

# Comparative Methodologies

## An Interdisciplinary Discussion

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IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXXII ©  
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After the lunch break, the conference reconvened for a panel discussion on methodology that aimed at exploring and to crossing disciplinary boundaries. As an institute bringing together Junior Fellows from a diverse set of fields in the humanities and social sciences, the IWM offered a particularly promising forum for frank discussions about the promises and challenges of multidisciplinary scholarly activity. Representatives of three fields – philosophy, history, and anthropology – presented their own research and teaching experiences in order to probe the differences and similarities between their respective disciplines. These short introductions were followed by discussions between the panelists and the conference participants concerning broader scholarly questions of methodology and approach.

### Philosophy (Elizabeth Robinson)

In the many semesters I have taught introductory philosophy to undergraduate students I have always started the first class of the semester in the exact same manner. I tell the students that since this is the beginning of the semester and we haven't started any reading yet, I only have one simple question for them: What is philosophy? Without fail this question is met with complete and total silence. Students stare at me, eyes wide with horror. After a bit I will prod the students to respond. I remind them that if this were a history or anthropology class they would have a ready answer to this question and that they must have had some idea of what we would do in class before signing up to take it. Usually at this point some brave student will offer a hesitant answer. Philosophy is about the meaning of life or deciding what is right and wrong. It is about proving that God exists or does not exist, or at any rate, it has something to do with God.

While asking this question is motivated in part by my general enjoyment of aggravating and confounding students, I also believe that the question itself (regardless of the answers given) speaks to a core component of philosophical methodology. Since Socrates, if not earlier, philosophers have concerned themselves with questioning what things are. The questions range from the fundamental: "What is truth?" "What is knowledge?" What is

justice?” to the seemingly pedestrian: “What is baldness?” “What is friendship?” “What is bullshit?” Insofar as we can speak of philosophy as having anything like a consistently applied or universal methodology, it is that of starting from a “What is...?” question.

The problem with any discussion of philosophical methodology is that simply posing a question does little to provide any sense of how one should find the answer. It is here that philosophy loses any sense of coherency as a discipline. Can we answer these questions through empirical research? A priori deduction? A consideration of intuitions? Examination of the phenomena? A mathematically formulated proof? An investigation of ordinary language? Should our starting point be an examination of received wisdom about the topic? Do we first need to answer the question of the nature of capital B Being before we can advance to exploring individual instantiations of being? Will propositional logic help us formulate our query more exactly? There is no general agreement concerning the answers to these questions. As a result, there is no general agreement about the proper methods of philosophy.

Though the quarrels within the philosophy profession about what methodology is proper to our research may be more pronounced than those of other disciplines, I do not think philosophy is alone in being a field rife with methodological disagreement. Factions certainly exist within anthropology and political science, for example, as they do in philosophy. There is a sense in which it is an oversimplification of the issue to speak of distinct disciplines having a single methodology that is appropriate to them. Each discipline has a variety of methodologies and competing voices which frequently seek to monopolize discourse within the discipline at the expense of alternate theories. One of the things that I think philosophy does right as a field is to make space for incompatible points of view, to allow multiple methodologies to work simultaneously towards answering the same questions. I do not mean to suggest that all points of view play nicely with one another or that all possible methodologies are equally deserving of respect, but I do think that philosophers have come to accept that fundamental disagreement among ourselves is an integral part of the discipline.

It is with all of this in mind that I wish to pose a question to those of you working in other fields. How does your discipline treat methodological disagreement? Is there room for competing voices? Are there mechanisms in place to allow those who disagree to fruitfully interact? Within the context of your discipline, what is methodological disagreement?

