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Introduction

Comparative Ethnography: Its Promise, Process, and Successful Implementations

Edward D. Lowe and Michael Schnegg

Two decades into the twenty-first century, anthropology is considering anew its comparative foundations, moving away from the methodological and epistemological crises that shook the discipline at the end of the twentieth century. As Matei Candea (2019, 1) writes, "[C]omparison is back in the limelight and it is the 'crisis of representation' itself which is beginning to feel thoroughly *passé*. A new wind of epistemological confidence is blowing through the discipline, and comparison is explicitly reclaimed and brandished as a distinctive anthropological method." No longer yoked to an explicitly positivist project, and generally more careful about anthropology's past connections with colonial and imperialist projects, comparison in anthropology today makes use of a variety of heuristics and methodological strategies to make important contributions to the understanding of the human condition past and present. Yet, one legacy of the disciplinary critique at the end of the last century is that *explicit* considerations of why and how the varieties of comparative praxis might be successfully used in anthropology are rare. Leaving such considerations implicit prevents ongoing innovations in using comparative strategies and heuristics to produce valuable anthropological insights into complex and pressing human concerns. If the new enthusiasm for comparison is going to make a larger impact, it is essential to consider the methodological and epistemological promise and perils of working comparatively.

This book contributes to the aim of giving explicit attention to comparative praxis in contemporary anthropological research. The chapters are authored by an international panel of seasoned ethnographic researchers who have all conducted comparative projects or who have written about comparison since the reengagement with comparative approaches in anthropology at the end of

The essays collected in the volume were presented at a workshop organized in Hamburg, Germany, in May 2016. We thank all participants for the stimulating and productive discussions during those days. The Universität Hamburg and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) supported the conference financially. In addition to our funding agencies, the authors would like to thank Julia Pauli, the late Thomas Schweizer, the chapter authors, and two anonymous reviewers for the many insightful discussions and comments leading to the final production of this volume.

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the 1990s and into the early 2000s. In convening the authors at a conference in Hamburg, Germany, in May 2016, we asked the participants not to write about comparison as a long-standing, if often "troubled" (Brettell 2009) or even "impossible" (Candea 2019), methodological and epistemological standpoint in anthropology and related fields. Several books and articles already provide excellent overviews (Candea 2019; Felski and Friedman 2013; Gingrich and Fox 2002; Holy 1987; Ingold 2011; Lazar 2012; Lewis 1999; Yengoyan 2006). Rather, we asked the chapter authors to write about how they conducted successful comparative ethnographic projects and about the challenges and benefits of having done so.

We do not intend to develop a consensual methodology for ethnographic comparison, particularly given the methodological ambivalence regarding the use of scientific "styles of reasoning" (Hacking 1992) in anthropology and the well-established plurality of comparative ethnographic strategies (Candea 2019; Fox and Gingrich 2002; Gingrich 2012, 2015). Instead, we explore the varieties of comparative practices that are represented in the works of the chapter authors. We believe that the resulting chapters provide an invaluable resource for researchers who might be interested in conducting comparative ethnographic research and who are looking for frank discussions about the different strategies available for doing so.

In this introduction, we present a synthesis of the central themes that emerge in the chapters of this volume. We begin by providing an overview of why ethnographic comparison is essential in anthropology while also considering the challenges that are presented by its main critics. We then provide a general overview of how comparative ethnographic research is generally conducted in anthropology today. Our focus is on the process involved in the kind of ethnographic comparison that is the main focus of the chapters in this book, contrasting small-*N* qualitative comparison with large-*N* quantitative and typological approaches (Ragin 2014; Ragin and Amoroso 2019). Finally, we provide a brief overview of how the contents of this book contribute to our understanding of the varieties of effective comparative ethnographic practice today. The main finding from reading across all the chapters is how the construction of *contextualized configurations* is an important methodological heuristic for developing successful ethnographic comparisons. The configurational comparisons we see as a common thread in all the chapters are positioned between particularistic and generalizing approaches. These configurational strategies depart from variable-based logic that emphasizes the covariation of phenomena. Instead, they highlight how configurations of social and cultural phenomena combine to pattern the particular way a phenomenon manifests within each case under study. These configurational comparisons better explain the diversity of social and cultural worlds that result from very different configurational logics in each case.

