



On the act of comparison: an introduction

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Version: Published Version

Book Section:

Pelkmans, Mathijs ORCID: 0000-0001-5188-3470 (2022) On the act of comparison: an introduction. In: Pelkmans, Mathijs and Walker, Harry, (eds.) How People Compare. Curzon, Abingdon, UK, 1 - 21. ISBN 9781032229973

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003283669-1>

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1 On the act of comparison

An introduction

Mathijs Pelkmans

Swiping through ...

With each swipe, a new profile picture appears, showing men or women posing as the beautiful, funny, interesting, cool, or tender individuals that they surely are. Most are swiped away to the left to make room for a new profile, but when there is a spark of interest additional pictures of the same person can be perused, possibly even swiped to the right, allowing for the possibility of a future match. Much has been written about Tinder, how it epitomizes recent trends in dating or even signifies the end of romance, and about how swiping exemplifies our newly mediated existence. But Tinder is also an excellent example for thinking through the complexities of the comparative act, precisely because it encapsulates various modalities of comparing and hence offers a useful starting point for this introductory chapter.

Routinized swipers may not even be aware that they are comparing as they are swiping through a database that has placed pictures and texts in a standardized grid that makes them eminently comparable. The grid is designed so that users can form quick impressions and make fast and painless decisions. The detachment produced by the grid gives it the feel of a game, with some swipers feeling as if they are ‘looking through some kind of weird catalogue’ (Wygant 2014). Such acts of comparison are often made offhandedly and remain incomplete,¹ as the lone swiper may learn to regret after having swiped the potential love of their life accidentally to the left, now lost forever.

The detached perspective collapses when instead of swiftly swiping left, the user looks at a profile in more detail (up to six pictures and a short bio can be uploaded). This prolonged attention allows the act of comparison to partly escape the grid, and to take on different qualities. These may include the pondering of apparent similarities or differences with persons already known to the user, musings about how the pictures (and texts) would compare with their real-life versions, and how the selected individuals would compare to the self, prompting thoughts about compatibility. The comparative act is further transformed when Tinder is made part of social events. Whether as part of a comedy show² or simply in the company of friends,

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jokey comments to the effect of ‘you can do better than *him!*’ or smirks implying total and utter incompatibility demonstrate that comparison serves numerous purposes.

Starting with the example of Tinder highlights, perhaps, the darker side of comparison. The standardized grid that foregrounds appearances and the mechanics of swiping may be objectionable to those who hold that ultimately each person is unique. It also challenges romantic notions of true love, which, if it originated in Tinder and was delivered through the grid, often requires to be rapidly removed from that setting. Moreover, for those whose involvement with Tinder was unsuccessful, the mechanisms of comparison may well produce a feeling of utter rejection: ‘I have been judged by the world and found wanting’. But although Tinder may exemplify the standardizing and objectifying effects of comparative framing, it is noteworthy that users still find ways to express and detect personal particularities. Placed within such a forceful grid, the smallest details may become especially significant, and in surprising ways.

So, what can we learn from Tinder about comparison? First, that the act of comparing is associated with a range of epistemic techniques (e.g. generalizing, contrasting, juxtaposing, ranking, translating) which are variously employed, with greater and lesser intensity, by those who compare. Second, that there is a frame within and against which comparison proceeds. This prompts discussion of how the grid (such as the technical features of the Tinder app) and the applied values (such as attractiveness) shape the units of comparison and influence outcomes. Such grids and values vary in terms of rigidity, and engagement with them is not uniform. Third, there is the relational aspect of comparing, comparing as a form of association and dissociation between elements, through which positions are established and the world is ordered. This introductory chapter will discuss these key issues further to argue in favour of an anthropology of comparative practices. But before we get there, it will be useful to briefly (and incompletely) discuss debates on comparison in anthropology, even if these debates have by and large ignored the empirical study of comparative practices in the world.