### **History (Dave Petruccelli)**

In the study of history, there is a traditional reliance on written sources, so I think it's only appropriate that I open this discussion with a piece of source analysis based on files I found at the Police Archives here in Vienna.[1]

In late July 1898, two agents of the Viennese Criminal Police detained a man and two young women at a hotel in the city. The man had registered in the hotel as Hermann Goldmann and claimed the two girls were his sisters. A month earlier, the police had been alerted by a letter from Buenos Aires about a human trafficker with the same surname. Under police questioning, Hermann Goldmann and the two girls he claimed were his

sisters raised further suspicions. The first woman questioned gave her name as Anna Rosenberg, and age as 21 years. She told the police, "I arrived today in Vienna from Lemberg with my sister, Feige Rosemann, and my brother, whose name I do not know, in order to see a doctor, have still not been to see him, I speak German very badly, no Polish also no Russian, but only Yiddish."

The second, a 15-year-old who gave her name as Feige Goldmann (not Rosemann, as her supposed sister claimed), used very similar phrasing, "I came to Vienna with my brother Griescher and my sister Anna in order to see a doctor. Because I suffer from headaches, although I have still not been to see him. I understand German very badly, also do not speak Polish, also not Russian, but only Yiddish."

Hermann Goldmann, when first questioned, stated that the two women were his sisters, Feny Goldmann and Channa Simma, though he gave their ages as 21 and 24. He they were taking a vacation to Turin together, where he had friends. He had come from Lemberg with the two women, he claimed.

After giving more contradictory statements, Goldmann finally relented and vowed to tell the truth in a statement the following day, "Now that I see that I can only hurt myself through the partially untrue statements I have given, I want to tell the whole truth. Channa Simma Gorallik is related to me (I believe a niece) and now only has a father, who lives in Odessa, but she wants nothing to do with him. In Odessa, she was under vice police supervision [*sittenpolizeiliche Kontrolle*] and brought great shame to her father. When he learned a few days ago that I was traveling to Turin in order to start a business there, he asked me if I might bring Channa Simma with me and might do everything possible to set her on a better path. I agreed, but asked that she travel ahead to Lemberg, since I knew she would not receive a passport. She brought her closest friend Feige N. (I do not know her surname) with her there. Feige N. likewise led a reckless life in Odessa, but only in secret. In Lemberg we met in a private home (the woman of the house is named Sophie Stark or Sterker) and traveled together to Vienna... I registered the two girls here as sisters, because I knew that they did not have any passports and in my opinion I would spare them a police penalty in this way."

Chana Goralik (earlier Anna Rosenberg) also changed her story once it became clear that the police knew her real name. She now told police she was 18 years old, rather than the 21 years she had initially claimed, and explained, "Hersch Goldmann is my stepbrother. My father is named Wolf Garalik and lives in Odessa... I traveled from there a few days ago. With me traveled a relative named Feige. I do not know her surname. Goldmann traveled earlier from Odessa, and Feige and I met him on the way. I intended to go with Feige from here to a city whose name I do not know to seek employment there... A woman outside of Odessa advised me to leave Odessa, since my father is not rich and I would find it difficult to get ahead. Abroad, if I wanted to work, I would earn money and be well dressed. I do not know the name of this woman."

Pushed further by the police, Goldmann stood by his prior statement but added that he had planned to employ the two young women traveling with him as shop girls in the business he hoped to open in Turin.

What are we to make of these contradictory and changing stories? For the police, it was fairly clear – the signs pointed to *Mädchenhandel*, “white slavery” as it was then known in English, or human trafficking in today’s parlance. The problem was that “white slavery” was not a legal definition, but a popular term playing on European fears of white women being abducted and forced into sexual slavery in Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. Beginning with a series of scandals involving police-run prostitution rings in Belgium in the early 1880s, European philanthropist groups and publishers transformed the issue into one of the central public concerns of the era. Although it enjoyed widespread popular use, though, “white slavery” was not a crime in any legal sense, but encompassed a range of different offenses within various legal codes. In the Austrian section of the Habsburg Monarchy, for instance, it could be prosecuted as three distinct offenses—kidnapping, statutory rape, and procurement.