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The Promise of Comparative Ethnography

Why should we compare? Of course, anthropology has always included comparison of various kinds as a major means of advancing theory in the discipline (Ember et al. 2014; Fox and Gingrich 2002; Handler 2009; Ingold 2011; Johnson and Hrushka 2015; Ragin and Amoroso 2019). But as an explicit research strategy, comparison has often existed in tension with either more particularistic approaches or more generalizing strategies. Here, as an example, we touch on a long-standing tension in discussions of anthropological practice between what Radcliffe-Brown (1952; as cited in Ingold 2011) described as ideographic and nomothetic forms of anthropological inquiry, where the aims of the former involved documenting "the particular facts of past and present lives" through ethnography, while the aim of the latter was "to arrive at general propositions or theoretical statements" through comparative ethnology (Ingold 2011, 229).

Many would agree that the aim of comparative research should not be to use comparison to arrive at generalizations, universal theoretical statements, or teleological metanarratives (Gingrich and Fox 2002; Hirsch et al. 2009; Ingold 2011). Most would also agree that we should not accept the imposition of an ideographic disciplinary straitjacket that relies exclusively on various strategies for writing "ethnographies of the particular" (Abu-Lughod 1991) or multisited ethnography of the unfolding of processes of globalization (Marcus 1995). Some balance between the two is needed if anthropology is to retain and enhance its standing among other disciplines. As Gingrich (2015) has observed, an academic field cannot "sufficiently address any larger issues nor sustain any credibility and legitimacy if [its claims are] based on nothing else but particularities" (412). Indeed, it is through what Laura Nader (1994) has called a "comparative consciousness" that anthropologists are best able to contribute new knowledge to our understanding of the processes that characterize the modern era of globalization. To paraphrase and quote Nader, an intellectually broad and methodologically diverse comparative consciousness can better illuminate the connections that anthropologists study, "between local and global, between past and present, between anthropologists and those they study, between uses of comparison and implications of its uses" (Nader 1994, 88; as cited in Brettell 2009, 656). Ethnographic comparison can do this because its focus is on highlighting not only the differences but also the similarities in the ways human beings inhabit and understand the world we share (Ingold 2011). It is in the tension between these two that ethnographic comparisons are better able to contribute to public understanding of pressing issues of the day.

All the chapter authors address the question of why explicit forms of comparison are essential to anthropological practice in one way or another. For example, Caroline B. Brettell (Chapter 1) argues that an explicit comparative

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framework of two or more cases has three benefits. First, it helps us to understand better the particularities of one case by revealing that case's internal structures and dynamics when juxtaposed against those of another, such as in the production of ethnic identity in upland Southeast Asia (Sprenger, Chapter 4), highland architecture in Arabia (Gingrich, Chapter 5), and the differential ontogeny of emotion across different social and cultural contexts (Röttger-Rössler, Chapter 8). Second, comparison also allows us to assess how and why different cases might be doing better or worse in terms of some particular outcome of interest such as the integration of migrants (Brettell, Chapter 1), the felt authenticity of cultural performance (Handler, Chapter 2), or vulnerability to suicide (Lowe, Chapter 3). Third, comparison can be used to explore "best practices" regarding public or institutional policies such as those aimed at HIV prevention for married couples (Hirsch et al., Chapter 7) or the management of collective natural resources (Schnegg, Chapter 6).

Explicit strategies of ethnographic comparison are important when studying phenomena at multiple scales, particularly those associated with processes of globalization, such as international trade and migration, or global-scale processes that can have diverse local impacts, such as climate change. As Besnier and Guinness argue in their chapter (Chapter 9, 207), the study of large-scale events or processes requires that we understand them "in all [their] manifestations and ramifications for different regions of the world, in different configurations, and over a significant period of time." An explicitly comparative ethnographic approach is well suited to successfully study such diverse global-local dynamics.

The Challenges for Comparative Ethnography

As advocates have written about the need to retain a comparative tradition in anthropology, we are struck by the regularity with which these authors include a discussion of comparison's "problematic" or "troubled" history in the discipline (Brettell 2009; Chapter 1; Hirsch et al. 2009; Schnegg 2014). These anxieties about the place of comparison in anthropology seem to have always been part of competing disciplinary currents (Brettell 2009; Fox and Gingrich 2002; Handler 2009; Ingold 2011).