The LSE Anthropology Department’s website is hardly unique in introducing the discipline with the line ‘Anthropology is the comparative study of culture and society’. In fact, together with a holistic approach and reliance on long-term intimate fieldwork, comparison is habitually depicted as one of anthropology’s three central pillars. At times, these pillars are taken for granted and risk losing their edge, while at other times, they are subject to critique and revision. Holism, long assumed to be a key strength of anthropology, came under attack in the 1990s for its association with wholes and totalization but found new strength in ideas of context, entanglement, and interdependency (Marcus and Fischer 1999; Otto and Bubandt 2011). Anthropology’s hallmark fieldwork practices, too, have come under fire recently, with critics focusing their ire on the term ‘ethnography’, while

simultaneously emphasizing the values of ‘participant observation’ or of ‘fieldwork’ (Ingold 2014; Rees 2018; Shah 2017). The recent flurry of anthropological writings on comparison fits this pattern (e.g. Iteanu and Moya 2015; Candea 2019; van der Veer 2014; Schnegg 2020), with the qualification that more so than the other pillars, comparison has seen waves of criticism and defence ever since the discipline’s origins in the late nineteenth century. The reason for this, as Webb Keane puts it in a recent book commentary, is that ‘anthropology has long been haunted by the sense that comparison is impossible yet indispensable’.³

Because of anthropology’s cross-cultural approach, comparison is an inherent part of the discipline,⁴ but it has been enlisted to serve rather different, and oftentimes contrasting, agendas. First, there is the generalizing agenda. Early anthropological debates on comparison revolved precisely around the desire to formulate generalized laws. Systematic cross-cultural comparison resonated particularly strongly with those who saw anthropology as a science rather than an art.⁵ As Radcliffe-Brown stated: ‘It is only by the use of the comparative method that we can arrive at general explanations. The alternative is to confine ourselves to particularistic explanations similar to those of the historian’ (1952: 113–114). The 1950s and 1960s saw sustained attempts to perfect the comparative method, whether it was by finding the best ways to *control* comparison (Eggan 1954) or by trying to produce the best *sample* for comparative purposes. The development of the Human Relations Area Files and the associated ‘standard cross-cultural sample’, described by its co-creator George Murdock as a ‘representative sample of the world’s known and well-described cultures, 186 in number’ (Murdock and White 1969: 329), epitomized these systematizing efforts. But it is telling that they never led to significant intellectual breakthroughs in anthropology. Apart from filling anthropology textbooks with curious correlations, the works of Murdock et al. have been more influential in cross-cultural sociology and psychology than in anthropology. No surprises here. The reifying and decontextualizing tendencies of systematic comparison make most anthropologists uncomfortable or suspicious.

Criticisms of systematic comparison have been almost as old as the discipline itself. When Franz Boas famously commented on the ‘limitations of the comparative method’ (1896), he was warning against the false certainties of similarity, which derived from the mistaken ‘assumption that the same phenomena are always due to the same causes’ (1896: 904). His warning that, to put it differently, correlation does not equal causation did not discredit the comparative approach as such, just bad applications thereof. A persistent critique has been that systematic comparison relies on objectifying the units of comparison, a process with potentially distorting, decontextualizing, de-historicizing, and essentializing effects. For example, when we compare the level of corruption across a range of countries, we end up not only objectifying and essentializing ‘corruption’ (as measurable through fixed indicators) but also affirm the reality of the units that

are compared, in this case countries. Although not always equally bluntly, these kinds of operation are logically necessary for systematic comparison. They involve decisions about the comparable (rather than unique) character of the compared phenomena and moreover risks disconnecting these phenomena from the larger context in which they are entangled, a procedure based on the assumption that there are essences that are worth comparing. Responding to such problems, Peter van der Veer advises: ‘one needs to steer clear from a universalizing approach that first defines some kind of essence, like “ritual” or “prayer” and then studies it comparatively across cultures’ (2014: 2).

