Anne-Sophie Godfroy:
International comparisons in science studies: what and why do we compare?
The experience of EU projects on women and science

Abstract:
This research is based on the experience of EU-funded research projects for the last ten years: about women and engineering (WOMENG), about women in technological research (PROMETEA), about gender and scientific education in secondary education and higher education (INDECS, MOTIVATION, HELENA).
Projects had a common aim: comparing various national settings in order to develop a better understanding of gender issues in engineering and technology research.
They had common methodological issues:
1) to collect and to combine various levels of data: existing statistical data, information on national legal and social frameworks, career progression, existing bibliography, with sociological fieldwork as focus groups and interviews.
2) to analyse all that data to produce analyses and interpretations and to propose so-called "good practice" and "effective measures" to policy makers.

Under very usual topics, it raised many hidden methodological difficulties:
- "Engineering and technology" had to be defined as well as "gender".
- The research activity itself was not exempted of ambiguity, as it is a complex activity, not always aimed at research directly.
-The scope was technology, assuming that it represents a specific culture. In fact, many surveys shows that the more technological a field is, the less women are engaged in. Apparently, distinction between science and technology could be assigned with the help of existing nomenclature and some criteria as strong links with industry, applicative scope, predominance of engineering. As for the classification issue, old classifications still make sense and cannot be completely ignored, but we need to take into account the changes and the actual interconnection.
- An additional issue was the comparative one as classifications for status and disciplines are not exactly the same from a country to another and do not fit emerging or pluridisciplinary research fields.

An even more unsettling issue is the fact that after the great efforts made to define the research object, to ensure comparisons, to analyse tons of data, the outcomes were rather disappointing: when comparison was really successful, we rediscovered almost what we already knew. In other cases, the outcome was a collection of brilliant national studies, missing the comparative scope. The balance between harmonisation of the data and attention to specific settings is never easy to achieve (Ragin, 1987).

Such projects raise questions about existing classifications and issues, not fitting the actual existing research settings. What do we compare, do we ask the right questions, do we speak about existing research objects?