Doing adult education as tertium comparationis: Comparative research in cross-border regions at Germany’s peripheries through the lens of social spatiality

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Abstract
Comparing places represents one of the most traditional threads of comparative inquiry. However, international and comparative (adult) education research has to date focused on comparing places more in the sense of territorial entities. In contrast, this paper moves away from understandings of national or regional territories as given, container-like units, criticised as methodological nationalism. It draws instead on theoretical approaches of social spatiality and, in particular, on Werlen’s works on action-centred geography. Findings of qualitative research on organisations providing adult education in two cross-border regions at Germany’s territorial periphery serve as an empirical framework, analysing the programme planning activities of their managerial staff. The paper argues that it is the pedagogical actions and practices of these professionals, rather than the territorial entities, that become the tertium comparationis, eliciting the professionals’ share in the overall process of (re)producing social space and, ultimately, territory.

Keywords
Adult education, comparing places, cross-border regions, geography, managerial staff, methodological nationalism, organisation, programme planning, socio-spatial theory, tertium comparationis

Introduction
Comparing places represents one of the most traditional threads of comparative inquiry (see, for example, Crossley and Watson, 2003; Manzon, 2007; Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2008). However,
international and comparative (adult) education research has hitherto focused on comparing places more in the sense of territorial entities. In contrast, and in echoing the criticism raised on methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003), this paper draws on works that follow theoretical approaches of social spatiality. In particular, we aim to bring Benno Werlen’s (1993; 2013) contribution to action-centred geography to the fore.

Against this backdrop, the paper starts out by introducing its theoretical underpinnings. It refers to works on social spatiality and human geography and, thus, follows respectively the arguments of ‘making space’ (Löw, 2016) and ‘making geography’ (Werlen, 2013). This sets the scene for shifting the focus onto the issue of regions and the theoretical approach by the German-Swiss human geographer, Benno Werlen. Our aim is to demonstrate the benefit of Werlen’s work on action-centred geography, in emphasising the category of action and social practices in human processes of producing social space – such as producing concepts of a ‘region’ by adult education managerial staff who are ‘doing’ adult education: to be more precise, those executing their management and programme planning tasks. The next section then provides insights into the methodological premises and the findings of this empirical research on organisations providing adult education in two cross-border regions (Bernhard, 2017a; 2017b). It shows that we are comparing the spatiality of programme planning activities that are performed in and with respect to different territorial places in the cross-border regions. We ask: why, how and where do adult education professionals do what they do and what are the spatial consequences of doing this? This illuminates, for example, the emergence of individual ideas of a region as an outcome of these activities. Adopting this perspective, programme planning as part of ‘doing’ adult education becomes the tertium comparationis in our paper.

Finally, in summarising and problematising the issues raised, we also identify the implications for research in the field of international and comparative (adult) education. As such we seek to emphasise Novóa and Yariv-Mashal’s (2007) claim for the necessity to adopt ‘new zones of looking that are inscribed in a space delimited by frontiers of meaning, and not only by physical boundaries’ (Novóa and Yariv-Mashal, 2007: 367–368).

Theoretical underpinnings: shifting from territory and places to a concept of social spaces

From the beginning of the 1990s, the so-called spatial turn (Soja, 1989) in social science and humanities has brought the phenomena of space and place into the foreground. However, Crang and Thrift (2000) correctly remark that ‘different disciplines do space differently’, referring to the by-now diverse field of theories and approaches. In German social science and humanities, Kessl and Reutlinger (2010a) have enriched the educational discourse by adopting Martina Löw’s (2001; 2016) sociological work and her concept of space. Löw’s concept of space provided one of the most influential German language sociological works in recent years and served as a catalyst for analyses on (adult) education and learning through a spatial lens (for more on spatial issues in the German adult education discourse, see e.g. Bernhard et al., 2015).

In following Giddens’ (1984) conceptual underpinnings, Löw (2001) and also Kessl and Reutlinger (2010) aim to understand space as a duality of structural ordering (or: arrangement) and action, and they argue for a relational understanding of space. Accordingly, Löw defines space as a ‘relational arrangement of social goods and people (living beings) at places’ (Löw, 2016: 188). Of vital importance for the issues raised in this present paper is, first of all, the relevance given to the category of action. According to Löw, this relevance is based upon its function as a mediating category, which ‘makes it possible to link bodily positioning, perception, and the constructional performances of subjects with material artefacts and institutional frameworks’ (Löw, 2008: 31).
Löw concludes, with regard to analytical purposes, that space therefore ‘…in itself can never be empirically studied, but rather only individual spaces’ (Löw, 2016: 106). Secondly, Löw’s distinction between space and place is fruitful for analytical procedures. ‘Place’ refers to a concrete territorial locus, whereas on one territorial locus, many social spaces may be (re)produced by human beings. Thus, ‘space’ is more than place or territory (Löw, 2016; Werlen, 1993).