Comparison has been indispensable to anthropology not just because of the scientific need for generalization but also because of anthropology’s desire to pinpoint particularities. After all, the particular is particular only in comparison to something else. This strand of comparative work emerges almost organically from the process of translation and communication that anthropology entails. Thus, Malinowski communicated the significance of objects exchanged in the *kula* by first differentiating them from money, to then point out their similarities to the British crown jewels, both of which have ceremonial functions and are displayed in properly governed contexts (1922).⁶ Strategies for such dialogical or interpretive forms of comparison were elaborated on in later decades, not least as a response to the limitations of a generalizing comparison. The Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok argued, for example, that ‘By decoupling comparison from generalization and instead placing it in the service of a better understanding of individual cultures and cultural elements, the usual objections against comparing elements from different cultures are no longer relevant’ (1976: 81). This resonates with Geertz’s technique of juxtaposing two cases of religious change in the Islamic world in order to highlight both differences and commonalities, suggesting that these ‘form a kind of commentary on one another’s character’ (1968: 4).⁷ It is not accidental that several authors favouring this approach (including Blok and Geertz) found inspiration in Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblances’. It suggests a form of comparison that is less direct, more probing and open-ended, and thereby more in tune with the complexities that we face when comparing across contexts and through complex phenomena.⁸ These suggestions seem to move away from large-scale comparison and towards mutually illuminating ‘dialogues’ across a few cases.

Which is not to say that such trends towards ‘particularizing comparison’ have been roundly accepted. Objections have been made not only by those who lament the retreat of systematic anthropological comparison (e.g. Schnegg 2014, 2020). They have also been made by those who hold that dialogue, interpretation, and commentary do not solve the deeper problem of generalization. As Candea (2019: 80–84) points out, before we even get to the point where we can compare cases, we have constructed those cases through description, a process that entails generalization based on

comparisons within the case. This does not mean that such procedures are without value, but that a dialogical/interpretive approach cannot fully overcome the liabilities of generalization, objectification, and translation that are inherent in comparison.

Attempts to address these problems have reinvigorated debates about comparison in recent years. Most of these attempts fit within what Matei Candea has usefully rubricated as a shift from typological to topological approaches (2019). That is, instead of trying to perfect anthropological comparisons through proper categorization, generalization, and contextualization, they zoom in on the relational logics and epistemic techniques of comparison. Marilyn Strathern, in a thought-provoking piece (1988), dwells on the intriguing idea that to overcome limitations we need to ‘cancel the basis of comparison’, a move designed to release the critical and destabilizing potential of comparison. Viveiros de Castro similarly challenges the stranglehold of academic comparative practices to offer instead a technique of ambiguous translation, or what he calls ‘controlled equivocation’, which resists the reductive (generalizing) effect of comparison by refusing to provide closure (2004). Bruno Latour, finally, understands comparison as a form of association that is radically contingent on the perspective from which it is applied (2015). If comparison has the tendency to stabilize, generalize, and flatten, then these efforts attempt to turn the table on comparison, meanwhile aiming to isolate the critical potential of bringing elements into some form of relationship. We could conclude from this that analytically speaking, the most productive comparisons are ‘comparisons that object’ or destabilize their own terms, while also acknowledging the governmental, managerial, and psychological benefits of conformist comparisons.

Not unlike seasoned Tinder users, I have quickly swiped through more than a century of productive discussions on anthropological comparison, paying virtually no attention to its nuances, and only picking up on a couple of snippets that stood out. But no apologies here. The recent wave of writings on anthropological comparison still needs to sediment in the discipline. And rather than making further contributions to this wave, the aim here is to bend discussions about comparison in anthropology away from our own practices, to instead illuminate and analyse how comparison manifests itself in the world.

As Candea rightly points out but never seriously addresses in his impressive anthology of comparison in anthropology, ‘however much anthropologists may be dubious about their own comparative devices, comparison is already in the world – the people anthropologists study are themselves constantly comparing’ (2019: 141). In acknowledging yet largely ignoring the question of ‘how people compare’, Candea is far from unique. While anthropologists have extensively written about their own comparative practices (not dissimilar to their colleagues in say comparative literature), they rarely have

paid more than passing attention to the way that their interlocutors compare, or to the role of comparative practices in shaping social life.

