

Journal editorial

Introduction

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Introduction

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In his presidential address to the 2005 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Troy Duster argues (2006:1) that “the increasing authority of reductionist science” presents one of the main challenges to current sociological research. According to him, this surge of reductionism is fueled first and foremost by those sciences that explain nearly everything from “inside the bodies,” e. g. through brain scans or DNA analysis (M’charek, this issue). Thus, reductionism is a drive external to sociology, one which challenges sociological work on at least two levels: First, research funding is diverted away from sociology toward the search for mostly neurological, genetic, or biological “causes of wide ranging problems – from disparities in health and educational achievement to explanations of alcoholism and violence” (Duster 2006). Second, sociology is challenged to move beyond mere constructivist commentary and to regain confidence and relevance by engaging in investigations of those very architectures of knowledge production, which Duster makes out to be at the heart of this emerging constellation of reductionism.

These architectures are those of the natural sciences, medicine and psychology, and of state agencies and business: they are inscribed in bio-banks, health insurance databases, clinical trials, drug approval procedures, public health policies etc. They are not the architectures of the social sciences proper.

However, Duster does not attempt a reflexive turn to include sociology itself in his analysis. Had he done so, he could have pointed out that a very similar development is unfolding within the social sciences themselves. An increasing amount of work in the social sciences is focused on representing economies, nation states, or regions in scales, rates, ranks, and intervals. Quantitative research feeds into global evaluation and benchmarking. Performances in education, schooling, or medical care are measured, compared, and rated. National and international bodies alike increase their funding of large-scale, cross-national survey work in line with global demands and requirements of transparency, cooperation and learning (see also Scheffer, this issue).

Thus we extend Duster’s analysis: in the same way that science funding generally is becoming skewed towards reductionism, funding within the social sciences is prioritized into large-scale, cross-national project clusters. Certain forms of comparison thrive in these constellations, as cross-national survey design and statistical analysis render comparison seemingly unproblematic in principle. Other forms, however, such as qualitative and

ethnographic comparison, are not readily compatible with these practices of knowledge production.

It is surprising, then, that the involvement of the qualitative social sciences in comparative analyses has nevertheless been on the increase. They are not just bystanders impressed by the output of their quantitative colleagues. Qualitative scholars get themselves involved in cross-national comparative projects, albeit with widespread ambivalence on the part of their own research communities. The current situation, then, is one of ambivalence: On the one hand, the standard *mode of comparison* has been criticised as mechanistic, technical, and naïve (vis-à-vis hegemonic concepts and categories), especially by those of ethnographic provenance (cf. Marcus 1982). On the other hand, the rising demand for cross-cultural and comparative research has proved productive for ethnographers (as cultural translators).

Being pushed to producing objects of comparison has motivated scholars to question and redefine their established fields of observation (Moore 2005). It provides some expedient rationales to generate, to sharpen and to qualify ethnographic concepts, methodology, and praxeological theory. It raises awareness, moreover, about how best to produce comparability in ethnographic sociological research.

This “epistemic slippage” between a well-rehearsed critique of comparison as a formal method, on the one hand, and the challenges and benefits of actual comparative research practice, on the other, forms the starting point for the contributions to this special issue. We argue for a new, confident, yet partially tentative and reflexive stance towards comparison in ethnographic research. Comparison should not be left exclusively to certain social scientific research traditions and methods. Comparison also should not simply be either criticised or neglected. At the same time, comparison should not be undertaken simply by copying the deductive model of quantitative approaches.

Comparison should be seen as a challenge, one exceeding both the single case study and the contrasting of any number of multiple cases. Comparison, we believe, enriches ethnography and adds to its aspiration for thick description.

Some scholars, therefore, have begun to sketch an alternative to quantitative comparison. According to Fox and Gingrich (2002) comparison requires a plurality of methods; for Barro, Jordan and Roberts (1998) it should be thick, explorative and multi-dimensional; for others it should resemble an ongoing dialogue between cultures (as Geertz envisioned in 1986) and it should strive to “make discoveries” rather than insisting on consciously seeking comparative results (Yengoyan 2006).

