mind here, although I suggest that international comparisons of what librarians understand by democracy or intellectual freedom, and studies of gender roles in libraries could fruitfully be undertaken from this metatheoretical perspective.

Applied research

I come back to the question of 'practical, applied research'. Mouton and Marais (1990:13) referred to the duality of striving for knowledge for its own sake and striving for knowledge as a source of power which opens up possibilities for change. Thus they distinguished between theoretical and practical research aims. These should not be seen as a dichotomy, but as "two poles of the same dimension" (p.13). Given the nature of our field, it is safe to say that practical research predominates in LIS, where much of our scholarly research is not far removed from its application in professional practice and where we tend to import much of our theory from other disciplines. However, since some metatheoretical perspectives integrate research and action, the distinction made by Mouton and Marais between theoretical and practical research now comes across as a bit dated.

Among comparative studies a distinction can be made between empirical and normative studies. Empirical studies explore, describe and explain phenomena,

while normative studies are concerned with what should be and how things can and should be improved through reform, emancipation or more rational public policy. In practical or applied research, the aim may be to improve systems, promote efficiency, enhance the quality of life of library clients or potential clients, solve management or technical problems, develop plans and policies, evaluate or advocate. Writing in the context of European comparative social research, Hantrais (2009:11) points to the increasing use of international comparisons of policy as a means of informing policy, identifying common policy objectives, evaluating proposed solutions, drawing lessons about best practice, and assessing the transferability of policies between societies. Arnove *et al.* (1982:4) refer to the "ameliorative strain" in comparative education, the desire to improve practice in one's own country. A comparative analysis of metropolitan public library services reported by Oller and Creus (2009) is a clear example of an international comparison undertaken primarily for purposes of improving public library services, specifically in Barcelona.

Much has been written about the 'borrowing' or transfer of systems and policies from one country to another, particularly in education (e.g. Kelly *et al.* 1982; Cowen 2006; Phillips and Schweisfurth 2008:96-98.) In education comparison is increasingly used as a "tool for setting policy agendas" (Steiner-Khamsi 2010:323). Transfer of educational policies between countries and policy 'borrowing' have significant political dimensions. Comparison can be used as a policy instrument stimulate or stall reform. In the case of developing countries policy borrowing may be "coercive and unidirectional" (p.324), often as a condition for receiving aid. This has obvious relevance for the study of library development in developing countries.

In LIS comparative research may be undertaken to learn from how things are done in other countries with a view to improvement in one's own country (or to apply how things are done in one's own country to developing countries) by the transfer of technology, policies etc. Students from developing countries often want to compare the situation in their own country with that in the country in which they are studying (e.g. the USA or UK). Such a study might compare very unequal entities and yield little theoretical insight, but may be motivated by the desire to

put forward proposals for improving matters back home. Novak (1977:5-6) calls this the “diagnostic-therapeutical” approach. Indeed, comparative studies are often used for advocacy. By demonstrating that the resources allocated for certain library services in one’s own country are greatly inferior to those allocated for analogous services in other countries, one may hope to persuade politicians and government officials to be more generous. (On the other hand, if one’s own country stood out as a shining example, one might be less likely to bring this to their attention.) Since politicians and officials are unlikely to respond to comparisons of countries with widely differing conditions and resources, the choice of countries to be compared is important in such cases. An example of the “diagnostic-therapeutic” approach is a study by Van Zyl *et al.* (2006) in which a sadly under-resourced South African university of technology is compared with a New Zealand counterpart. This seems to be aimed at jolting South African decision makers into rectifying the situation. In a less political mode, a study by Sapa (2005) comparing US and Polish academic library websites as a “starting point to improve and develop” (p.2) the latter.