This is a shame for at least two reasons. First and foremost, the study of ‘comparative practices in the world’ is intrinsically important and interesting. As the contributions to this book testify, comparative practices are essential for people to orient themselves in and make sense of the world, while they are simultaneously affected by the comparative practices of others. Because anthropologists are people, some of the quandaries that bedevil ‘anthropological comparison’ are similarly experienced by the people whose practices they analyse: the tension between generalization and particularization, the issue of objectification and essentialization, as well as questions surrounding comparability and commensurability. But although similar, outside the academic context these issues often take on different qualities. Moreover, in anthropology’s obsession to ‘get comparison right’, insufficient attention is paid to aspects that are more easily observed and acknowledged outside the academic context. Central amongst these aspects are the affective and instrumental dimensions of comparison. Of course, many have pointed out that ‘scientific detachment’ is partly a myth, one that extends to academic comparative practices. But the features of ‘attachment’ are more easily visible when studying comparative practices in which those who compare and those who are compared are directly affected by the act, thereby also revealing different cultures of comparison. This then foreshadows the second reason, namely that the ‘study of comparative practices’ stands to shed new light on the comparative practices of anthropologists. Whether it is because fine-grained ethnographic study will reveal epistemic techniques not employed by anthropologists, or because the drives, purposes, and effects of comparison will reveal themselves differently outside the academic context, there is much to gain from broadening discussions on comparison this way.

Unstable grounds

Comparison does not happen by itself. Whatever else the act of comparison may entail, it requires someone (or something) to perceive the relative position of things. And crucially, such perception requires ‘shared ground’. To quote Thomas Kuhn, ‘Talk about differences and comparisons presupposes that some ground is shared’ (1982: 670).⁹ We can take comparing apples and oranges as an example, a comparison that in spite of the saying does not have to be problematic in the least. The *usual* precondition for comparison is that ‘things’ are compared as members (that is, as ‘units’) of a larger category, which in this instance could be ‘fruit’ or ‘food’ or a broad one like ‘objects’.¹⁰ This procedure allows apples and oranges to be positioned in relation to whatever value is deemed relevant, be it ‘vitamin C content’ or ‘shape’, or ‘price’. This could produce all kinds of comparative claims, including the relatively uncontentious ones that ‘oranges are more expensive than apples (in my local supermarket)’, that ‘oranges contain more

vitamin C than apples’, and that ‘apples and oranges have a similar shape but different texture’.

So, why the saying’s dismissive attitude towards ‘comparing apples to oranges’? One reason is that in everyday speech ‘comparing’ suggests similarity (as visible in the word ‘comparable’) and thereby may be seen to improperly distract from the fruits’ dissimilarity. But another, and related, reason is the suspicion that such a comparison indicates an absence or mix up of a larger category. Apples and oranges can be validly compared as members of a larger category to which they both belong (such as fruit), but not in absence of such a category, as this could lead to thinking of apples as odd oranges, or vice versa. Meanwhile, any larger category may be considered biased or inappropriate, seen to do injustice to (at least one of) the compared objects. What we see here, then, are some of the objections to comparison. Judgements about taste, price, acidity, shape, and so on would be nonsensical if there is no agreement about the ground on which the comparison stands. To complicate matters further, the categories are not necessarily pre-existing and stable but are (re)produced in the act of comparison. The grounds of comparison can be treacherous.

Whether or not anthropologists embrace comparative methods, on a personal level it often is the fieldwork experience that carries the comparative dimension home. In post-Soviet Georgia in the 1990s, when foreigners from capitalist countries were still a novelty and life in ‘the West’ captured people’s imagination, much of my fieldwork time went into answering my interlocutors’ comparative curiosity. Do children in the Netherlands take care of their ageing parents, as they do in Georgia? Where does fruit, and fruit liqueur, taste better? And most frequently: How does the typical monthly salary of a teacher, factory worker, or shop assistant compare?¹¹ Aside from the discomfort this occasionally produced in me – even my PhD stipend was much higher than the typical Georgian salary at the time – was this not comparing ‘apples and oranges’, of the problematic kind? Was it not deceptive to compare salaries by simply applying the currency exchange rate, given that this would not account for the difference between the currencies’ local purchase power? And how insightful was such a direct comparison, when expenditure patterns were very different, for example because teachers and shop assistants in rural Georgia were also part-time farmers? On the other hand, it would be problematic to avoid making such direct comparisons because they highlighted deep global inequalities, which should not be covered over.