This special issue calls for an additional twist: ethnographic comparison should focus on and explicate the production of comparability. This, in turn, leads inexorably to explicit discussions of the limits of qualitative comparability. Thus, the thickness of qualitative comparison derives from: its augmentation of quantitative differences and similarities, its processual and explorative character, and its demonstrations of the conditions and the limits of qualitative comparability.¹

¹The explorative use of comparison goes back to Mills, who achieves a measure of “sociological imagination” by ways of comparison: “On almost any problem with which I am concerned, I try to get a comparative grip on the materials.” This grip is playful and analytical. And it produces comparability

In compiling this special issue, we do not claim that thick comparison is entirely new, or that Sociology and Anthropology have failed to discuss the traps and limits of comparison (see Matthes 1992). The opposite is the case. We simply realise the necessity to change the status of methodical critique and sensitivity in this area. In other words, the impossibility to compare objects in their totality or thickness (or to translate from one entire context to another) should not stifle productive comparative research. It should rather instigate “problematic comparison”: we are able to learn from the problems (of comparing) and the resistances (to being compared), and not only from clear-cut solutions.

Thus, we can be read as calling for “risking thick comparison.”² Failing is one productive constituent of this mode of comparison.³

Scepticism and Beyond

We are interested neither in providing a new grand theory of qualitative comparative method nor in wishing to ignore important critical achievements by simply “going for it.” We appreciate the long and varied trajectory the idea of comparative analysis and enquiry has had over the past two centuries in the social sciences (Yengoyan 2006). However, we do recognise that most qualitative and, indeed, ethnographic researchers today, no matter whether their background is in sociology, anthropology, political science or ethnology, shy away from the challenges of comparing complex practices. The reasons for this are multifaceted: Those employing microscopic methods and steeped in intricacies of a particular field emphasise the importance and uniqueness of their local settings. They thereby resist attempts to isolate objects of knowledge which may be able to travel across contexts (Star and Griesemer 1989; Strathern 2006). The duration of participant observation and the diverse types of collected data go along with calls for the uniqueness and incomparability of each field. These claims, along with narrative strategies, contribute centrally to ethnographic authority (Clifford 1988).

Those interested in theory-driven analyses point out that analytical concepts are bound strongly to their “native” context, and thus necessarily fail to capture meaning adequately in comparative settings. These scholars relate to the contextual nature of language games and the “impossibility of translation” (Lyotard 1988).⁴

Those concerned with power relations in asymmetrical relationships criticise comparison for reinforcing existing hegemonies, thus reproducing and stabilising highly problematic patterns of dominance and dependency (Collier 1997; Nguyen 2005).

after the first imagination: “[A]nd I can then sort out the dimensions in terms of which the comparisons are made.” (1959: 215).

²Or, as Tagore points out (2006: 79) “in the face of the sceptical attack”, meaning in his case the “impossibility of translation:” “It is the sense of possibility that I invoke in my remarks.”

³A similar attitude can be witnessed in discussions of field access. Some ethnographers (e.g. Whyte 1943) turned a failure to obtain access into a success in relation to certain research questions. They declared field access as limited by principle.

⁴For an overview, see Aoki (1992) on anthropological fieldwork, or Howland (2003) for cultural historiography.

Another challenge arises from within occupational disciplines themselves. Comparison is omnipresent in everyday social practices: in the work of lawyers, medical practitioners, or engineers. There is no single occupational activity that is not in some sense using comparison in order to forge relations and produce order and meaning. While this omnipresence of comparison may also encourage its use amongst observing social scientists, the mixing of “reflexive observing science” and “participant common sense” troubles those who favour sharp distinctions. Comparing too rapidly can turn into a somehow “too common” and “too involved” everyday undertaking, lacking the rigour and systematics expected from social scientific method. Comparison seems a mundane exercise of the tinkerer and blender.