In recent decades international cooperation has become an important motivator for international research. This is particularly so in Europe, where the expansion of the European Union has created a significant demand for comparative studies for purposes of measuring demographic, economic and social trends and for coordinating national policies on a European level (Hantrais 2009:16-18). This is not limited to the EU. In a time of globalization a multitude of international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations is involved in compiling comparative data. Many studies produce rankings of countries in terms of ease of doing business, corruption, educational achievement, teledensity, Internet access, etc. There is considerable scope for misuse or at least misinterpretation of comparative studies (Pennings *et al.* 1999:3-4). In education international comparative rankings (‘league tables’) of student performance in subjects such as mathematics not infrequently hit the headlines.⁴ Not only are there serious pitfalls in making

⁴ In December 2010 reports that 15-year old students in Shanghai had outperformed those of all other participating countries on the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) test caused consternation in the US, where President Obama compared the poor showing of the American students to a “Sputnik moment”, reminiscent of the shock experienced when the USSR successfully

such comparisons, but the findings are liable to be misunderstood and misinterpreted in the media (Crossley 2002:83, Phillips & Schweisfurth 2007:19-21; Mundy & Farrell 2008; Steiner-Khamsi 2010:328-329).

Finally, there may be consciously propagandistic or unconsciously patriotic motives for a comparative study: the desire to demonstrate that the system of one’s own country is superior. Novak (1977:5-6) calls this the “cosmetical” orientation, where the researcher may tend to select certain variables and operationalize them in such a way as to achieve the most ‘satisfactory’ result. This is a temptation in comparisons of all sorts, across the Atlantic, or between developed and developing countries.

The ontological dimension

Ontology is the study of being or reality. This is the original, philosophical sense of the word, which is not to be confused with its more recent use in the context of computer science, artificial intelligence and knowledge organization, where it refers to formal representations of knowledge. The ontological dimension of social sciences research is concerned with the reality that is being investigated, which is also referred to as the research domain of the social sciences. Associated with a social science research domain are domain assumptions, beliefs about the nature, structure and status of social phenomena (Mouton & Marais 1990:11-13). In comparative studies this implies that we need to consider what can legitimately be compared.

Ontological stances

As summarized in Table 3-2, metatheories differ in how they understand reality.

launched the first earth satellite ahead of the USA. (New York Times, December 7, 2010, available <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/education/07education.html?pagewanted=all>).

Positivist ontology (also characterized as ‘naive realism’) assumes that there is an “apprehendable reality” (Guba and Lincoln (1994: 109). Thus there exists an objective, stable and singular reality ‘out there’ which is independent of human perception and thinking. The assumption that reality can be fully apprehended and is not dependent on the human observer, implies that it is invariant, allowing for the determination of cause and effect and the formulation of scientific ‘laws’. In the social sciences this implies that a tangible social reality exists. Taking to extremes the notion that reality can only be discovered through observation (using the senses) means that things that cannot be observed, do not exist. This may appear to be appropriate in sciences dealing with physical phenomena (it is not), but is particularly problematic in the social sciences, including LIS. For example, in a bibliometric analysis which investigates the use of documents on the basis of citations, the reasons why an author cited each document, how much of a cited document was used (if at all) and how it was used (what it contributed to the author’s understanding and thinking) would not be taken into account. This simplifies the investigation in that much less interpretation is required, but it severely reduces what we can know about complex human phenomena.

Postpositivist ontology is known as critical realism, because it is thought that “claims about reality must be subjected to the widest possible critical examination to facilitate apprehending reality as closely as possible” (Guba & Lincoln 1994:110). (This ontology should not be confused with the metatheory (or paradigm) known as critical *theory*.) As in positivist ontology, a reality external to human beings does exist independently but there is less certainty about cause and effect relationships. We can determine relationships to be true with a high degree of probability, but human and technical limitations mean that our knowledge of such relationships is provisional and subject to revision. In the social sciences such an ontological stance is obviously more appropriate than that of earlier positivism, since human behavior is highly complex and there is much more uncertainty. Thus extensive critical examination is needed to apprehend reality as closely as possible. Much if not most current research in LIS appears to be implicitly based on this assumption. Postpositivist ontology is relevant to comparative research because it implies that multiple studies conducted in different countries can be helpful in establishing and confirming observed relationships.

Pickard (2007:7) labels the ontology of *interpretivism* as relativist. Under the interpretivist umbrella we need to consider the ontological stance of critical theory and its related metatheories and that of constructivism, as delineated by Guba and Lincoln (1994:107-111).

