

Journal article

Producing Comparability Ethnographically – Reply to Robert Prus

Ethnographic Comparisons, Complexities and Conceptualities: Generic Social Processes and the Pragmatic Accomplishment of Group Life

Jörg Niewöhner*

Thomas Scheffer

2010

Abstract: This short contribution is a response to Robert Prus' commentary paper "Ethnographic Comparisons, Complexities and Conceptualities." We agree with many of the points raised and merely reiterate three aspects of our position in order to reinforce the unique features of our notion of thick comparison: First, ethnography has an important role to play in social inquiry. Second, ethnographers appropriate fields by getting involved in them. This involvement enables the production of comparability, which we do not understand to be an inherent quality of the world. Third, producing comparability is an ongoing process at the heart of thick comparison. Its failure and limitations are productive.

Keywords: comparability, ethnography, process, involvement

This is the accepted manuscript (postprint) of the published journal article as follows:

Title	Producing Comparability Ethnographically – Reply to Robert Prus
Subtitle	Ethnographic Comparisons, Complexities and Conceptualities: Generic Social Processes and the Pragmatic Accomplishment of Group Life
Authors	Niewöhner, Jörg; Scheffer, Thomas
Date of publication	2010
Journal	Comparative Sociology
Volume	9
Issue	4
Pages	528–536
Publisher	Brill
DOI/URL	10.1163/156913210X12555713197213

*joerg.niewoehner@hu-berlin.de; ORCID: 0000-0002-9034-9761

Producing Comparability Ethnographically – Reply to Robert Prus

**Ethnographic Comparisons, Complexities and Conceptualities: Generic
Social Processes and the Pragmatic Accomplishment of Group Life**

Jörg Niewöhner

Thomas Scheffer

2010

Let us begin with a word of appreciation. It is not at all common today that someone takes the time to comment extensively on an entire special issue – as a collection and as individual pieces. Thus we very much appreciate Robert Prus' commentary, his constructive criticisms and indeed his helpful suggestions. We learned a lot from this close reading of our efforts. It is fitting that his commentary produces a kind of comparability between our individual contributions that we had not appreciated before and we are delighted to be given an opportunity to reply and further specify our argument.

We share with Prus the conviction that ethnographic methods have an important role to play in comparative studies. Many scholars take a similar view. Yet a broad debate persists in sociology and cultural anthropology alike as to the exact nature of these ethnographic contributions. By way of responding on three main points and clarifying our position, we aim to further this debate.

Ethnography in Social Inquiry

We generally agree with Prus' introductory point that positivist social science does not provide “sustained examinations of the ways people purposively (that is, knowingly and intentionally) enter into ongoing flows of community life as reflective, interacting, adjustive agents” (page 3). We agree that much positivist and objectivist research abstains from “what is going on” out there, but we do so in a rather phenomenological and ethnomethodological fashion. Lived complexities, experiences, and effects have not played a significant role in quantitative social science work for a number of reasons, which Prus from a symbolic interactionist perspective rightly emphasizes. We also agree that the quantitative and qualitative divide reflects a debate still very much alive within social science communities and indeed our introduction to the special issue makes the same point although in less depth.

Yet we are somewhat less enthusiastic about an analysis that puts this divide at the very centre of the debate about how best to understand social order and processes or

“the whatness of human group life” (page 2). While Prus’ introductory remarks present an eloquent plea for the purpose, value and rigour of ethnographic inquiry, this plea in its enthusiasm runs two risks – as an unintended consequence. It runs the risk of stabilising the quantitative and qualitative divide as a central analytic category in the field. It also runs the risk of stifling ethnographic creativity, namely by reducing what we perceive as a plurality of methods into a singular mold fit to answer a preset set of questions deriving from only one ethnographic tradition. This does not seem to be doing ethnographic comparisons a favour. To put this simply, not everybody need apply Herbert Blumer’s wisdom to his or her field of study.