At times, I responded to such questions by broadening the comparison to also bring in the cost of say accommodation and transport, and to discuss the differential role of the state, and the workings (and failures) of the welfare system. That is, I tried to attend to the ground of comparison, making it more textured, thereby allowing for a more fine-tuned and contextual understanding of similarities and differences. But although this could lead

to productive discussions, it also risked missing what these off-handed comparisons were all about. As it turned out, some of my interlocutors used the (decontextualized) contrasts to make value judgements about the political economic crisis in Georgia and the perceived failures of their government, while for others, the comparison of salaries energized aspirational projects that included plans to find work in Western Europe.

Such issues are carefully addressed in Nicholas J. Long's chapter 'In Defence of Bad Comparisons' (this volume, Chapter 2), which asks what to make of logically faulty comparisons. He presents various examples from his fieldwork in Indonesia, one of which features schoolteachers who compared the perceived slow pace of their pupils' English-language acquisition to Nicholas's faster speed in learning Baha Indonesian. Long quickly identifies the logical faults in this comparison but then draws attention to the more productive task of exploring the purposes of making these comparisons, which in this case were motivational and disciplinary ones. The ground of comparison, while problematic, was in fact carefully set up by the teachers. By putting one exemplary language learner on a pedestal, the teachers could portray their pupils' efforts to be inadequate and admonish them to work harder. Ignoring context or tilting the scales can allow the comparer to convey starker messages. But if the immediate affective force of comparison stands to benefit from decontextualization, such forms of comparison also tend to be more fragile. The Indonesian pupils may have not only been impressed in the moment but upon reflection also more likely to dismiss this ultimately unfair comparison. Along similar lines, those of my Georgian acquaintances who migrated to Europe in pursuit of better paid jobs (usually low-skilled ones), also came to realize that the salaries' bare numbers did not translate straightforwardly into better standards of living.

If the 'ground of comparison' can be treacherous in personal projects and face-to-face encounters, then this is certainly also true for larger comparative projects, such as those we find in governance and development. It is not difficult to conjure examples of grids, frameworks, and blueprints that disregard context. This is, after all, integral to the logic of 'high modernity', which operates by making society legible through standardization, abstraction, and quantification (e.g. James Scott 1998: 27–30, 219). In this volume, Gardner and Huang (Chapter 8) show how development projects often proceed from thin but confident projections that offer solutions to poverty and inequality of various kinds. And although these projections are bound to clash with reality, this does not necessarily lead to their collapse. The chapter features young rural Bangladeshi women who are enrolled in a project to provide advice and assistance to other women, and whose performance is constantly compared to 'exemplary entrepreneurs', a technique which brings together the affective qualities of 'best practices' with the regulatory push of 'benchmarking'. These modernist manipulations of reality do not, however, ensure success in the longer term. As the young women start to discover that

the odds are stacked against them, this type of ‘modernist comparison’ is bound to lose its vibrancy.

If acts of comparison can reveal cracks in the ‘shared ground’, it is because these acts impact on this very ground, potentially (re)shaping it in the process. To further reflect on this process, it is useful to stick with the world of development and Gardner and Huang’s chapter (Chapter 8). In one of its main sections, they trace what happened to the radical insights of feminist development specialists, who advanced practice-based insights as an antidote to male-biased blueprints. And yet, in the process of scaling up, these specialists produced their own templates that were increasingly detached from reality. Generalizations are rooted in comparative descriptions of particularities, used to measure and assess other particularities. Comparison here produces a ‘normal’, a benchmark that serves to structure and stabilize the work of development.