Such an understanding of space serves as framework for our paper. We agree with these exponents of spatial theory who consider space not as a given, stable and physical ‘container’, but as a dynamic, socially constructed interplay of individual actions, social structures and materiality. Using the analytical lens of spatial theory thus enables us to analyse the interrelatedness of materiality, social goods, symbolic dimensions and human beings at specific places, being embedded in a geographical context, in frameworks of power and a given period in the historical timeline. Such an analysis of spatial processes and outcomes renders visible incorporated conventions, norms, hegemonic power issues, social inequalities and/or ideas of normality. It elicits information on the balance of power among the respective players with regard to shaping, influencing and negotiating space; by virtue of this, different forms of a ‘hegemonic spatiality’ (Kessl and Reutlinger, 2010b) might become apparent.

In linking these works on social spatiality to the field of human geography, the paper supports arguments that follow the understanding of ‘making-geography’. It raises the point that the spatial configurations of borderlines, of inter-national demarcations or supranational classifications are not quasi-natural but, rather, are more or less arbitrary, politically or socially founded constructions. The UNESCO world regions, spatially uniting Europe and North America (UNESCO, 2016), illustrate such a socially constructed quality of border demarcations. Similarly, the territorial assignments that contributed to drawing political boundaries of the map of the world throughout the centuries of colonialisation could serve as an example. Following this line of argument, Anderson has brought emphatically to the fore the observation that the emergence of modern nation states has not followed quasi-natural logics but represents instead imagined political communities (Anderson, 1991). The far-reaching dynamics of globalism as part of modernity led Appadurai (1996) to develop Anderson’s thoughts further, through a cultural perspective of post-colonial theories. In exploring the impact of globalisation on everyday worlds, Appadurai moves away from top-down world systems approaches, emphasising instead the local context for conceptualising the global. Appadurai understands imagination as a social practice, eliciting the social imaginary as the key component of the new global order (Appadurai, 1996: 31). At times of modernity, therefore, Appadurai speaks of imagined worlds, no longer simply of imagined communities (Appadurai, 1996: 33). This emphasises criticism on academic approaches in social sciences that – for example in migration studies – conceive the nation-state as a territorial container for analysing social processes (see also Ebner von Eschenbach, 2017). Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) have brought this to the fore by criticising such methodological nationalism as the ‘naturalization of the nation-state by the social sciences’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003: 576) (see also the final remarks section of this paper).

In addition to acknowledging the contributions of social spatiality and human geography, we shall argue further that comparisons of and between today’s global societies might need also to pay attention to transnational (Pries, 2008), sub-national and local contexts (Nuissl, 2003), such as cross-border regions, and not simply to inter-national categories of comparison and territorial landmarks. This seems important to us because on the level of regions, for example, nationally determined categories might prove to be neither applicable nor explanatory. For instance, in Germany the sixteen federal states are granted substantial power and autonomy with regard to matters of education and lifelong learning (Nuissl and Pehl, 2004). This autonomy results in quite differing variations of national governance regulations, requirements and social state policies on the level of
each federal state. Acknowledging this, we make the case that cross-border regions might offer a more conclusive framework for comparison in various terms – for example, with regard to living standards or economic, topographical conditions – than a necessarily more generalising international level (see, for instance, AEWB, 2016).

Staying with the German context, we observe that national and European policies on lifelong learning have indeed sought to foster the idea of regions in the sense of locally embedded lifelong learning networks. This was launched via the federal government’s funding schemes such as the so-called Learning Regions (BMBF, 2000; Schreiber-Barsch, 2007) or its successor, the Learning Locally initiative (BMBF, 2008). Overall, these policy strategies have supported an action-perspective on learner-centred research (Faulstich and Faulstich-Wieland, 2012), on adult education organisations (Bernhard, 2014, 2016; Franz, 2016; Schreiber-Barsch, 2017) or on polity fields of research in adult education academia. However, the latter often remained embedded in organisationally driven understandings of networks (Emminghaus and Tippelt, 2009) and offered only a few explicit linkages to socio-spatial approaches. Nevertheless, it can be stated that there is a growing interest in academia in taking into account social space theory when elaborating on conceptual underpinnings with the aim of enriching community education by regional or local categories (Bernhard, 2014; Deinet, 2013; Schönig, 2008). This broadens the horizon of the current saliency of policy-based strategies with regard to regional or local contexts and their networks, tending not to consider the individual learner’s point of view or the perspective of adult education professionals in these regional entities.

Summing up, the concept of social space shifts the viewpoint from elaborating solely on the geographical territory, where an organisation of adult education is being active, to the perspective on how this is (re)producing social space and how pedagogical activities refer to space. Furthermore, by focusing on cross-border regions, we raise the point that this conceptual lens offers again a more differentiated understanding. We assume this is the case because in such regions it can be observed that adult education professionals, as well as their respective organisations, might need to refer to very different spatial entities, but without transcending their official, nationally-defined public mandate. This means that providing adult education in such places oscillates between, on the one hand, the requirements of a national and/or federal state’s policy arena and, on the other hand, European, local or regional policy requirements for strengthening cross-border activities. Thus, adult education professionals might need to tackle partly contradictory demands (see also, for example, AEWB, 2016). In addition, they might need to broaden their local public mandate, as defined by the nation’s territory, in order to take into account adult learners’ daily lives in cross-border regions; that is, peoples’ cross-border commuter traffic between their workplace, places to spend leisure time, and their place of residence.