Rather, we should strive towards greater attentiveness to the reasons for and effects of specific problematizations, research objects, conceptualisations, and field sites and how they link to questions of methodology. As Kozin points out, the life-world is everything and nothing; thus it depends on the specific perspective we choose. Only through this can we discover the life-world’s structure, meaning, and relevance.

Of course, much has been said and written about mixed method approaches, triangulation and the difficulty of bringing quantitative and qualitative analyses together. Few elegant examples exist that integrate ethnography with quantitative sociological data (cf. Znaniecki 1965; Cicourel 1973; Wacquant 2009) – or with biological data (cf. Melby et al. 2005). We do not even attempt to delve into the complexity of this debate.

We prefer to isolate a single point that is pertinent to our argument: how comparison is rendered (im)possible.

Ethnography can produce (in)comparability due to its capability to deal with: uncertain boundaries, complexity, unsettled matters, and black boxes. Its radical process-orientation is an undervalued resource when it comes to the business of comparing.

Prus argues that “any approach that does not respect its subject matter is inauthentic” (page 5). Respect is a term taken from an ethical repertoire which describes a just and fair relationship between researcher, researched and their respective communities. Few people in any science would disagree with this. And even fewer would be unable to name pieces of research that they considered less than respectful in its handling of the research process and indeed its subject matter.

This seems to be an issue that pertains as much to the social sciences as it does to natural sciences and medicine. It is equally common in quantitative traditions as in qualitative traditions. This does not lessen the importance of the issue of respect. It merely lifts it off the methodological level of analysis. The more fundamental point and the point that holds the key to making this statement productive is authenticity.

The notion of authenticity is firmly rooted within a representational paradigm. Prus argues that “because people possess capacities for speech, thought, agency, deliberation, interaction, and purposive adjustments,” the social sciences require method(ologie)s that are able to pay respect to these qualities and represent them as authentically as possible. Quantitative approaches are ill-suited to do so. Qualitative and particularly ethnographic methods are thus needed.

However, research may focus on other constellations and problematisations, for example on how settings demand certain modes of participations. Consequently, research may also

prefer some sets of capacities as compared to others, or certain structures of possibility that dis/allow people to articulate their thoughts.

Some of us think differently in methodological terms. While most of us do not have any quarrels with respect, authenticity rests on a troublesome assumption, namely that something akin to a view from nowhere is still a productive perspective. Prus himself argues that science is ultimately a social process and product. Taking this seriously means to us that authenticity is not a category, which should be attributed asymmetrically to representations by the researcher. Debates on the authenticity of quantitative or qualitative methods are unlikely to further our analytic capacities.

Rather, we can understand representations as more or less co-productively shaped through the interaction of researcher and practitioners, author and audience, and indeed their respective material and symbolic contexts. Representations, comprising their overarching circulations, translations, and careers, are not fully controlled by the researcher (or author) or indeed any single participant in the research endeavor.

What Prus seems to demand is a certain unity of inquiry, both for our group and for the social sciences as well. Our Special Issue documents a different ethics. We collected a considerable variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, which temporarily came together for just one focal project: the quest of ethnographic comparison. This means that we bring together analytical, participatory, critical, and other ethnographies, each with different concepts and theoretical assumptions. All of these ethnographies, however, share a basic idea: in order for ethnography to come back to the business of comparison it needs to re-articulate the production of comparability and its limits. This is where the contributors to our special issue meet: not in one theoretical framework but in a shared interest in reviving ethnographic comparative efforts.

When it comes to ethnography, we celebrate eclecticism, which must seem rather odd to Prus who places his own work on solid and traditional grounds. This may suite his fields of ethnographic inquiry; it does not necessarily suit our fields. Our fields range from criminal legal procedure, to medical wards, to computer game industry, software developers, or forensic genetics. Our respect and our authenticity may derive from a modesty when it comes to the various ways – concepts, theories, frames, methods, styles of writing etc. – in which it is possible to give voice to these largely diverse fields of practice and the ethnographic experiences they allow/disallow.