In *critical theory* and related metatheories (historical realism) it is assumed that the reality that can be apprehended at a given point in time is the result of a range of historical factors (social, political, economic, cultural, ethnic and gender) that give rise to structures that constitute a virtual reality. The term ‘virtual reality’ is used here not in the modern technical sense of an apparent reality mediated by information technology, but as referring to an illusory reality which limits and constrains our thinking, and needs to be challenged. Social phenomena are the results of processes that take place over time, creating structures that shape human experience at the same time that human action continuously changes those structures:

Society and culture are the products of human activity, and are constantly elaborated or reinforced by human activity. However, at any given time these social and cultural structures are pre-existent, which gives them their autonomy as possible objects of investigation (Wikgren 2005:15)

Since libraries are complex social and cultural institutions (itself an ontological assumption!) it makes sense for LIS to study them in their multiple contexts and not as isolated phenomena. This implies a historical perspective and not merely cross-sectional surveys of conditions existing at one point in time. It also implies a greater depth of analysis. Thus from the perspective of critical theory a study of libraries in West Africa would need to place the institutions studied in the context of a range of factors, including the impact of colonialism (and how colonial policies and racism framed policies about what was appropriate for subject peoples), racism, literacy and orality, concepts of development aid, and north-south power relations as expressed, for example in international intellectual property treaties and agreements. The ACA2K report, referred to earlier, serves as an example of looking at the contextual reality – it added value by not merely

analyzing the copyright legislation, but looking at the total context of education, publishing, economic factors etc. which influence enforcement and compliance.

Constructivist ontology (relativism) assumes multiple realities or meanings that are constructed by humans individually and in their social contexts. It has both psychological and social dimensions. Individual minds create knowledge structures through experience and observation, the mental process being “significantly informed by influences received from societal conventions, history and interaction with significant others” (Talja *et al.* 2005:81). The realities thus created are not universal, as posited by positivism, but embedded in local and specific contexts, and they evolve over time. An extreme relativist position appears to be problematic. If all our concepts mean different things to different people, how can we make valid statements about anything? However, this stance implies that when studying a social or cultural phenomenon, we should allow the participants in the study to interpret their situation in their own ways using their own concepts, rather than, or in interaction with, those imposed by the investigator. This allows a richer texture of meanings to emerge from the study. It has obvious implications for comparative studies; especially those conducted in developing countries, where researchers must suppress their tendency to impose their own conceptual structures on the ‘other’ being studied, and be prepared to negotiate meaning interactively. At another level, a constructivist approach opens up new ways to think of such projects as ‘access to knowledge’ (A2K), seeing this as a dynamic process in which the intended beneficiaries are not passive recipients of knowledge ‘packages’, but as active participants in constructing knowledge individually and within their communities (Lor & Britz 2010).

Some ontological assumptions

Since international comparisons tend to deal with countries, it is necessary to be aware of ontological assumptions about them. Assumptions concerning the nature and comparability of nation-states will be touched on below. In considering library development in LIS we also need to be aware of our assumptions about westernization and modernization. The latter is the assumption that all societies

follow the same path to development, positing that

...societies constantly strive for economic and social rationality which maximizes productive resources. Social change is unidirectional and consists of the movement from simple to increasingly complex social organization; from functionally diffuse to functionally specific institutions; from lesser to greater divisions of labor; from social systems of stratification based on ascription to those based on individual achievement; from belief and legal systems that are particularistic and fatalistic to those that are universalistic and subject to human control (Kelly *et al.* 1982:516).

In comparative education modernization theory was very influential but was overtaken by other approaches several decades ago. However, one may still discern traces of these assumptions in LIS.

Mention should also be made of the distinction that is made in psychology and various social sciences between *emic* and *etic* approaches. (It is helpful to remember that the word ‘emic’ derives from the linguistic term ‘phonemic’ and ‘etic’ from ‘phonetic’.) An emic approach focuses on the unique issues and phenomena that are found within a single cultural or national group and emphasizes the variations within groups. An etic approach emphasizes differences among groups. It “studies behavior, attitudes and social values based on the assumption that they are universal” (Tran 2009:7) and thus incurs the risk of imposing external concepts on the group being studied. On the other hand, the emic approach, taken to extremes, would make cross-cultural or cross-national comparisons impossible. Contrasts between emic and etic, relativist and universalist, interpretivist and positivist recur in the literature of comparative method, with emic, relativist and interpretivist approaches, and etic, universalist and positivist approaches respectively being frequently but not automatically associated.