Theorising regions: Benno Werlen’s approach of action-centred geography

Whereas Löw’s framework provides an analytical tool for understanding spatiality on a somewhat small scale, such as city planning, architecture or classrooms (Fischer, 2013), Werlen shifts the focus to the perception, interpretation and, as a consequence, production of social space. This serves well for large-scale entities such as regions and geographically extended areas of action, which is why Werlen’s analytical lens is highly appropriate for the empirical research presented in the following section.

Furthermore, Werlen emphasises even more strongly the category of action, moving away from Löw’s priority on space. Making reference to Giddens’ work (1984), Werlen’s definition of action and social practices serves as the point of departure for a comprehensive socio-spatial theory. Actions and social practices represent a complex interplay of three dimensions (Werlen, 2013):
(1) The subjective life world (knowledge, interpretations of reality and subjective theories about the world);
(2) Given social structures and conditions of action in the surrounding world (values, norms, ‘the way we do things over here’); and
(3) The spatial–material context (in the sense of physical space, distances).

All these three dimensions need to be taken into consideration when analysing an action or a social practice. Hence, Werlen declares space as no more than an attribute, albeit a medium of action, talking no longer about social space but, rather, about the spatiality of (pedagogical) action. He argues that the material–physical context does not of itself offer structures of meaning. According to Werlen it is the subject’s interpretation of this physical context that is of relevance, and which attaches meaning to the physical context. Research, then, focuses not on space, but on subjective perceptions and the underlying interpretation of a spatial context, which are again (re)produced by actions.

Regarding this, critics point to the risk to which the theoretical framework is exposed of a somewhat high degree an independency of individual actions and to the idea that the individual is highly interested, motivated and capable of playing an active part in such processes of spatial (re)production (see, for example, Freytag et al., 2014: 11). However, in keeping this in mind, this paper seeks to explore the benefits of Werlen’s approach for enriching current pedagogical research. With its emphasis on action, it also provides an opportunity to develop further different strands of the German discourse in adult education academia – and beyond. For example, the debate on the issue of programme planning has resulted in widespread acknowledgement of an action-based point of view (see e.g. Gieseke, 2012; Käpplinger and Sork, 2014), but without explicitly drawing on spatial aspects. Thus, the latter could contribute to the desideratum of ‘regionality’ of programme planning in adult education (see e.g. Gieseke, 2012) and doing so without reducing it to a macroeconomic policy regime issue. Furthermore, whereas the works by Löw (2001; 2016) play a prominent role in the German discourse, other approaches, like that of Werlen, are – relatively speaking – neglected, albeit they are, as has been argued, particularly suitable for the topic of regions. This will be illustrated by the following piece of empirical research.

Insights: empirical research in cross-border regions

For the purpose of discussing generic elements of comparative research through the lens of social spatiality, we draw upon a recent empirical study by Bernhard (2017a; 2017b). This study, implemented in 2013 and 2014, adopted a qualitative research design. It used semi-guided expert interviews (Bogner and Menz, 2005) \((n = 10)\) for data collection and, for data analysis, selective coding following Grounded Theory methodology in its application by Kelle and Kluge (2010) (referring to Strauss and Corbin, 1996) with a particular focus on empirical typification. Werlen’s approach on action-centred geography served as the heuristic framework for the purpose of developing a Grounded Theory.

The theoretical sampling procedure (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1996) had been targeted at border regions at Germany’s territorial periphery having at least three nationally defined borders. It was possible to identify a sample of two contrasting cross-border regions, as the outcome of the sampling. One cross-border region was located at Germany’s Western periphery, and one at its Eastern periphery. Initially, the Grand Region SaarLorLux was chosen because it was one of the very early Euro-Regions, having emerged in the early 1980s. Currently, this cross-border region unites the whole of Rhineland–Palatinate and Saarland (Germany), the whole of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg, parts of Lorraine (France), and the Wallonian part of Belgium.
Having its roots in the upheavals of the economic coal crisis of the 1980s, it now represents a wide range of cross-border cooperation and, ultimately, 20% of the European Union’s labour-based, cross-border commuter traffic. Despite all of this, the everyday practices and the overall landscape of education and learning are still very much a national matter of fact. Secondly, the Euro-Region Neiße–Nysa–Nisa (ERN) was chosen: a Euro-Region including parts of Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany. In contrast, the ERN represents a somewhat ‘young’ region, portraying an emerging neighbourhood in the aftermath of the removal of the Iron Curtain. Unlike in the Grand Region, regional policy strategies in ERN emphasise the education agenda, resulting in a cross-border network dealing with educational affairs.