Here, the police assembled a case of procurement against Goldmann, and of violation of the city’s registration requirements, as he furnished false information when he checked into due to false registration at the hotel for all three. Though the court files are not present in the police documents, the state prosecutor seems to have decided that there was insufficient evidence for the more serious offense of procurement and only pursued a case of false registration, for which he was to spend three days under police arrest before being expelled from the state.

What I like about this case is that it reveals what in a sense constitutes a deep methodological divide between the police and the court, which have very different standards for determining facts. For the police, it was sufficient to unravel a suspicious story and to arrange circumstantial evidence into the most convincing account. The court, on the other hand, had more stringent requirements for ascertaining the truth and apparently rejected the police’s version.

I think similar considerations underlie historiographic approaches to the issue of white as a historical phenomenon. Older historical studies, working in the field of social history, tended to accept that trafficking in prostitutes was prevalent in this period and looked at the conditions – mostly demographic and economic – that created this traffic. Since the 1990s, the historical profession has taken the so-called “cultural turn” in history, essentially the embrace of postmodern ideas. The trend has questioned supposed facts and probed the constructedness of “truth.” These recent studies problematize the idea of white slavery by analyzing the discourses that created it. More radical versions of this approach question whether the phenomenon ever actually existed and instead analyze how this “myth” was deployed by various state and private actors jockeying for power.

To broaden my considerations a bit, I’d like to close with a few questions that this debate raises:

What kinds of truth or knowledge do we as scholars aim to deal with or create? What standards do we have in place for determining the validity of these claims? Is “truth” even a term we want to use? How do different disciplines approach these problems?

**Anthropology (Agnieszka Pasieka)**

Referring to Dave's presentation, I'd like to start with the observation that while in the study of history there is a traditional reliance on written sources, the basic source of data in anthropology is ethnographic fieldwork. Without going into the details regarding the different ways of both understanding and doing anthropological fieldwork, I'd like to emphasize three aspects which I find most relevant for our discussion. The first is the idea that due to direct contact and everyday interactions with local people – an 'immersion' in the local context – doing fieldwork enables one to gain 'familiarity' with local life and local concepts, broadly understood; in other words, the idea of 'familiarity' denotes here both 'knowledge' and 'closeness'. The second issue regards the way of doing fieldwork, namely the fact that despite the proliferation of research techniques within anthropological scholarship (among those the methods borrowed from other disciplines), the core of anthropological research is still concerned with everyday encounters, informal talks with and participation in the life of a local community. The third issue does not refer to how anthropology is done but what it offers: the conviction that it is possible to make generalizations about a broader context by taking under scrutiny a local one.

I now would like to present one of the case studies gathered in course of the fieldwork for my dissertation, carried out in a multireligious area in Southern Poland. One of the main research questions I addressed in my research was the (strong) position of the Catholic Church in Poland. The following case constitutes a part of my dissertation.

“One of the main protagonists of my conversations with local inhabitants was a Roman Catholic clergymen – a powerful priest who heads one of the biggest parishes in the commune and is doubtless one of the best-known Roman Catholic priests in the area. The fifty-year-old self-confident clergyman, who has a sharp tongue, owes his fame to two factors: his busy 'social life' and the financial empire he has managed to build. As to the first, there was no one in the commune who did not inform me about the priest's love affairs and the children conceived in these relationships. Actually, the only element that varied in the stories was the number of the priest's children: some people spoke about two, some about five (the latter, hearing that other inhabitants had only spoken of two, said: 'Yes, it's true, two in our village and three others in neighboring ones'). Although these kinds of stories may seem to be mere gossip and their truthfulness could be put into question, the very existence of such narratives is helpful for understanding how people perceive the priest's power. The villagers did not only tell me that the priest had a child by Mrs X, but they found it important to tell me the whole story in detail. Telling me about his relationships with female parishioners, they referred to his vulgar way of speaking and his insolent behavior, which, in their view, was evidence of how powerful he felt. They always depicted him as a cold, calculating person who could offend others without fearing any consequences and who could 'buy' silence and consent, for instance, by paying his lovers' husbands for 'adopting' illegitimate children or by paying the bishop, i.e. sharing with him the money he had gained by selling some of the parish's land. Similar stories were brought with regard to various kinds of the priest's investments e.g. the construction of a new church and the acquisition of an abandoned building near the church, which the priest transformed into a guest house for tourists. The guest house has its own name, and the villagers claim that it is not the property of the parish, that it belongs to the priest. Once again, I want to emphasize that the account about the priest's guest house was not