Last but not least, comparison as a method is not developed primarily by ethnographic disciplines. Like statistics, comparison seems to be owned by other methodologies and methods – those of Western law, economics, experimental psychology, or functionalist macro-sociology. It seems to be placed outside the scope of ethnography and its intrinsic tendency to place elements in complex cultural, organisational, or practical relations – as opposed to seeking monolithic lines of cause and effect. Ethnography as a critical project distances itself from constructions that tend to subsume everything specific under general categories or institutions, such as law, labour, or variables. Ethnography rather protects life worlds against the levelling of all differences, the measuring of the immeasurable, or the translation of idiosyncrasies into versions of the same.

Distancing, however, does not necessarily rule out any involvement with alternative modes of social scientific comparison. It simply does not make sense to ban comparison *in toto*. British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern summarises this stance very well when she argues (2002:xvi): “Comparison is fundamental to the critical moment. [...] Each enactment of comparison [...] falls short of, is often less than, the intellectual promise of comparison itself. Now, if we consider that ‘falling-short’ relationally, if we put it alongside other shortfalls, it begins to look interesting.” The reflexive moment, which is advocated here for analytical purposes regarding the objects, frames and explications of ethnographies, is central to the papers in this issue.

Modes of Comparison

The attempt to develop what one might call thick comparison is not new. The opposite is true: from its early beginnings, ethnography has been a comparative enterprise that contrasted foreign culture with home culture, the other with the familiar, the exotic with the common. This difference “helped to make discoveries through different ways of seeing things – by drawing forth new, unique and possibly odd implications that bear on what is being compared” (Yengoyan 2006:4). However, whenever comparison was turned into an explicit, conscious and systematic method, it was subjected to harsh critique, which often led to paradigmatic debates.⁵ Throughout the history of sociology

⁵One classic debate absorbed legal anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s, the main adversaries being Bohannan (1969) and Gluckman (1969). At the heart of their conflict was the *tertium comparationis*. Was it allowed to relate to “English” concepts, as Gluckman did by referring to English Jurisprudence?

and social anthropology, qualitative and particularly ethnographic comparison has thus been viewed with a good deal of suspicion. The social anthropologist Evans-Pritchard famously commented in 1963: “There is only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method – and that is impossible.” This epitomises the ambivalent relationship anthropology has always had with comparison, as productive and reductive *at the same time*.

In sociology, ethnographic comparison has been central to the early development of the discipline. Tocqueville, Martineau, Comte, Marx, Weber, Durkheim,⁶ and others employed cross-country and cross-cultural comparison as the basis for explanatory and/or interpretative analyses of social processes and societal organisation. At the heart of these modernist comparisons were evolutionary concepts that placed cultures or societies at certain stages in a continuum. The state under investigation, for instance, would lack this or that component of the “modern state.”

However, throughout the 20th century, different modes of comparison have been developed by scholars in Marxism, structuralism (Lévi-Strauss), structural functionalism (Durkheim, Parsons), systems theory (Luhmann), or structuration theory (Giddens). In ethnography, some qualitative modes of comparison have become particularly prominent, namely symbolic interactionism (Blumer, Goffman), processual and figurative sociology (Elias), grounded theory (Glaser, Spradley), and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, Lynch). However, ethnographic comparison of cultures or cultural practices either remained entangled in debates over colonialism, orientalism, writing culture, or reflexivity, or it quietly withdrew to the regional and disciplinary “comfort zones” of like-minded scholars (Strathern 2002). Comparison became an exercise within ethnographic fields rather than across fields.⁷ This is why the established statistical approach to cross-national or crosscultural comparison lacks an ethnographic counterpart of similar disciplinary standing.

Is it possible to mobilise the theoretical potentials inhering in sociological ethnographies in particular in their numerous studies of regions, professions, workplaces, organisational cultures, political movements, institutional careers, socio-material networks, youth gangs, legal processes, etc.?⁸ These contextsensitive, relational, explorative and reflexive studies seem promising when it comes to the task of actually producing (limited) comparability. They invite a mode of thick comparison that will in some cases enrich and in other cases develop alternative understandings of the subject matter both outside and inside comparative projects.

Or should the foreign culture be analysed and understood within its own terms, as Bohannan insisted by leaving concepts in the “original”?