Against this territorial setting, the research interest focused on adult education organisations and, in particular, on the managerial staff of such organisations, and their professional activities concerning the area of programme planning as one of the key responsibilities and parts of the overall management function (see e.g. Sork, 2010). The research question was designed to investigate, first, how the category of a ‘region’ appears in the professionals’ programme planning and management perspective; and, second, which are the implicit or explicit references of those professionals to the concept of ‘region’ in their daily practices. Thus, our questions were: why, how and where do adult education professionals do what they do, and what are the spatial consequences of doing this? Given this background, ten interviews with heads of organisations providing adult education in two German cross-border regions were conducted (five interviews per cross-border region).

Finally, it is important to note that the sample of the interview partners, from the adult education organisations with which they were working, were all employed in the sector of public adult education (Schrader, 2010). This might explain some of the references made in the interviews with regard to the public mandate of adult education, which is obviously of higher relevance for these organisations than, for example, for organisations providing adult education in the private sector (the latter might define their area of mandate more as request-, contract- or demand-based). However, this – eventually contradictory – task in programme planning, negotiating between public regulations, learners’ interests and demands, and organisational interests and requirements, is regarded as of particular interest and relevant for the research question.

**Methodological framework for comparison: doing adult education as tertium comparationis**

For the purpose of this paper, and based on the empirical study, we aim to identify, and elaborate in depth on, the comparative component of the issue under scrutiny. In this respect, we are guided by the fundamental question of identifying the so-called tertium comparationis.

Following well-known strands of comparative research, the tertium comparationis represents the so-called third part of comparison and it establishes the generic link between different objects of research (Bereday, 1964; Bray et al., 2007; Hilker, 1962). Such units of comparison can be made across education policies, systems or also physical places: the latter serve as the point of departure for this paper. In his seminal work, Hilker (1962) explains the procedure of comparison as an ‘ordering activity’ (Hilker, 1962: 99) which gains meaning through the meta-criterion of a tertium comparationis that judges the affiliation or non-affiliation of aspects to the phenomenon under scrutiny. Thus, in general terms, ‘to compare’ means ‘thinking in relations’ (Hilker, 1962: 100) that results in declaring congruency, similarity or also disparity. In this sense, the tertium comparationis can serve as a starting point as well as an outcome of the comparison procedure. Bereday (1964) followed the same line of thought in defining the tertium comparationis as ‘the criterion upon which a valid comparison can be made and the hypothesis for which it is to be made’ (Bereday, 1964: 10–11).
Against this backdrop, we argue that the units of our comparative analysis are, first of all, geographically defined, territorial places, investigated at a specific point of time: two cross-border regions at the peripheries of Germany’s territory that each constitute a transnational, albeit sub-national, territory. Following Manzon (2007: 88), the initial comparability of the chosen units of analysis is given, because within these two cross-border regions the framework for providing adult education is, in a broad sense, comparable: this means comparable with regard either to living standards and economic conditions, or to physical access to lifelong learning opportunities also beyond the nation-state (thanks to cross-border mobility in the Schengen area). Similarly, the same characteristic features of adult education exist in both units of analysis, in contrast to, for example, the schooling context (based upon, for instance, the extent to which participation was voluntary, free choice of course offers, plurality of providers, and far fewer legal requirements or centralised structures than schools and the like).

Considering this, we would argue that it is valid to assume that within these territorial units of analysis, the aspect ‘region’ is a matter that demands, in each case, the adult education professionals’ attention in their daily work. The managerial staff of the adult education organisations need to operate, in whatever manner, in regard to their territorial locus (place): they need to act due to and towards their geographical location within the respective cross-border region. They are expected to act because they are part of an officially defined cross-border region, and because of the aim of fulfilling their tasks of programme planning. Such region-related activities might be influenced by various factors: for instance, it could be a specific demand from learners from the other side of the national border; the will or need to broaden the organisation’s outreach for the sake of its existence; the fulfilment of the organisation’s professional mandate to offer lifelong learning opportunities for adults; or to respond to claims of the policy agendas; and so on.

Thus we conclude that the professional activities of the managerial staff can be considered as diverse, but neither arbitrary nor completely detached from a common idea and body of knowledge of how to execute the task of programme planning of an adult education organisation in a cross-border region. This specific range in ‘doing’ adult education is of interest in the present comparative analysis and it promises insights into the processes of (re)producing the social space of a region through individual activities of professionals. The territory of the region serves as the common framework; but constituting space ultimately depends on individual perceptions, interpretations and, finally, actions. It is only because the Schengen area allows territorial mobility in a transnational region, because policy agendas declare the cross-border region’s existence or because regional networks might exist, that this causes no automatisms, neither in providing cross-border adult education offers, nor in participating there.

Ultimately, our specific area of interest lies in the processes of constituting a region (as learning space) from the learners’ and the professionals’ grass-roots levels rather than from the top-down level of agenda-setting or macroeconomic policy regimes. With regard to these units of analysis and the research interest, the pedagogical actions and practices of the professionals become the tertium comparationis, ensuring the basis for comparability and opening up insights into making-space and making-geography in the course of doing adult education.