Ontology as classification

There is another angle from which to consider the ontological dimension of

international and comparative research in LIS, an angle which is more closely aligned with the meaning of ontology as classification. According to Mouton and Marais (1990:11), social scientists study "humankind in all its diversity, which would include human activities, characteristics, institutions, behavior, products, and so on" (Mouton & Marais 1990:11). This is very diverse and makes possible many different perspectives. We could classify phenomena as observable and unobservable, verbal and non-verbal, individual & collective, human behavior and products of human behavior, etc. Mason (1996:11-12) provides a long list of "ontological components" which might be seen as constituting social reality. The following are some examples that appear relevant to LIS:

- People, social actors
- Understandings, interpretations, motivations, ideas
- Attitudes, beliefs, views
- Experiences, accounts
- Representations, cultural and social constructions
- Actions, reactions, behaviors, events
- Interactions, situations, social relations
- Institutions, structures, the 'material', markets
- Underlying mechanisms

A variety of classifications of phenomena have been proposed in the literature of international and comparative librarianship. The entry by Krzys (1971) on research methodology for international and comparative librarianship in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of library and information science* included a checklist for the comparison of library phenomena (pp.333-334). In her "Outline for the study of a foreign library system", Simsova (1982:83-86) provided a very similar checklist covering background factors (geography, climate, population, etc.) as well as the components and aspects of the library system (types of libraries, services, personnel, developmental factors). Parker (1983:10) listed seven sets of concepts as part of a "systematic framework" for planning library and information services. In their attempt to construct a "world librarianship" Krzys and Litton (1983) devised a grid with areas (e.g. the Middle East, Africa, and Western Europe) on one axis and "aspects of librarianship" on the other. They identified eleven aspects:

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Bibliographic control | 7. Educational agencies |
| 2. Legislation | 8. Literature |
| 3. Financial support | 9. Service agencies |
| 4. The profession | 10. Services |
| 5. Practitioners | 11. Planning for the future |
| 6. Associations | (p.47) |

A systematic analysis of each of the cells in the grid would result in a theory of world librarianship. The analysis would be carried out by asking questions of each aspect. Thus in the case of libraries:

1. What is a library? (Nature)
2. Why is it established? (Purposes)
3. Which element(s) initiate a library? (Origin)
4. Which types of the aspect are evident? (Categories)
5. Which forces influence its development? (Variables)
6. Which phases does a library experience? (Development)
7. What ends a library's existence? (Demise) (p.51)

Today the eleven 'aspects' appear a bit dated, although the seven 'elements' hold more promise. The entire project was cast in a quite positivistic mold, being aimed at establishing a "global librarianship". Checklists such as those cited here and frameworks such as those presented in Chapter 2 can be very useful, but they reflect significant ontological assumptions. As such, they can have the effect of framing research in such a way that other, unlisted and unanticipated aspects or dimensions may be overlooked or disregarded as irrelevant.

Ontological implications of a systems approach

The kinds of frameworks referred to here and in Chapter 2 raise the issue of the ontological status of systems. Systems thinking is widespread in LIS, particularly in technical and organizational areas of professional practice. We speak, for example, of circulation systems, inter-library loan systems, RFID systems, personnel management systems and financial systems. In strategic planning we are

encouraged to see an academic library as a component of larger systems within its college or university, and beyond, for example as part of regional and national networks, of a national system of preservation of the national documentary heritage, part of a system of national bibliographic control, and as a component of the system of scholarly communication. Systems thinking is also widespread in other comparative disciplines such as comparative education and comparative politics.