These generalizing and particularizing tendencies and tensions are central to Deborah James chapter (Chapter 6) on debt advice interactions. The advisers and their clients both attempt to understand the relevant debts in a comparative perspective, but they come to this effort from contrasting positions. The advisers bring a broad palette of tools to the meetings that allow them to slot their clients into categories, and thereby to decide on which remedies to prescribe. But as they proceed, some advisers may empathize with the unique circumstances of their clients and come to realize the inadequacies of the comparative grid. Meanwhile, the trajectory of the clients is almost diametrically opposite. In fact, one of the reasons for why they seek advice is that they are so immersed in their predicament that they have difficulties seeing patterns in the incoming and outgoing flows of money and do not recognize the forces that perpetuate their predicament. By learning about the difficulties and strategies of other debtors, they potentially come to grips with their own situation and be able to chart a way forward. To summarize the contrasting directions, if the debtors learn to decipher the ground on which they stand, the advisers come to realize how treacherous the ground of comparison really is.

It is vital to pay attention to the ‘lines of flight’ away from the comparative grid. Mitchell W. Sedgwick’s study of overseas Japanese salarymen in this volume (Chapter 7) is a case in point. These professionals, who are products of a competitive schooling system and job market, are constantly aware (and are made aware) of their relative standing vis-à-vis their colleagues. Finding themselves encased in in a forceful comparative grid that extends laterally as well as temporally – measuring career progress since graduation – these men are keenly searching ways forward. If some disengage by dropping out of the rat race, many others try to beat the grid and establish direct connections to upper management, for example, by cultivating unusual but admired fields of expertise such as knowledge of French wines. This will not allow them to fully escape the comparative grid, but by leaping ahead of their peers they demonstrate that acts of comparison are about more than mapping

exercises, they also establish connections. If in anthropology the analytically most productive comparisons are comparisons that surprise, then this is a logic that resonates beyond the discipline. Destabilizing the comparative grid, or challenging the terms of comparison, can have transformative effects for the relationships involved.

These examples demonstrate the dynamic relationship between acts of comparison and the ground on which they stand. If we agree with Kuhn's previously quoted statement that comparison 'presupposes that some ground is shared', then we have also seen that this shared ground is not necessarily a stable one. Some comparative acts may proceed without, or in opposition to, established frames of comparison, but these will only stick if they manage to touch ground. The grid, the framework, and the blueprint – including those that are newly designed – 'territorialize' and thus stabilize the relational dimension of comparison.

If we briefly return to the objections surrounding 'comparing apples to oranges', then sometimes these objections are inspired less by suspicions of a category *mistake* than by awareness of the consequences of bringing phenomena ('things') together under a common category. Creating 'shared ground' flattens particularities and foregrounds generalities. Because such an epistemic move may be seen to do injustice to the unique features of a phenomenon, the involved may insist on its incommensurability. Feuchtwang and Steinmüller (this volume, Chapter 9) offer vivid examples of such a protective stance, as they reflect on their experiences with teaching the MSc course 'China in Comparative Perspective'. It was quite common for their Chinese students to initially resist the central idea of the course. Although they were interested to discover how outsiders looked at China, these students had difficulties to think about presumed unique Chinese features in broader – comparative – terms, as this threatened to reveal these features to be not so unique after all. Nevertheless, the authors show that even where 'shared ground' is rejected, this does not mean that it is non-existent; and even where explicit acts of comparison are rejected, the rejectors rely on implicit comparisons in their thinking and talking about China. To explore the sensitivities that surround acts of comparison further, it will be useful to shift perspective, backgrounding the ground of comparison to foreground the relationships that acts of comparison bring into being.