**Findings**

In presenting the findings of the comparative enquiry, we shall argue that concepts of social spatiality and, in particular, the action-centred geography approach by Werlen offer an enriching perspective and a promising theoretical architecture for shedding light on the questions of why, how and where adult learning professionals do what they do in their regional context, and their local area of activity – exemplifying the spatiality of (pedagogical) actions.
Furthermore, we propose as an outcome of the procedure of comparison that, in doing adult education in the territorial context of a cross-border region (*tertium comparationis*), a coordinate system arises in the data material, serving as a heuristic model. We identify a horizontal line in doing adult education (concepts of ‘region’ as an outcome of inter-regional comparisons), on the one hand, and a vertical line (concepts of providing adult education within a cross-border region), on the other.

**Conceptualising ‘region’: horizontal line.** We begin with an elaboration of the findings of a horizontal line in doing adult education. This horizontal line illuminates spatial (as being more than territorial; see section on ‘Theorising regions: Benno Werlen’s approach of action-centred geography’) interpretations or conceptual ideas of the respective ‘region’ as an outcome of inter-regional comparisons made by the individual adult education professionals in the wake of their programme planning activities. One can envision such concepts as imagined spatial maps that are individually located on the respective cross-border region’s territory.

First, we present an in-depth example into such spatial processes of conceptualising a ‘region’. In one of the first interviews, an interviewee refers a great deal to their activities concerning anticipated cross-border commuter traffic. (The interviewee is the manager of a German adult education centre, located close to the French–Luxemburg border.)

Luxemburg, I would have talked about that anyways. We have parts of our catchment area there. We notice that a lot and being close to the border shapes our programme. That means, now, as well in regular evening courses, we do provide support for the development of Luxemburgish language skills etc., so that people from over here can quite simply integrate into the Luxemburgish labour market, as much as we have courses that aim at getting started in a new job in Luxemburg. And we have also from the Luxemburgish catchment area people coming, who for example take German language classes. Or a very remarkable thing is health education […] Health education does nearly not exist in Luxemburg, which means, if you offer courses of that kind, you will have good feedback from the Luxemburgish community and people are ready to take a little longer ride for taking those courses. (Sequence 6, interview 1 [translated (from German) by the authors])

The interviewee emphasises a very strong effect of the fact of being located close to the Luxemburg border. More precisely, the individual elucidates the impact as having effects on the course programme of the adult education centre, including influences on the programme itself, on its preparation and, thus, on the professional everyday routines and practices. Remarkably, in describing this impact, the German term ‘prägen’ is used, meaning ‘coining’. In German, this term is closely linked to the behaviourist-inspired theory of Konrad Lorenz (1903–1989), a well-known Austrian zoologist and behavioural scientist. Following Lorenz’s theoretical line of thought, once someone is ‘coined’, that person will not be able to get rid of certain behaviours. Therefore, using the term ‘coining’ in the professional context of an adult education centre tends to emphasise neither a singular nor even a random action but, rather – using Reckwitz’s (2004) terminology – a highly institutionalised, regularly repeated social practice.

Following this argument, we can identify two separate social practices within the organisation, described by the interviewee. Each of the social practices reveals different conceptions of relevance given to the region. First, there is the description of the regular evening courses that are aimed at people from the German side of the border, called ‘*people from here*’. Drawing (implicitly) this spatial line, the interviewee constitutes a border between, on the one hand, the domestic target groups and, on the other hand, people from Luxemburg, who are declared as a somewhat special target group. In talking about these ‘*regular evening courses*’ aimed at ‘*people from here*’, the interviewee portrays Luxemburg not as a neighbouring country or a cultural place to be explored
but rather, throughout the whole interview, in the sense of a relevant cross-border labour market. Such a clear and well differentiated relationship, however, cannot be reproduced with regard to the organisation’s second neighbouring country, France. In this case, the adult education organisation indeed provides French language classes, but without referring to the geographical situation (being close to the border), albeit again referring to labour market mechanisms. In conclusion, in portraying the matter of regular evening courses, the interviewee reproduces their individual idea of ‘the region’. Within this, Luxemburg is given relevance due to its labour market, whereas any relevance to France is awarded from the region’s perspective. In addition, an idea of adult learning is institutionalised by the interviewee: in this sense, cross-border adult learning activities are channelled first and foremost towards developing the skills of the local workforce.

Against this backdrop, second, the interview reveals another social practice by means of a different part of the organisation’s programme, defining that part as being beyond those ‘regular evening courses’. In this non-regular part of the course programme, adults from Luxemburg indeed participate in classes, such as German language classes or, mainly, health education. By establishing this regular/non-regular divide, the interviewee articulates the idea of a quite clear regional positioning: people from here, and people from there (Luxemburg), the latter forming a separate target group, a niche with the benefit of generating additional financial resources. Aiming to take advantage of this potential financial benefit, the adult education organisation even advertises in Luxemburg-based newspapers, thus establishing a social practice of non-regularity in the case of German language classes and courses in health education.