⁶Comparison was at the core of these grand theories: “We have only one way of demonstrating that one phenomenon is the cause of another. This is to compare the cases where they are both simultaneously present or absent (...)” (Durkheim 1982: 147). For Durkheim, comparison is at the heart of “sociological proof.”

⁷Hammersby and Atkinson understand the comparative method as the “one general method for testing causal relations” (1983: 200). It is used to enhance models and typologies for the field under study and to generate and test hypotheses relating to these maps.

⁸According to Matthes (1992: 78), it is these middle range theories that are best equipped to carry out comparison. The level of abstraction should lie between universalism and localism.

Enacting Objects of Comparison

One of the challenges, and here we return to Duster, is to develop ways of engaging the different architectures of comparative knowledge production with each other, in order to produce findings for others to “invent around,” findings that are generative and make new connections. Marilyn Strathern rightly argues that mechanistic comparisons have often been taken to the stage where they only produce knowledge *like itself* (Strathern 2002). Put in ethnographic wording, these sorts of comparisons are “going native,” sharing the criteria and problematisations of the regulative field under study (such as unemployment, crime, or illness). Yet the response to this development is neither a celebration of the local and idiosyncratic nor a search for explanatory models with the least unexplained variance. Rather, the response is to cast our attention to the multiple ways of producing objects of knowledge and how ethnographic comparison contributes to this endeavour alongside other approaches.

This forms the leading question for the articles in this issue: how does thick comparison engage with its field and sites to produce comparability, and, as a core part of this, produce objects of comparison? The identified *and* invented comparative objects will be presented primarily in their performative force, meaning in the ways they make new links and relations and explicate novel qualities and dynamics (both within the ethnographic field and in ethnographers’ social scientific discipline). This means that the objects of comparison are presented in more or less the same ways they were created during the research phase.

Some papers here present this process as a journey from one site to another (Sørensen), others as juxtaposition by accident (M’charek), and still others as an inbuilt contrast in the field of practice (Langstrup & Winthereik) or as a theoretical or methodological stimulus (Scheffer or Schmidt, respectively). All these studies, as a result, are driven by solicited dialogues between empirical and theoretical perspectives. This dialogical character places thick comparison at the forefront of empirical research *and* theorising: a rhythmical interchange between observations, theoretical sources, and concepts of explication.

Ethnographic comparison is analytical ethnography in a radical sense. The dialogue between various ethnographic fields is aided by a formal and analytical attitude, similar to conflict parties engaging a third party in order to keep in touch. Creating comparability is a productive challenge. It initiates, enriches, and thickens ethnographic explication similar to metaphors, theories, or concepts (Hirschauer & Amann 1997). The drive towards comparability confronts ethnographic research with demands of explication, with a play of distance and closeness, with the alteration of perspectives and levels (see Clifford 1988), and – as a result – with a “comparative optics.”⁹ Thick comparison exposes itself to these alternations in seeking shared grounds and homelands, comparability and incomparable states.

⁹Knorr (1999: 4) explains this optics as follows: “Using a comparative optics as a framework for seeing, one may look at one science through the lens of the other. This ‘visibilizes’ the invisible; each pattern detailed in one science serves as a sensor for identifying and mapping (equivalent, analog, conflicting) patterns in the other.”

The objects of comparison are not representations of what one would find and bring back home from the field. They are not representatives of cultures or measures of cultural performance. They are rather articulations of analogous properties or problematics – related to a whole range of motions, and effects. How do these analogous features take place (differently)? How are the features different? In a strict sense, the objects of comparison are not found by our studies (Schmidt, this issue), but “enacted” (Urry & Law 2006). They are performative in the way they connect what would otherwise remain unconnected, specify what would otherwise remain unspecified, and emphasize what would otherwise remain unrecognised.

Thick Comparison in this Issue

The contributions to this special topics issue all rely on ethnographic comparative work. They do not, however, simply report on results from this work. Rather, they portray biographies of comparables, i. e. objects that emerged from and organised thick comparison. In this way, the reader becomes a witness of comparative work: watching objects being produced, defined, traced, employed and dismissed.