Is systems thinking positivist or interpretivist? In comparative political science Peters *et al.* (1978) criticized the use of systems theory, arguing that the field has been impoverished by excessive attention to inputs (e.g. voting), relative neglect of outputs (e.g. policy and legislation) and more or less complete neglect of what happens in the metaphorical 'black box' of government where inputs are converted into outputs. Such a reductionist approach can lead to superficiality and conceptual weakness. However, systems thinking need not be reductionist; on the contrary it can be argued that systems thinking is essentially holistic and hospitable to complexity because it deals with entities such as libraries as dynamic and complex wholes. Such systems are seen as at consisting of interacting parts (which are themselves systems), as having properties that are on a different (higher) level than the properties of those parts, and as interacting with their environments. Systems thinking focuses on relationships. In management, a school of soft systems theory has emerged which deal with complex human interactions and problem solving using both quantitative and qualitative approaches (cf. Underwood 1996)

In comparative librarianship treating libraries (or groups of libraries, or the libraries and related agencies of a country) as systems appears to be a common-sense approach, but implies significant ontological assumptions, e.g. that such entities exist only in relationships with others. These ontological assumptions do not appear to have received attention in the literature of our field.

Some practical implications

In a comparative research project we can extend the ontological dimension to the

classification of units of analysis, which may be individuals, social groups, organizations (such as libraries) or social artifacts (products of human behavior, such as citations). A further refinement would relate to the conditions, orientations and actions of each of these (Babbie 1979 in Mouton & Marais 1990:18; 38-40). Units of analysis should not be confused with comparators, the countries, cultures or societies being compared. What we regard as comparators also reflects ontological assumptions. In the social sciences generally international comparative studies are thought to entail the comparison of phenomena "in two or more countries, societies or cultures" (Hantrais 2009:2; cf. Danton 1973:52). Of these three, countries at least seem quite straightforward, but in comparative social studies and political science this concept is considered more problematic. In a time of globalization questions are being raised about the assumption that the nation-state is the primary unit of comparison in comparative education (Crossley 2002) and social policy (Kennett 2001:2-3). Galtung (1982) has discussed the notion of the nation in some depth.

An example of uncertainty is found in LIS when one studies national libraries. The British Library is clearly a national library. What about the National Library of Scotland? Or the National Library of Quebec, Kosovo or Chechnya? Our answers will be determined in part by what, for the purposes of the comparison, we consider to constitute a 'country'.

The epistemological dimension

Epistemology is concerned with "the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope, and general basis" (Honderich 2005:260). Another way of looking at this is reflected in the question, "what is the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the would-be known?" (Mertens 1998:6). Metatheories differ in how they answer this question, as outlined in Table 3.2.

Positivism and postpositivism

Our epistemological position is closely bound up with our ontological assumptions. In conjunction with the ontological assumption that reality exists independently of the observer (dualism), a *positivist* epistemology assumes that the investigator is detached from the object of study and can assume an objective stance towards it (objectivism). In *postpositivism* the assumption of dualism is largely abandoned and it is accepted that it is not humanly possible to maintain the independence of the investigator and what is studied. There is a greater awareness of the investigator's limitations, but a concomitant emphasis on the use of rigorous, standardized methods to prevent the investigator's bias or values from possibly influencing the findings (Mertens 1998:7-10). Formal testing of hypotheses developed in the context of a theory is characteristic of this stance; however, it is not the substantive hypothesis ("there is a relationship between A and B") that is tested, but the null hypothesis ("there is *no* relationship between A and B"). If the latter is rejected, it provides confirmation of the substantive hypothesis. However, substantive hypotheses are never definitely 'proven'; there always remains a possibility that an alternative explanation will be found (Pickard 2007:10).

The assumption that the investigator is detached from the object of study provides the basis for the procedures of control and manipulation of the object of study that are characteristic of experiments. In an experiment the investigator aims for a high degree of validity. Thus the investigator will typically draw a known probability sample of 'research subjects' from a population, to ensure that the sample is representative of the population so that findings can be generalized to the whole population. This generalizability is, roughly, what is meant by *external validity*. The investigator will also randomly divide the sample into experimental and control groups which are subjected to different 'treatments', that is, different values of an independent variable, while other variables are held constant, or 'controlled'. This is to ensure that the effects observed are the result of the manipulation and not of other, extraneous factors. This is, roughly, what is meant by *internal validity*. In order to demonstrate experimentally a relationship between the chosen variables, the number of variables that comes into play must be limited. In the social

sciences, where we deal with human beings, these procedures are difficult to carry out with sufficient control to ensure internal validity. Attempts to exercise experimental control give rise to artificial situations, which constitute a threat to external validity.