We emphasise in our contributions the importance of producing comparability (differently) rather than focusing on (monological) comparison per se. This point is either undervalued or dismissed in Prus' comment, due to a different understanding of the empiricism-theory relation. We place in the foreground the performative aspects of various methods, concepts, and perspectives. We appreciate, however, that this performative turn has not been followed by everyone involved in the field, and for important reasons.

Yet even within a pre-performative epistemological stance, authenticity can only have ethical, not epistemological, implications. Strathern (2002) reminds us that the problem with quantitative comparative work has often not been that it tried to objectify and decontextualize items of information. Rather the problem has been that the operations run on these items have turned out to be uninteresting. By uninteresting Strathern

means two things: results are not interested in the objects of study and they do not find anything unknown beforehand.

Whether our studies are interesting in these two dimensions, we do not know. What we do know, however, is that ethnography should account for its – conceptual, methodical, interactional – involvements with the sites and fields of ethnographic research in order to learn from different experiences (instead of streamlining them). Our special issue is, most of all, a collection of accounts of contrastive involvements. The articles within it thereby serve as a backdrop for what we mean by the production of (limited) comparability.

Comparability

The crisis of representation – epitomised in anthropology in the writing-culture debate of the 1980s – has rippled through all areas of social inquiry. Its implications have been sustained not only in a few niches of feminist critique, but also in science studies and some of the more performative readings of sociology and social anthropology. Our methodological notion of thick comparison is rooted within such lines of thought. And we thank the editor for giving us the opportunity to further clarify our position.

Thick comparison, as Prus rightly remarks, does indeed borrow from Geertz's thick description (Geertz 1973). He argued that a particular action can only be comprehended with an understanding of the context within which it is situated. Geertz's example is a wink of the eye: which can be anything from an erotic advance to some kind of tip-off. A thick description is a description that not only reports the action itself but also the context needed to make the action intelligible.

In our re-readings of Geertz's concept, we find that some researchers emphasise the situated nature of knowledge and meaning-making practices; others emphasise the situated character of participation or being/becoming a participant. Situated, and this goes beyond Geertz, denotes not only a context necessary to understand a particular action (as the wink in Geertz's example). It also includes the researcher as well, to whom things, gestures, speeches, documents, machines and so forth demonstrate their meanings and relevancies. Situatedness is a notion that reminds us of the collaborative – and sometimes contested – nature of all meaning-production. We move away from a distant and representational view of action to a 'closer' position of involvement and necessary partaking.

What are the implications of this for comparative research? Thick comparison transposes the notion of situatedness into comparative settings and emphasises the need to co-produce comparability. Comparability, like the meaning of Geertz's wink, is not simply a given, ready to be represented "from nowhere" – or something that can be read and re-read like a text and con-text. It does not make itself fully available for our purposes as an inherent quality of the world or as a preformed thing.

This is even more so the case once we start reframing and modulating components from different settings. Comparability is constructive and, as a result, a threat to replace thickness with universal concepts or standards. In top-down analytic approaches, comparability is produced by selecting a *tertium comparationis* and adopting this as a

lens through which to look at two different settings, say, the colour of two objects or the meaning of a plea-bargain in two different court settings.

We have tried to argue in our special issue that working ethnographically precludes this kind of comparing for at least two reasons. First, a particular situation or phenomenon needs to be understood or appropriated in ethnographic terms. The individual contributions show that researchers are not going “into the field” with an a priori notion of what it is they are going to compare. Ethnographic involvement triggers a co-production of what is significant in and to a field, what holds it together as a form of practice and what matters within it. It is only through the involvement that a “field” takes on the sharp contours that allow us to speak of “field” as if it were a pre-given entity. Ethnographic involvement is boundary work and integral to the constitution of the objects of comparison.