Thus, the interview sequence illustrates that the interviewee produces space. Werlen’s three dimensions (see above) can differentiate this multidimensional process. The interviewee refers to Luxemburg in a well-differentiated manner, based on individual knowledge (subjective life world), on the interviewee’s perception of the social framework conditions (such as the high percentage of cross-border commuter traffic in the region and the legal framework), and on being situated in a specific physical place (close to the Luxemburg border). The interviewee’s idea of benefitting from providing learning offers in the Luxemburg market reveals similar processes: the individual concerned is aware of this potential market niche as well as of the market’s physical proximity; equally, the interviewee needs to increase financial resources. Due to this, the person concerned starts advertising activities in Luxemburg, portraying quite strongly (throughout the interview) a vision of education and learning as a commodity to be sold. Thus, all these activities are deeply embedded in spatial assumptions and criteria. Furthermore, we would like to point out that, in contrast to the priorities on networking or cooperation in the current (policy) discourse (see above), the interviewee did not refer to these aspects as crucial topics in carrying out the organisation’s work in the region.

Overall, the comparative inquiry reveals the emergence of distinguishable concepts of a ‘region’ (imagined spatial maps), which can be differentiated in the data material. Three concepts emerge as consequences of inter-regional comparisons made by the individual adult education professionals

Concept 1: ‘Region’ as an area of mandate

The organisation’s target group of adult learners is established by the learners’ status of being situated in the respective territory. The organisation has a public mandate at its command and, furthermore, a legally consolidated duty to provide adult education for the population living on the German side of the border. Accordingly, the organisation keeps to its mission by preparing its programme with regard to the needs and wants of the population on the German side of the border. This mission is reproduced via its territorial grounding in the responsibilities of the local and
regional authorities, not least rooted in education legislation of the federal state. Thus, the organisation first and foremost reproduces a territory.

In the example given, the public mandate and the territorial demarcation are the point of departure in the interviewee’s perception of any part of the programme planning in the organisation. Clearly, the territory and the mandate pre-structure the pedagogical actions, to a large extent. This concept of ‘region’ as an area of mandate is described by all ten interviewees. However, such a mandate is not necessarily a public or a legal one. It can also be established in the form of a contract with another public or a private body, such as employment services or companies. Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that public mandates show stronger direct impacts on programme planning practices than contracts.

Concept 2: ‘Region’ as an individual, qualitative interpretation

The territorial proximity to Luxemburg is perceived as relevant for the professionals’ own activities and responsibilities. Describing Luxemburg mainly in the sense of a labour market, the idea of a region is given a qualitative connotation, which is grounded in assessments of needs and non-needs, in specific constructs of relevance and visions and, quite implicitly, in educationally-wise objectives as well. Other existing territorial parts of the region are not recognised as relevant; or, rather, in the perception of the interviewee, these are not part of the region. Therefore, one might argue that the interviewee subjectively constitutes an idea of the region, which is being reproduced in the organisation’s course programme. As a result, this individual interpretation sets the limits for the potential variety of learning opportunities offered for the inhabitants of the region.

Such qualitative interpretations can be found in all the interviews. For example, three interviewees from organisations situated very close to the German–French border emphasised the importance and the benefit of cross-border encounters between French and German adult learners with regard to learning the mutual language (Interviews 3, 4, 5; see also below). Interestingly, qualitative interpretations of a cross-border region could be reconstructed, for example by use of the term ‘neighbour’. Thus, those interviewees who established a connection with the cross-border country in their programme-planning activities tended to frequently use the word neighbour. In doing so they ascribe a symbolic meaning to them: neighbours as a social phenomenon are of importance in peoples’ daily lives (whether in a positive or negative sense), and therefore by calling somebody a neighbour a certain quality of social relationship is granted. In contrast, those interviewees who clearly did not have a connection with the country on the other side of the border chose, in a somewhat neutral sense, to refer to those countries by the nation’s name (e.g. Luxemburg, Poland, etc.).

Concept 3: ‘Region’ as a catchment area or market

In this case, territorial proximity as well as distance are identified as being relevant in the sense of a market, a possible catchment area for the organisation, having the potential of a market niche. This promises financial gain without much effort for the organisation, because many people in Luxemburg speak German and, thus, can easily become participants without further (linguistic) assistance. This market mechanism relies on physical proximity, whereas in contrast long distances would necessitate participants’ investment in and use of additional time and financial resources. Hence, seen from a market-based view, long distances are to be considered as costs: in this view, learners thus become difficult to reach in terms of distance.

In addition, this concept of ‘region’ was revealed in all the interviews. For example, programme planners referred to the need of being ‘close to the client’ (Interview 7) or to ‘going where the learners are’ (Interview 1). In that sense, long territorial distances are something of a restricting
factor exemplified, in that interpretation, by the comment that ‘long driving distances make quite a challenge’ (Interview 8). This was emphasised, at the same time, by the importance of physically close competitors who serve the same niche in providing adult education being highlighted (Interviews 3, 4).

**Conceptualising providing adult education: vertical line.** As well as the horizontal line of doing adult education, the comparative enquiry identified a vertical line. This corresponds to the findings that, in the processes of spatial reproductions of cross-border regions by adult education professionals, different concepts also emerge, addressing the idea of providing adult education within a cross-border region. Whereas the horizontal line refers to spatial mappings of a region due to inter-regional comparisons, the vertical line draws upon individual interpretations of a specific regional function that is directed at providing adult education within a cross-border region. This, furthermore, offers an option to widen Werlen’s approach insofar as it emphasises the education’s perspective of spatial processes in regions.