Prickly connections

The act of comparison establishes a connection between two or more 'things'. Indeed, if we agree that the compared things do not contain comparison in themselves (Saussy 2019: 1), then the act necessarily begins by linking them. We can also postulate that in comparative acts, this force of convergence – the linking – is counteracted by a force of divergence. The converging force may well remain dominant when comparison is motivated

by a desire for likeness, but unless comparison morphs into full-blown identification or assimilation, the diverging force will continue to push outwards. The net directional force can also point outwards, such as when an incompatibility or contrast is revealed that had not been apparent before the comparative act brought it to light. We might even think of this interplay of forces as analogous to Schopenhauer's 'porcupine dilemma'. This parable imagines porcupines 'huddling together for warmth on a cold day in winter'. The porcupine's dilemma is that they will freeze if they keep their distance and will hurt themselves if they get too close (2000, chapter 31, paragraph 396). The parable has primarily been taken up in psychology to reflect on the problem of intimacy and identity (amongst others by Freud),¹² but it also usefully illustrates the sameness/difference tension in the comparative act, especially where the comparer is an interested or affected party. We are driven to comparison because we need to know where we stand, wishing to associate ourselves to others in acts of identification and aspiration, while using the act to carve out our own unique position and to distinguish ourselves.

At least two interventions are needed to move beyond porcupines. One is that whereas in the parable similar creatures with similar drives find each other on even ground, many comparative practices occur in more uneven conditions featuring dissimilar creatures with different drives and interests. The other one is that it is crucial to consider the *kinds* of relationships that are established, in different acts of comparison. This will reveal how the specific ways in which the positive potential of extension and connection is being counteracted by the negative possibilities of losing singularity and integrity. This section argues that the specifics vary depending on the used comparative techniques, but also that notwithstanding variation, the comparative act is necessarily a prickly one.

Acts of comparison are comprised of a range of variously deployed epistemic techniques, which can be provisionally placed along an objectification/subjectification axis. The objectifying techniques include juxtaposing, categorizing, ranking, and benchmarking, each of which allow the compared 'objects' to be mapped onto a canvas. Whereas these objectifying techniques create distance (between the compared elements), in subjectifying techniques of comparison such as those of recognition and translation this distance between the elements is partly collapsed. It should be emphasized, however, that the objectification/subjectification distinction is somewhat artificial, because these techniques are modified by the position of the comparer. And as we saw in the previous sections, including in the Tinder vignette, 'mapping' activities that stay within the confines of the grid can be enlisted into the 'relational' technique of translating. Here we start at the relational end of the spectrum, with the techniques of recognition, possession, and duplication, as foregrounded by Michael W. Scott in his contribution to this volume (Chapter 4).

Situated in a Melanesian context, Scott wonders how his Arosi interlocutors engage with strangers. They employ various comparative techniques but do so without invoking the familiar categories of us versus them – Arosi versus foreigners – a categorization that would allow for a ricocheting of perceived similarities and differences between the groups. Instead, they zoom in on the physical features of individual bodies (such as hand palm lines) in search of signs of recognition by which a foreigner could be proven to be a (lost) member of one of the Arosi matrilineages. This ‘totemic’ mode of comparison avoids the mapping of differences, to instead explore them relationally. By directly connecting with outsiders and absorbing them into the matrilineages, the lineages reproduce themselves while simultaneously metamorphosing. As Scott puts it, these relational comparative practices seek to sustain ‘trajectories of becoming’ by finding the ‘Goldilocks zone’ between isolation and conflation, between stasis and rupture. This careful manoeuvring acknowledges both the creative and destructive potentials of comparison. But while different from ‘modernist’ forms of mapping, these relational techniques are equally prickly. There is always a violent element to comparative practices relying on translation and possession, in that the integrity of the compared elements is at stake.

This issue of integrity, along with that of judgement, is the focus of Harry Walker’s chapter (this volume, Chapter 5) on ‘comparing for equality’, based on his research among the Urarina people of the Peruvian Amazon. There, acts of comparison that would reveal dissimilarity and inequality are generally avoided. This need of avoidance is even encoded, to an extent, in the grammar of the Urarina language, which lacks comparatives or superlatives that enable explicit ranking. So, instead of saying ‘Jose is bigger than Manuel’, one would have to say ‘Jorge is big, exceeding Manuel’ – but even such circumspect statements are rarely made. By contrast, ideas of similarity and sameness are frequently and straightforwardly expressed, thereby reflecting Urarina values of equality and of avoiding judgement, at least as these take shape in public life. Instead of applying direct and upfront techniques of comparison, Urarina make abundant use of analogy to make sense of the world and their position in it. And as Walker points out, such analogical comparisons do not need a third term, a common standard of measure, to be effective. Because they don’t require shared ground, they don’t violate the integrity of the compared elements; this also means that the comparisons remain situational and cannot be scaled up.