Second, and central to the notion of thick comparison and to the entire special issue, the *tertium comparationis*, that is, the concepts used to compare, develop through a process of immersing oneself in two or more different contexts. Researchers’ “toing and froing” between these contexts spurs at the same time and interactively the delineating of the field as a distinct social setting and the development and sharpening of concepts that make sense in both contexts, albeit often in very different ways. If you wish here to use a term from science studies, you can speak of the co-production of boundary objects. These are concepts that are relevant in several contexts but are appropriated in very different ways. Anthropologists tend to use the phrase “play out” in this context, to mark the dynamic and interactive work that goes into meaning-making.

In thick comparison, then, the *tertium comparationis* is not derived from theory prior to the ethnographic research. Rather, it emerges from the ethnographic work together with an understanding and delineation of the two or more fields within which the research takes place. This does not by any means open doors for some kind of post-modern relativism or an a-theoretical empiricist research. It only stresses the processual nature of ethnographic research.

Hence we are not worried about the limits of comparability. Certain concepts work in particular contexts and not in others. If we realize during a research process that we cannot produce comparability, that is, that a concept does not work in two contexts, then this failure is informative. It does not tell us that our method is flawed or that our theory is wrong. It makes us think why a concept from one context does not take hold in another. The limits and failures of our comparative efforts help us to shape each field in relation to bounded comparison in more clarity.

Contrast versus Reflection

All of this means that we give away some of the control that is needed to achieve the conceptual clarity Prus is demanding from us. We are not prepared to control comparative analysis to derive from it trans-situational concepts that add to existing theory. Although symbolic interactionism is close to most of our hearts, we are separated from it by the performative turn. We are not in a position to describe thickly and, by doing so, also to

contribute to a monolithic body of theory.

This might be considered a major weakness of our approach. It does not contribute to existing theory in an additive manner. Rather it hands some of the control over theory building to the process of research. This has nothing to do with action research, dialogical anthropology or advocacy. It has everything to do with the position derived from practice-oriented theories. It responds to the writing-culture debate and the performative turn that reframes epistemological questions of representation and authenticity as ontic issues of involvement (Law et al. 1999).

Ours is also a position that emphasises the importance of contrast over critical reflection. Much of Western social science is built on the idea of critical distance. Going back to notions of the subject and its possibility to reflect critically, most social-science researchers have striven to distance themselves from their research subjects and objects. The farther they remove themselves, the clearer the process of reflection can be. The notion of transsituationality Prus introduces is a good example of this kind of approach. It is also an example of how easily ethnographic approaches can be combined with rather deductive approaches more common in the positivist tradition of social inquiry.

Thick comparison gives up the possibility of critical reflection from a distance and with a view from nowhere. It allows us to see each field with a new measure, while at the same time questioning this measure in the light of both fields. We assume, to put it polemically, that distancing from the subject matter does not make this matter clearer. It makes the matter harder to decipher without the help of strong theoretical lenses. It is thus not particularly suited to address problems of meaning-making in different contexts. We emphasise instead the need for contrasting involvements.

It is not in detached theorizing that we find the opportunity to weigh our subject matter; it is by comparison and its limits that manage to move in and out the respective fields. A “toing and froing” between contexts does not produce critical distance. It instead produces a process of dialogue between general concepts, diverse fields, and singular involvements. This is at the heart of thick comparison as we see it.

References

Cicourel, Aaron Victor. 1973. *Cognitive Sociology: Language and Meaning in Social Interaction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Education.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Law, John and John Hassard, eds. 1999. *Actor Network Theory and After*. Oxford: Blackwell and the Sociological Review.

Melby, Melissa, Margaret Lock and Patricia Kaufert. 2005. “Culture and Symptom Reporting at Menopause.” *Human Reproduction Update* 11(5):495–512.

Strathern, Marilyn. 2002. “Not Giving the Game Away.” In *Anthropology, by Comparison*, edited by André Gingrich and Richard Gabriel Fox. London: Routledge.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2009. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Znaniecki, Florian. 1965. *Social Relations and Social Roles: The Unfinished Systematic Sociology*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.