The challenges of different comparative strategies have to do with the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which they are based (Brettell 2009; Handler 2009; Ingold 2011). Before we describe configurational comparisons as a heuristic for comparative ethnography that we find to be common to all the chapters in this volume, we must first review the tension between the different comparative approaches in anthropology historically. A fundamental tension has to do with the positivist or historical/interpretive ontological standpoints assumed by the researcher. Following Richard Handler (2009, 628),

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human societies or cultures are often imagined from a positivist standpoint to be spatiotemporally distinct and bounded units that comprise particular, causally independent social and cultural traits. These societal units are understood to vary regarding which of a universally identifiable collection of social and cultural traits are present and which are absent in a given societal unit, rendering the traits themselves social and cultural variables. The analysis of the distribution of these traits through comparison either to derive taxonomies, *à la* Radcliffe-Brown or Lévi-Strauss, or to use statistical procedures of correlation or covariation, *à la* George Peter Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas and the hologeistic method (Fox and Gingrich 2002), became the means through which fields like anthropology were thought to be a positive science that produces its own generalizations and master narratives of human culture and society and their evolution over time. This is not to say that there were not significant disagreements within the positivist tradition. These two styles of reasoning, the taxonomic and the statistical, exist in a tension of their own, as exemplified by Edmund Leach's (1961, 2–3) famous reduction of the taxonomic approach of Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss as nothing more than "butterfly collecting." As Ingold (2011, 234) notes, Leach preferred generalizations that "would take the form not of a typological specification that would enable us to distinguish societies of one kind from those of another, but of a statement of the relationships between variables that may operate in societies of any kind."

While positivists understand discrete social and cultural phenomena to be objective facts to be identified, described, counted, and compared or correlated with one another, the historical/interpretive standpoint sees these as phenomena whose meaning and value derive from its historically contingent relationships to other phenomena in an "ever widening context within the phenomenal cosmos" (Kroeber 1952, 123; as cited in Ingold 2011, 231). From the interpretive standpoint, both human societies and the phenomena found within them cannot be placed on an etic universal scale of description and measurement because, as Ruth Benedict argued, human societies "are traveling along different roads in pursuit of different ends, and these ends and these means in one society cannot be judged in terms of those of another society, because essentially they are incommensurable" (1934, 46; as cited in Handler 2009, 634). But Benedict *did* believe that societies were comparable. As Handler (2009, 634) notes, "[S]he was able to show her readers that cultural comparison required sophisticated translation practices that went far beyond the naïve idea that each term, trait, or unit in one culture could be matched to a corresponding term, trait, or unit in another." Benedict employed a reflexive hermeneutic analysis, working back and forth among the materials for each case and her own understanding, until the pattern that characterized each case emerged that would also illuminate more clearly the terms of comparison itself.

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If the comparative approach advocated by Benedict (1934, 1946) and later by Geertz (1973) allowed us to more carefully place our own and other societies' social and cultural patterns on a more equal, if incommensurate, footing, it still tended to reify cultural boundaries. Assuming the boundedness of culture tends to support a further problematic assumption that human cultural groups are maximally different from one another, rendering them as truly "Other" from the perspective of the anthropologist-observer (Ingold 2018). The criticism holds that human worlds only become interesting to anthropologists when they are assumed to be places of bounded, radical alterity, resulting in the muting or silencing of the human commonalities that exist among human societies in anthropological studies. Such a view also tends to "incarcerate" people in time and place, "denying them the capacity for movement, travel, and interaction that Westerners take for granted" in the modern and global era (Abu-Lughod 1991, 146; Appadurai 1996). The view of cases to be compared as bounded cultures also tends to promote an overemphasis on the internal coherence of the cases compared, as opposed to their being shot through with contradiction and conflict (Abu-Lughod 1991).

The boundary problem also points to the problem of scale. The unfolding historical processes in which the cases of comparison are embedded operate at different temporal and geographic scales, from the microscopic to the cosmic, from the immediate to the macroevolutionary. Understanding how phenomena that one might observe through ethnographic fieldwork within particular field sites might be embedded in larger regional and global processes has been particularly relevant in comparative anthropology of the globalizing political-economic system of capitalism (e.g. Mintz 1985; Wolf 1982; West 2012; Besnier and Guinness, Chapter 9). In addition, the comparison of cases that might be part of regional histories of emergence and transaction has a well-established history in anthropology (Gluckman 1960; Eggan 1953; Gingrich 2012, 2015).

One way to address the problem of scale is to use multisited ethnography. Marcus (1995) describes these studies as those that move "out from single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space" (96). It would seem, however, that multisited ethnography addresses the problems of boundedness and scale by moving up in scale, from the local to the multisited as phenomena are configured when they move through the channels and pathways that are created by the systems of global capitalism and governance. It leaves for a comparative ethnography the problem of working between scales, such as the global, the local, and the temporally and spatially "disjunctive" (Appadurai 1996; Lazar 2012; Besnier and Guinness, Chapter 9; Brettell, Chapter 1; Lowe, Chapter 2; Schnegg, Chapter 6).