Comparison as substitute for experimentation

Seeking to approximate the scientific method, pioneers in the social sciences saw comparative research as a suitable alternative to experimental research (Arnove *et al.* 1982:4; Mabbett & Bolderson 1999:35; Hantrais 2009:26). If it is not possible to manipulate nations, societies or cultures and control the variables impacting on them, an alternative is to compare existing nations, societies and cultures, seeking cases where particular conditions exist or do not exist. This provides us with what may be referred to as natural experiments, quasi-experiments or 'ex post facto research'. Much of this is carried out using survey methods, which allow large numbers of cases or subject to be studied. Although techniques of multivariate statistical analysis allow researchers to determine the effects of multiple variables, the number of variables to be taken into account has to be limited and the nature of the relationships among the variables cannot be explored in detail. The result is that such studies lack explanatory depth. Thus, comparing the circulation statistics of Finnish, US and South African public libraries would show clearly in which country books are most circulated per head of the population. The circulation data could also be compared with such variables as literacy rates, per capita GDP, and number of book titles published per year. The data could be analyzed statistically and statistical tests could be used to determine whether the differences between the countries are significant. However, this could not tell us why the books were borrowed, whether they were in fact read, how the readers experienced their reading, how reading functions in their lives and their communities, etc.

From an overview by Hantrais (2009:22-44) of approaches to comparative studies in a range of disciplines in the social and human sciences, it would seem that in the course of the 20th century there was general movement from humanistic and conceptual origins (including the use of typologies or ideal types for classification

and explanation) towards a more pronounced positivist epistemological stance. As comparativists strove for academic and scientific respectability they adopted increasingly empiricist and quantitative approaches.⁵ In comparative politics this is exemplified by the following definition:

The comparative study of political institutions and systems... entails the comparison of variables against a background of uniformity, either actual or analytical, for the purpose of discovering causal factors that account for variations. More generally, it has a threefold function: (1) to explain such variables in the light of analytical schemes and to develop a body of verified knowledge; (2) to appraise policy measures and to identify problem areas and trends; (3) to reach a stage where prediction of the institutional trends or processes is possible (Macridis 1978:18 (1955)).

This is a classical statement of the goals of explanation and prediction pursued by social scientists in emulation of their colleagues in the natural sciences, striving to contribute to knowledge by building of a scientific edifice of general laws explaining social phenomena.

Nomothetic and idiographic research

Here it is useful to refer to the distinction between nomothetic and idiographic research. The former aims at establishing general regularities or laws (nomothetic derives from the Greek *nomos*, law) through the formal testing of hypotheses. This approach is also reflected in Danton's (1973) definition, cited earlier, of a comparative librarianship which aims to "arrive at valid generalizations". Idiographic research, on the other hand, is more concerned with comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon in itself, in depth, in its uniqueness and in its context. Idiographic (frequently misspelled ideographic) derives from the Greek *idios*, own, private, which also appears in the words 'idiosyncratic' and 'idiopathic'

⁵ Hantrais (2009:44) cautions that the pattern of epistemological preferences was by no means uniform. There was considerable variation among the disciplines, the boundaries of which were in any case in a state of flux.

and 'idiot' (Mouton & Marais 1990:48-50).

The rise of the nomothetic approach in the social sciences has been attributed to the desire of social scientists for 'scientific' respectability (Hantrais 2009:43). In comparative education the 1960s saw a big push to develop a nomothetic 'science' of comparative education using methodologies derived from the social sciences, emphasizing the formal testing of hypotheses using statistical techniques. Bereday's (1964) pioneering work and the text by Noah and Eckstein (1969), which emphasized empirical and quantitative methods, exerted great influence in our field too. Bereday's methodology⁶ provided the basic structure for the well-regarded comparison by Hassenforder (1967) of public library development in France, Great Britain and the USA. It also formed the basis for the research methodology set out by Krzys and Litton (1983) for "world study in librarianship", which aimed at "the formulation of theoretical knowledge that underlies librarianship". Taking as an example the study of reference service, they wrote:

Traditional library science research may investigate, for example, the reference service at a particular agency in order to analyze the service at that agency; whereas, an investigation of reference service for the purpose of formulating hypotheses, theories and laws that will explain, predict and control the phenomenon of reference throughout the world falls within the discipline of world study in librarianship (p.5)

Basing their work on the assumption of "a basic immutability of human nature" (p.6), Krzys and Litton proposed four "laws of world librarianship", which reflect a progression from context-dependent national variants, through partial convergence across national boundaries, to global standardization, formulated as follows in the fourth law, the "Law of Total Convergence":

Eventually all world variants of librarianship will, through standardization, converge to form a global librarianship. The success of the global librarianship will be controlled by the preciseness by which

⁶ Rust et al. (1999:86) have pointed out that Bereday remained true to earlier educational comparativists in his use of induction, with observation and classification preceding the formulation of hypotheses.

all elements of world librarianship are standardized (p.197).

The project of Krzys and Litton illustrates the nomothetic approach that is associated with positivist epistemology. In addition, one could hardly wish for a more vivid illustration of universalism, the desire to demonstrate the universality of social phenomena (cf. Hantrais 2009:28), than this aim.⁷

While (to my knowledge) metatheoretical reflection in comparative librarianship failed to progress beyond this point, comparative education continued to evolve. In the 1970s and 1980s a growing interest in educational outcomes and the experiences of different groups and minorities, a concern with social inequalities, and greater awareness of the socio-economic and political context of education gave rise to controversies over the nature of comparative education (Altbach & Kelly 1986:6-7) and to the importation of new perspectives from anthropology, feminism, and postcoloniality, among others (Cowen 2006:568). The diversity of approaches is currently such that Hantrais (2009:42) has characterized comparative education as “fragmented”. Similarly, Sartori (1991) deplored the general state of confusion in comparative politics. It appears that the general trend in comparative studies has been towards a greater acceptance of epistemological stances associated with what Pickard has grouped under interpretivism: not only critical theory and associated paradigms, and constructivism, but also stances labeled as culturalism or historicism, depending on the discipline.

Interpretivism

Pickard (2007:7) states that in interpretivist epistemology the results of the investigation are produced by the interaction between the subject and the investigator. Both are simultaneously changed by this interaction, so that the knowledge that results from the process is not universally valid but contextual and restricted to the particular time of the interaction. Under this broad umbrella, Guba and Lincoln (1984:110-111) distinguish between critical theory and

⁷ Krzys and Litton appear to confuse scientific laws, which are intended to explain, with normative laws, which lay down how things should be done.

constructivism, characterizing their epistemological position as follows:

- *Critical theory and related paradigms*: transactional/subjectivist; value-mediated findings – there is an inevitable, value-laden link between the investigator and the ‘object’ of the investigation, which influences the findings, thereby blurring the line between ontology and epistemology
- *Constructivism*: transactional/subjectivist; created findings – the investigator and the ‘object’ of the investigation are interactively linked and the findings are developed or ‘created’ in the course of the investigation through the interaction of a particular investigators and a particular object or group

Interpretivist epistemologies generally are case-oriented rather than variable-oriented (Ragin 1987: xiii). Attention is focused holistically on the phenomenon or case as a whole in its particularity, complexity and detail. This is in contrast with the positivist and postpositivist epistemologies, which tend to look at reality in terms of variables and where the need to operationalize concepts for purposes of ‘measurement’ (collecting quantitative data) and the testing of hypotheses, leads to simplification and loss of detail. Generally, interpretivist epistemology gives more weight to hypothesis *generation*. It takes contextual factors into account, and for this reason is sometimes referred to as “culturalist” (Hantrais 2009:38). It pays attention to the evolution of the phenomenon over time, which gives rise to another label, ‘historicist’. Writing from an information retrieval science perspective, Hjørland (1998:607-609) expresses a preference for the historicist approach, which accepts that humans are social and cultural beings and that psychological processes such as logical thinking, memory and decision making are culturally determined. Such a point of departure seems appropriate for international and comparative librarianship, where it is sensible to try to understand library development and conditions in terms of cultural and other contextual factors.