Important here is the efficacy of the constructed object of study with respect to the results it yields, the object’s ability to be invented around, to forge new relations and to open up new perspectives. In this sense, the constructed object is more mediator and catalyst than entity. Such objects thus readily crisscross data types and sources. They work differently at different stages of research. By parading our constructed objects of comparison, we wish to jump right into the empirical and conceptual practice of research. We wish to celebrate the limits of comparison as hypotheses-generating points of departure (Scheffer, this issue).

The papers in this issue introduce the reader to different stages of thick comparison. Some papers emphasise the choice of sites (Sørensen) and the researcher’s efforts to move them into juxtaposition (Schmidt); others emphasise how this juxtaposition lays bare some unexpected comparables (Langstrup & Winthereik); still others spell out the limited grounds of comparability (Scheffer) and its alternatives that overcome the enactment of separate units (M’charek). All of the papers nonetheless share one core idea: the comparable state remains incomplete and yet it enriches the ethnographic study empirically and analytically by helping to spell out this incompleteness. That is, a movement towards the margins of comparability unites the papers in this issue irrespective of their different objects of study: criminal procedures (Scheffer), asthma treatment (Langstrup & Winthereik), computer programming (Schmidt), regulation of under age media use (Sørensen), and forensics (M’charek).

In overview, the papers present the following versions of thick comparison:

Scheffer argues in his analysis of binding effects in criminal procedures in the US, England and Germany that these effects, which emerge between different versions of the same objects in past and present, cannot be captured with the static objects of comparative law-in-the-books. Rather, it is an understanding of objects (such as statements or cases) as interactive becomings, unfolding in events and processes of law-in-action, which renders

a high degree of incomparability *of procedures* across countries. This is a productive finding of thick comparison.

In Sørensen’s paper on the regulation of children’s computer games in Germany and Denmark, the starting point is the surprising incomparability of seemingly similar sites of regulation. Through a multi-sited study, Sørensen is able to appreciate this difference and deliver as a result multiple objects of comparison which reveal their own ability to fuel comparing as an analytical challenge. Absent this challenge, some sites of this study would never have been brought together and, more important, fundamentals of doing regulation would pass unrecognised.

Schmidt’s sites also seem entirely incompatible. Comparing boxing and programming is by no means an obvious study design. Yet a closer look reveals that using a comparative optics in analysing ethnographic data, this design makes visible what we did not expect to see: the embodied nature of programming and the “mental” aspects of boxing. Here the issue is not so much the adequacy of the object of comparison which takes centre stage – boxing is not like programming, however much we compare the two – but the study design’s explorative ability to make incomparability productive.

As in comparative law, so, too, Langstrup and Winthereik find that their field of study is already engaged in comparison. A pharmaceutical company compares an online asthma self-assessment tool in a clinical trial with the same tool in general practice, to find that the tool works only in the trial setting. From the company’s perspective, this is a case of “split reality,” where the tool fails to account for everyday applications in medical practice. The thick comparison of the paper produces comparability between experimental setting and clinical setting by taking into account the differences in practices and in patient identities between these settings.

M’charek’s study on current and future forensic techniques – fingerprinting, DNA fingerprinting and DNA-based reconstruction of phenotypic features – focuses on the political and epistemological dimensions of identifying crime suspects. While the technologies themselves may be portrayed either as vastly different or as variants of the same, depending on one’s point of view, the paper builds a thick comparison to show the manifold connections between the technologies, the political discourse and the bio-scientific practices. In this analysis, comparing and contrasting become intertwined.

These papers provide an insight into different ways to enact objects of comparison at different stages throughout the process of comparison. In all cases, thick comparison contributes to a respecification of the studied settings, practices, and regimes. We hope that this special issue will serve as an invitation to thick comparison as:

- it revitalises the articulation work inherent in analytical ethnographies;
- it varies observer perspectives and points towards “blind spots”;
- it names and creates “new things” and modes of empirical work;
- it gives way to intensified dialogues between data analysis and theorizing.

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