Again, three different logics in awarding regional functions to providing adult education thus arise. First, we would refer to the interview sequence provided above with regard to Luxemburg and France. This also exemplifies, beyond the inter-regional comparisons made, a specific regional function of providing adult education within the cross-border region, namely: (1) adult education as a commodity to be sold.

A second logic can be illustrated by introducing another interview sequence:

But as I mentioned already, for me personally, chances – even if I do feel like being all alone with this thought – chances predominate for development and for the people in this cross-border region. And – to put it that way – it is our unique selling proposition to say, we are in a region where four peoples – Poles, Germans, Czechs and Sorbians […] but these are assets that this region NEEDS [very forceful] to exploit. For it will still have a chance. (Sequence 60, interview 9; [translated (from German) by the authors])

In this example, from the Neiße–Nysa–Nisa Region at Germany’s Eastern periphery, the interviewee argues quite differently. The person concerned does not talk about the region as a market or as the place where the target group is living, but constitutes the region as a collective entity (the region has a chance; the region needs to exploit). All this is happening against the backdrop of a ‘development’-logic, identified as being significant for this region in the sense of a ‘unique selling proposition’. The latter term originates from marketing theory. Transferring this marketing logic to the conceptualisation of the region suggests that the regional function of adult education is not seen as a commodity to be sold, but that adult education itself will serve as a catalyst for the region’s development. In this way, the region will exploit its assets in order to compete successfully with other regions. As a consequence, adult education is interpreted by the interviewee as a means of gaining a qualification that the adult learners’ population in the region should acquire for the benefit of the overall regional development. Finally, indicating that the interviewee felt like a lone voice in the region (‘all alone with this thought’) emphasises that, apparently, the respective adult education organisation cannot rely on supportive market mechanisms. On the contrary, the social framework of their activities provides a view different from the one in the first interview example. The present organisation is strongly supported by stakeholders of the regional polity level, as confirmed by the reference made to the ‘four peoples’ – echoing the official vision of the cross-border policy agenda. Ultimately, in this case, providing adult education is reproduced as a means of policy strategy: (2) adult education as catalyst for the region’s development.

Furthermore, a third logic becomes apparent in the data material, placing a different regional function of providing adult education in the limelight again, exemplified by an interviewee
working at the German–French border (Interview 5). This person offered the interpretation of adult education in a cross-border region as serving first and foremost the fostering of social encounters between the region’s inhabitants, beyond national borders and beyond traditional social groups of participants in adult education. Imagining, therefore, a social integrative function of adult education, the benefit of a cross-border region’s multilingual setting is seen in providing diverse learning opportunities (e.g. language courses by tandem partners of each nationality). Correspondingly, (3) adult education as an arena for social encounters aims to transcend national borders as well as societal layers and patterns of participation.

To summarise, it points to ideas of explicit and implicit assumptions about what adult education is seen as aiming for from a professional’s point of view and with regard to spatial issues, whether the latter are on a local, regional, national or even global scale. One might argue, linking Rau’s (2013) thoughts on historical spatial research to this issue, that the embeddedness of local places in interactions of adult education professionals reshapes their local feature and opens them up to translocality – that is, to translocal interdependencies and structures (Rau, 2013: 189). Thus, local places are to be seen as a concurrent part of translocal dimensions and, eventually, translocally directed (inter)actions of adult education professionals.

**Summarising and problematising: final remarks**

This paper has examined how far, and in what ways, the procedure of comparing territorial places can be linked with the theoretical underpinnings of social spatiality and human geography. Accordingly, it sets out to challenge fundamental conceptions of comparing as a solely territorially bound and, in this sense, a one-way exercise. In concluding, we would like to emphasise that, from our point of view, it is not only adult education professionals who contribute to (re)produce social space and territorial imaginations by doing adult education, but also researchers, namely by doing research and through knowledge production.

As has been mentioned, Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) criticised methodological nationalism in the social sciences. According to these authors, three – intersecting – variants of methodological nationalism are to be differentiated. These are, first, ‘ignoring or disregarding the fundamental importance of nationalism for modern societies’; second, naturalisation in the sense of ‘taking for granted that the boundaries of the nation-state delimit and define the unit of analysis’; and, third, ‘territorial limitation which confines the study of social processes to the political and geographic boundaries of a particular nation-state’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003: 577–578). In acknowledging the points made by Wimmer and Glick Schiller, we would want to emphasise that the outcomes of our empirical study and the comparative inquiry would also not support an argument that national borders become obsolete, but they do reaffirm the relevance of such borders as reference points. However, social spatiality and human geography convincingly transcend the risk of a naturalisation of a nation-state because they refer explicitly to understandings of social practices and individual action as being essential in (re)producing space, constituting imagined worlds (Appadurai, 1996). In this sense, we agree with Rau (2013) (see above) that local places always involve translocal dimensions, which open up the potential of being activated by human beings and their (inter)actions. Thus, delimiting research of comparing places primarily in the sense of territorial entities stresses the third point made by Wimmer and Glick Schiller.