Another problem regarding temporal scales concerns those of a *longue durée* for a given historical period and even extending to the kinds of timescales that

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allow us to consider evolutionarily durable processes that operate at the epigenetic level. The latter have been of concern for social scientists interested in such topics as the nature of human sociality (e.g. Henrich et al. 2004) and the comparative study of emotion (Röttger-Rössler et al. 2015). However, unlike studies of processes embedded within global capitalism, comparative ethnographic studies working on an evolutionary scale tend to emphasize scale from the level of the shared human biological inheritance and its epigenetic ontogeny to the specific communities or sites that have been studied ethnographically and comparatively.

Finally, when conducting comparative ethnographic work, there is the problem of the reliability of what Handler (2009) calls the "person–people report" or the reliability and validity of the claims made about people's lives in each ethnographic document. When the comparative ethnographic study uses reports made by others, there is no way of assessing the validity and reliability of those sources. As Brettell (Chapter 1) and Gingrich (Chapter 5) each argue, this is a particularly difficult issue in comparative ethnographic studies of a historical nature.

The Processes and Kinds of Comparative Ethnography

Having addressed the question of why anthropologists should compare, and some of the main challenges of doing so, the next question we ask is: How do we do comparative ethnography? Again, a great variety of comparative approaches in anthropology has emerged from its origins as a discipline in the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century (Candea 2019; Fox and Gingrich 2002). These different approaches were often associated with specific national anthropological communities and in the service of different theoretical projects (Gingrich 2012). These early comparative approaches in anthropology include German diffusionism, the British American cross-cultural or hologeistic method as instituted in the Human Relations Area Files, Boasian historical particularism, Kroeber's comparative studies of Californian indigenous societies, Julian Steward's studies of cultural ecology, the holistic comparisons of Ruth Benedict and Louis Dumont, the functionalist-typological method of Radcliffe-Brown, the regional comparisons of Lévi-Strauss and the Manchester School as advocated by Max Gluckman, and, finally, the controlled comparisons as advocated by Fred Eggan.

Many of these approaches to comparison aimed at providing empirical evidence to support grand explanatory narratives about universal laws of society and culture and the culture history of large regions. Such grand theoretical projects fell out of favor in the last decades of the twentieth century. But comparative projects in anthropology have continued to the present (see Fox and

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Gingrich 2002; Gingrich 2012, 2015; Lazar 2012; Schnegg 2014 for reviews). The theoretical projects of these recent comparative studies tend to be in the service of what Fred Eggan (1954) called the “middle-range theory development,” after Robert Merton (1949), meaning theoretical projects limited to understanding or explaining phenomena within more specific social and cultural domains.

Despite this great diversity of comparative traditions, methodological discussions rarely consider comparison explicitly except for those that reflect quantitative or large-*N*, variable-based social research strategies. For example, in the most recent edition of *The Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (Bernard and Gravlee 2015), Johnson and Hrushka (2015) present experimental or quasi-experimental designs as the model research strategy for answering explicitly comparative questions in cultural anthropology. In the same volume, Ember et al. (2015) present only the cross-cultural, hologeistic method as a means of addressing anthropology’s comparative agendas. Fox and Gingrich (2002) noticed this tendency in their earlier advocacy of giving greater explicit attention to the importance of what Fox and Gingrich label “subaltern” strategies, meaning those that are not the same as the mainstream hologeistic comparative approaches in anthropology but that are, nevertheless, critical for the production of anthropological knowledge. Indeed, Ragin and Amoroso’s (2019) *Constructing Social Research* is one of the few social science textbooks that include specific treatment of, on the one hand, small-*N*, qualitative comparison as a strategy that is distinct from the qualitative case study and, on the other hand, the quantitative, variable-based strategies.

The restrictive association of quantitative research strategies with comparative research agendas is a problem because it is both unreflective of the plurality of comparative approaches in the social sciences and out of step with the broader methodological literature (Fox and Gingrich 2002; Ragin and Amoroso 2019). For example, Ragin and Amoroso (2019) argue that quantitative research strategies are specific to the study of the covariation among variables in order to meet specific quantitative research goals. These goals include describing general patterns of covariation among variables, testing theoretically derived hypotheses about the covariation among variables, and making theoretically informed predictions about how variables might covary in the future given the present-day events. All of these goals assume the collection of empirical indicators for the variables from a large, probabilistically representative sample of cases (i.e. hundreds to thousands).