given as a matter of trivial curiosity, but presented in a detailed story. The inhabitants did not simply tell me that the priest had bought that place, but they said that he had paid 260,000 zlotych (65,000 Euro) for it; they also said that once he had realized that he had collected a sufficient amount of money, he put everything into a bag and sent his domestic help to the commune's office with the bag; that the clerks in the office did not know what to do with the money—they have no safe because nobody ever arrives unexpectedly with such an amount of money. On a different occasion, people told me that the church tower had recently become a source of additional income for the parish or, some insisted, for the priest, as a mobile phone company's radio mast is installed there. This kind of story corresponds to the characteristics of the powerful priest who demonstrates his capabilities. Nobody really knows whether the guest house and the radio mast generate income only for the priest (and thus not for the parish), but they imply that this is the case and stress that the donated money goes exclusively into his pocket. His lifestyle—an expensive car and holidays abroad—only reinforces this image.

When asked whether it would be possible to challenge the priest's dominance, the parishioners' answer was a decisive 'no'. They always explained to me that there were only a few people who rejected the priest's practices. A group who disagree with the priest's activities wrote letters to the bishop in which they expressed their concerns about his conduct. However, the letters were fruitless. As my informants explained, the bishop is a good friend of the priest so he would never remove him from the parish. Seeing the priest and bishop whispering while walking side by side during ceremonies in the commune, it was hard for me not to recall these words. Moreover, my informants provided other examples, which proved that the foundation of the priest's power did not only lie in the hierarchy's support. Some time ago, after the priest had placed a list of parishioners on the church door who had not paid their monthly donation, one villager (obviously one who had been on the list) tore it off and threatened the priest with legal action for defamation. The list disappeared, but a few weeks later the villager's son was informed that he would not be admitted for confirmation. In other words, this kind of 'payback' is the most common strategy applied by the priest: the performance of rituals—baptisms, weddings, and most of all funerals—remains his most powerful tool. Moreover, as the following examples demonstrate, he is able to use this in many different ways.

First, depending on how obedient the family of parishioners is, he performs the rituals for them with more or less solemnity. For example, if the family of the deceased pay well, he accompanies the coffin to the cemetery; if the family does not, he attends only part of the ceremony and holds a special sermon, speaking as much as possible about the deceased's 'dark sides', for instance, emphasizing that a drunkard's way to heaven is not an easy one. It must be stressed that all the rites of passage are highly important to the community—it is not (only) a question of belief or faith, but also a question of social representation, image in society, tradition and, also, dignity. Therefore, having a decent wedding or having their children admitted for their First Communion is of the highest importance for the villagers. Hence, whenever we discussed financial abuse and protest (or rather the lack of the latter) against the priest's practices, people repeated that they had to think of their relatives, their children's future, and so on. Secondly, the performance of rituals means additional income for the priest. Therefore, apart from a family's (mis)conduct, his

performance of rituals is also influenced by the sum the family is ready to pay. According to the villagers, the priest requests so much money for weddings and funerals that many people can hardly afford it. They also stress that while marriage is a deliberate choice and the couple is prepared to pay the costs, a funeral is often an unexpected expense. It is thus a shame that instead of supporting the family of the deceased, the priest puts an additional burden on them. For all these reasons, there have been cases of ‘post-mortem’ conversions in the commune, simply because the Orthodox and Greek Catholic priests ask for no or only little money to conduct a funeral. Furthermore, the inhabitants complained about the lack of solidarity in the village: they maintained that the priest had a group of ‘agents’ who denounce people who are critical of him and that people who were denounced would ‘pay for the consequences’. They also claimed that ‘the agents’ sent the bishops letters which spoke in favour of their priest, whenever they knew that other villagers had written a letter of protest.