This line of argument refers to traditional as well as recent debates in social sciences, which again highlights its ongoing relevance. As a first example, we would like to cite a work by Waldow (2016). Based upon research on educational borrowing and lending, he summarises that the same reference country might serve as a positive or negative example – according to varying predominant social practices and discourses. Inter alia, he elaborates on the German public perception and
academic discourse with respect to the assessment of Finland’s ranking in the different waves of the PISA survey (Programme for International Student Assessment, OECD). Interestingly, the stereotypical leitmotif ‘Finland as PISA-role model’, dominant in the wake of the first PISA wave, was literally downgraded in the years thereafter by a disqualifying process due to a then inferior ranking in the following wave – serving then as a negative reference country (‘Finland: PISA-role model by mistake’).

A second example is that of Knobloch (2016), who criticises the fact that in the German tradition of comparative education research the person of Marc-Antoine Jullien de Paris (1775–1848) is commonly defined as its founding father (see e.g. Field et al., 2016; also Schreiber-Barsch, 2010). However, this has ignored, for centuries, any other possible founding contexts or characters beyond Europe. Knobloch sums up that instead of defining the (without doubt valuable) work and contributions of Jullien de Paris as the invention of comparative education, we should instead call it the invention of its history; or, more precisely, of a collective narrative.

Lyotard (1979) deserves merit for clearly identifying these procedures for doing research and knowledge production in the terminology of (re)producing somewhat master narratives (métarécit). More precisely, he characterises ‘postmodern’ as being sceptical (incrédulité) about such master narratives (Lyotard, 1979: 7). Thus, not only is postmodern knowledge an instrument of power, but also, at the same time, it acts to refine our sensitivity to differences (Lyotard, 1979: 8). In this sense, dialogue might seek to constitute a consensus; however, according to Lyotard, such a consensus always remains no more than a state of debate, never its final objective (Lyotard, 1979: 106). Correspondingly, Mignolo claims in his work on Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing (Mignolo, 2013) that collective master narratives should be labelled as an inevitably historically, socially and locally embedded state of debate, as a ‘collective imaginary’ (Mignolo, 2013: 134) and ‘situated knowledges’ (Mignolo, 2009: 2). However, and this is the criticism, master narratives mostly materialise in the form of a ‘hegemonic narrative of Western civilization’ (Mignolo, 2013: 143). Hence, he argues that concepts such as the Enlightenment are precisely neither global nor universal but, rather, first and foremost regional and thus having ‘their own value as any other regional configuration and transformation of knowledge’ (Mignolo, 2013: 142). With respect to the above-mentioned Jullien de Paris, we therefore not only agree with Knobloch, that the labelling of Jullien de Paris as the founding father is part of the regional European invention of comparative education research history, but also we follow Mignolo’s claim for epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) for the benefit of replacing the ascendency of Eurocentric pillars of knowledge systems.

To summarise, territorial entities might serve as a starting point for research or a geographically-wise denomination of the units of comparison taken into account; however, as illustrated in this paper, undertaking adult education is constantly and in diverse ways (re)produced by all the parties involved. Nevertheless, this does not revoke the power of the nation’s idea and framework as such (see also Mazenod (2017) on academic knowledge production processes). Acknowledging this ambivalence, the powerful impact as well as the necessity of (national) contextualisation, it represents one of the vital legacies of developing research in and practices of international and comparative (adult) education across its historical trajectories and throughout its procedures of mediating meanings and terminologies (see e.g. Arthur, 2008; Crossley, 1999; Schreiber-Barsch, 2010). Eventually, this strengthens the scope of functions for international and comparative (adult) education insofar as the necessity of a wide range of theoretical frameworks becomes evident and, moreover, needs to be developed and adapted to the significant features of the respective disciplines, not least adult education (Egetenmeyer, 2014; Milana, 2015). A range of theoretical frameworks provides analytical lenses with which to differentiate between the diverse legal, cultural, pedagogical, social, economic and however-named roots, interdependencies and linkages that are significant and explanatory for ‘doing’ adult education.
Consequently, researchers will also need to reflect on their respective social constructions, professional perceptions and terminological denotations of space(s) and territory/ies. Fundamentally, by choosing a specific territory, research itself constitutes territory; geographies are (re)produced through and within social practices, political contexts and individual, as well as collective, world views. Just like the empirical research presented above, the research activity reproduced and, in this sense, strengthened the territorial constructs of the Grand Region and the Euro-Region Neiße–Nysa–Nisa, which remain, as well as nations, more or less randomly drawn territories. By means of describing, evaluating, emphasising specific contexts and frameworks of regions, nations and/or cities, research itself contributes to the respective social-space narrative. It points to the ultimate challenge, as a researcher, to be aware of, reflect on and clearly articulate which kind of narrative is adopted in the researcher’s own social practice and spatiality.

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