Of course, many questions social researchers seek to answer do involve the goal of understanding covariation. But this is not often the case among those who work comparatively with ethnographic data. Much more typically, these researchers seek to describe and understand (or explain) the

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patterns or *configurations* of similarities and differences of a common set of attributes found among a small number of carefully selected cases (Handler 2009). In other words, comparative ethnographic strategies aim to document, understand, and explain *diversity* across a sample of cases, not covariation (Ragin and Amoroso 2019). In general, Ragin and Amoroso (2019) argue that the goals of small-*N* comparative research include exploring the diversity of patterned similarities and differences among the cases, interpreting the cultural and historical significance of diverse configurations, and advancing theory. Advancing theory in comparative research includes being open to the need to revise the theoretical frames with which the project began and exploring causal complexity or the different combinations or configurations of factors that can bring about the outcome of interest to the researcher (see Ragin 2014).

The Process of Comparative Research

We find that there is a consensus – at least implicitly – on the process of conducting comparative ethnographic research (Ragin and Amoroso 2019; Gingrich 2012; Schnegg 2014). Researchers typically begin by selecting some theoretically or societally significant category of phenomena that they seek to understand by using a comparative framework and by posing research questions that suggest that a comparative approach would be appropriate. Researchers then carefully select, often using a theoretical sampling approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), a small number of comparable cases (typically between two and about twenty), ensuring that the cases belong to the same meaningful and empirically defined category (e.g. nations; communities; fields of practice; specific institutional settings such as schools, households, and hospitals; and mythological tales). Researchers then develop an analytic frame that provides the analytic categories that will be of interest in the study of each case. The researcher often also develops specific empirical criteria for the study of the cases. Both the analytic framework and empirical criteria may be developed prior to ethnographic data collection and analysis or as the study unfolds. Finally, the comparative researcher works with the empirical data, often iteratively, to identify the configurations or patterns of similarities and differences that characterize the diversity present among the cases. The researcher may also be simultaneously considering causal or explanatory accounts for the configurations so identified (Ragin and Amoroso 2019).

Social scientists who conduct comparative ethnographic projects often rely on a combination of historical documents and ethnographic texts as their empirical corpus (Gingrich 2012, 2015). There is a recognized issue of the priority of the design of ethnographic fieldwork and the comparative dimension of a research project relative to when ethnographic data are collected

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(Gingrich 2012). In a priori comparative ethnographic research, the design of ethnographic fieldwork, often multisited, and the comparative design are developed prior to the collection of ethnographic data. More typically, the comparative ethnographic design is developed after ethnographic or historical documents have been produced. These use an a posteriori approach.

An Archetype for Comparative Ethnographic Research

While the process for comparative research summarized previously does fit well into those described in the chapters of this volume, it is important to keep in mind that the great variety of comparative approaches in anthropology likely exceeds the descriptive range of the process described here. In light of this variety of approaches, Matei Candea (2019) presents what he calls an "archetype" for comparison in anthropology. By "archetype" Candea (2019, 15) means "not a blueprint or single set of methodological injunctions for how to compare. Rather it maps … the different ends to which it can be put, and the common ground of methodological techniques and fixes commonly used to purse these divergent purposes." In this archetype, Candea (2019, 15) first distinguishes two forms: "frontal comparisons," where the "ethnographic 'other' is contrasted with the presumed 'us,'" and "lateral comparisons," where cases are "laid side by side, from which the analyst is absent." Most of the chapters in this volume represent Candea's lateral forms, but Richard Handler (Chapter 2) provides a compelling example of a frontal comparison. In addition, Candea (2019, 16) describes three other contrasts: between "the elucidation of sameness and the pursuit of difference, between pinpointing things and tracing relations, and between pursuit of objectivity and reflexivity." Each of these contrasts is also part and parcel of the comparative ethnographic projects described in this book. We find that these emerge not as "either/or" propositions but more as sites of tension in the design and conduct of the contemporary comparative ethnographic studies.

A Typology of Comparative Ethnographic Research

After reviewing the variety of approaches to ethnographic comparison, Gingrich (2012, 2015) has suggested a loose typology of five approaches. These are labeled as binary, regional, distant, fluid, and temporal comparisons. We briefly describe the characteristics of each.

Binary Comparison

This type involves the comparative study of some phenomenon in two cases. Binary comparisons are primarily aimed at exploring in depth how the phenomenon is configured differently in each case. While most ethnographic

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