In summary, the priest is very skilled in recognizing areas where he can dominate. Being aware of the psychological control over children and their parents, he even ran for the position of grammar school director some years ago. He has not run yet for the office of commune leader, but he is often called ‘the second commune leader’ and the local government officials consider him someone to be reckoned with. The village leader, although highly disapproving of the priest’s practices and giving me many examples of the priest’s abuse—which he defines as ‘mental power’—would not miss a single Sunday mass or forget to pay his dues. When asked about the reasons, he gave me the usual explanation: It was because of his son who was preparing for his confirmation, or it was because of his public image among the inhabitants. Justifying his position, he reminded me that even the commune leader, despite being Orthodox, frequently attended mass. The reason was, in his view, the elections; the commune leader needed the priest’s support to be re-elected. Although it is hard to believe that the views of this unpopular and highly criticized clergyman could be so influential, the village leader confirms what is often said about Poland in general: the apparent contradiction between criticism of the Church and the importance of religious factors for people’s political choices. To sum up: all these examples illustrate a very inconsistent behavior: recurrent complaints about the priest collecting money and his immoral behavior, on the one hand, and tacit acceptance of the situation and continuation of religious practices, on the other.”

I believe that the case I selected may be helpful in addressing both issues ‘specific’ for anthropological practice and more general problems of the scholarly practice. Most crucial are the following issues:

1. How do we study people we don’t like? (using the anthropological jargon, we could ask: How can we be sympathetic with ‘repugnant others’?)
2. How can we be impartial and realise (or at least attempt to get close to) the ideal of value-free scholarship? Furthermore, does impartiality have limits, or are there situations in which making a statement or taking a side is justified?

3. How do we use information such as gossips and rumours and how do we use the data in the situation we are asked not to mention them? What constitutes an ethical/moral question here: the anthropologist's responsibility towards his/her profession and/or towards the people in the field?

Moreover, in reference to Dave's research, I would like to ask: How do we establish the truth ('truth'), why and whom do we (should) believe? Also, it is worth asking whether the aim of anthropologists is to establish the truth or to be interested rather in what people see as truth and what purposes their depictions of reality serve? In reference to Elizabeth, I would like to ask whether there is a place for compatible methodologies and compatible analytical frames within anthropology? Referring to my case study, it is worth asking whether a compatible framework would actually help to answer the question of the reasons of the priest's power or simply bring more confusion, given that a Marxist anthropologist would see here the Catholic Church's hegemony; a functionalist would perceive it as a stable system of relations and argue that apparently such a position of the priest is functional for the local system's functioning; while a cognitive anthropologist would argue that the priest's power is a manifestation of local culture, the rules of which are imprinted in people's minds.

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The three short presentations were each followed by animated discussion tackling the issues at hand. The first presentation focusing on methodological issues in philosophy led to further questions about the nature of disciplinary boundaries and the role of "theory" in academic work. The presentation from history prompted a debate about the use of language and the difficulty of maintaining consistency of jargon in interdisciplinary work. The anthropological presentation generated deep reflection about the place of one's personal opinions in academic work and what it means to maintain academic integrity when treating ideas and subjects one dislikes as well as those one favors. Many commented that the discussion as a whole prompted them to re-think their relationship to methodology within their own discipline in addition to providing insight into challenges faced by those in other field.

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[1] The entire case that follows is found in the Archives of the Bundespolizeidirektion in Vienna, Prostitution und Mädchenhandel 1897-1899

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IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. XXXII

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*Preferred citation:* Pasięka, Agnieszka; Petruccelli, Dave; Robinson, Elizabeth. 2012.

Comparative Methodologies: An Interdisciplinary Discussion.  
In: Re-thinking European Politics and History, ed. A. Pasieka, D.  
Petruccelli, B. Roth, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows'  
Conferences, Vol. 32.