To conclude this section it is worth noting the different perspectives of positivists and interpretivists on the nature of comparison. The positivist assumption is that objective data for comparison exist, so that similarity and difference are inherent

in what is observed. From an interpretivist perspective, on the other hand,

The researcher ... cannot set out to look for similar or different phenomena in different cultures, since similarity is not something that is an inherently inseparable part of an empirical observation. ...similarity is a relationship between the observer and the data, one that depends on the observer's system of concepts (Raivola 1986:270).

Relativism of this nature, taken to extremes, would make comparisons of cultures or nations impossible. Both extremes are to be avoided.

The Ethical dimension

Today there is widespread awareness of research ethics. Many social science research methodology texts have a chapter or section on research ethics, covering the canonical ethical principles of respect, beneficence and justice in research with human subjects, usually including such aspects as refraining from harming participants, voluntary participation, refraining from deception, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (Rubin & Babbie 1993:57-64, Pickard 2007:71-80, Creswell (2009:88-92, Connaway & Powell 2010:87-93). Much of this derives from problems encountered in biomedical and psychological research conducted in a positivist paradigm. In a discussion of ethics in qualitative research, Punch (1994:88-94) has pointed to the moral dilemmas that researchers may face when working within an interpretive paradigm, for example within the framework of critical theory, where the researcher's relationship with marginalized or downtrodden groups and his commitment to them may be seen as justifying the exercise of deception vis-à-vis dominant groups or authorities.

Other ethical aspects of academic and scholarly conduct (e.g. integrity in reporting and publishing research, objectivity in peer review, and respect for intellectual property) are often dealt with in such texts, and usually feature in the ethical codes of professional associations of social scientists such as that of the American Sociological Association (1999). Hantrais (2009:146-149) discusses research ethics in international comparative social research, with particular

emphasis on the maintenance of scientific standards in international projects.

Various ethical issues need to be taken into account in cross-cultural research (Marshall & Batten 2003). In the context of comparative librarianship it is worth bearing in mind that there may be cultural differences in the understanding and interpretation of concepts such as privacy, confidentiality and informed consent. The ethical codes of national professional associations and regulatory agencies may differ from country to country. Thus in cross-national team research, ethical issues need to be clarified at the initial stages, and attention will also have to be paid to such issues as the ownership and ultimate disposition of data, reporting, and dissemination of results. In the case of research conducted in or on countries with undemocratic regimes particular care must be taken with access to research data so as to protect the identities of research participants and informants. Citing even quite innocuous-looking facts or reproducing mildly unfavorable comments, if these can be traced to a local informant, can have very serious consequences for that person.

In addition to the ethical issues already mentioned, in international and comparative LIS research we need to consider the ethics of international knowledge sharing and information flows. This applies particularly to comparative research involving developing countries (or for that matter any LIS research in such countries) where asymmetries may exist in respect of power relations and information flows. People, communities and institutions should not be exploited as 'fodder for research'. The autonomy and dignity of research participants and collaborators should be respected. It is important that the authentic voices of those studied in other countries and societies be heard. The flow of information should be reciprocal, encompassing South-North as well as North-South flows. At the conclusion of the research project feedback should be given to communities that were studied and that provided research data, so that they too can benefit fully from information and insights gained (Britz & Lor 2003; Lor & Britz 2004). One should not assume that writing up the research in a scholarly journal will ensure that local scholars and the studied community gain access to the findings. Attention needs to be paid to the disposition of research data for access by the community or country concerned, provided that this does not conflict with

requirements for confidentiality.

Towards methodology

In this overview of metatheoretical considerations, reference is made to many metatheoretical -isms. The main points to be retained here by those considering comparative and international studies in our field are that our thinking may well be slanted positivistically without our realizing it; that there is a rich variety of alternatives to positivism; and that whatever metatheoretical approach we adopt, knowingly or unknowingly, will have implications for our methodology, which is the subject of the next chapter

Impatience is sometimes expressed with metatheoretical concerns. Researchers who want to 'get on with it' may claim to take an eclectic stance, adopting whatever theoretical approach that seems to them most appropriate to the topic they are investigating, or they may claim not to make use of any theory. However, as Sweeting (2005:30) points out, "atheoreticism and eclecticism are themselves theoretical standpoints".

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