What we see in both the Urarina and Arosi case studies is a rejection of objectifying techniques and broader lateral categories, by which elements can be made commensurate. But the cases show variation in the subjectifying techniques on which they rely. Scott shows for the Arosi that while avoiding objectification, the invasiveness of the relational techniques of recognition and translation may end up transforming the compared elements. The Urarina, by contrast, avoided such violations of integrity by relying on ‘respectful’ techniques of association and analogy. In that sense,

they are a reminder of what Mair and Evans refer to as incommensuration – the ‘process by which things are kept within different registers of judgment’ (2015: 217).¹³ This act of resisting both assimilation and differentiation can also be seen as an acknowledgment of the epistemically violent nature of comparison.

In the Uarina and Arosi worlds, avoidance of ‘objectifying’ comparative techniques is rooted in local value systems, but this is under threat by modernist logics that increasingly assert themselves in everyday life. The affinities between objectifying comparative techniques and modern governance and market competition mean that objectifying modes of comparison become more prevalent. Such processes potentially undermine (or transform) the destinies of other modes of comparison, whether they compared for equality, as in Walker’s study, or aimed at assimilation and duplication, as in Scott’s.

Here it is useful to briefly return to the ‘porcupine dilemma’ and the parable’s convenient simplification of reality – featuring identical creatures driven by identical concerns. To understand how the comparative act unfolds in more complex situations, thought must be given to differentials in the relative weight, impetus, and positionality of the elements. This brings us to the question of how comparative acts are entangled in, and how they affect, larger social fields. We can start with Feuchtwang and Steinmüller’s discussion of their Chinese students’ reluctance to consider their country in a comparative perspective (this volume, Chapter 9). By avoiding or dismissing a lateral comparative perspective in which Chinese features would be compared to (similar) features found in other contexts, these students can maintain the idea of Chinese uniqueness. Feuchtwang and Steinmüller observe this comparative reluctance in the Chinese academic community more broadly, for example in the insistence on the untranslatability of various Chinese concepts. Such reluctance tends to parochialize scholarship, but this may not be of great concern to the academics involved given the size and rising clout of Chinese academia. A parallel can be seen in Detienne’s (2008) critical discussion of the comparative reluctance among classicists, who insist on the incomparability and incommensurability of Greek and Roman civilizations, thereby of course attempting to preserve the elevated status of their own discipline.¹⁴

Positionality matters. It is one thing to try and *preserve* a sense of exceptionality from a position of strength, and quite a different one to try and prove one’s exceptionality to the world, especially from a marginal position. In my chapter ‘Recognizing uniqueness’ (Pelkmans, this volume, Chapter 3), I explore the involved tensions by analysing the World Nomad Games, an event that the Kyrgyzstan government had launched in an effort to boost the country’s international visibility and standing. The Games were envisioned as a platform to display the country’s cultural and sport traditions, and thereby to communicate its authentic and unique features. But for the event to be

successful and to be noticed, this cultural heritage needed to be presented in recognizable forms to foreign audiences, a process of translation that threatened to undermine this very uniqueness. The porcupine dilemma was palpable here: by making the World Nomad Games commensurate with other ‘international games’, it risked losing its distinctiveness, whereas to insist on cultural uniqueness bore the risk of remaining ignored or being ridiculed.

Additional tensions come into play when organizing competitive international games. To compare the performance of participants, such games resort to or create grids that do not just flatten unique characteristics but reproduce existing inequalities. The Olympics are a case in point. As an *inter-national* competitive event, it favours the largest *national* sport communities, especially those that can make large financial commitments. Even a brief glance at the Olympics medal table confirms that the largest and richest countries win the largest number of medals. The appeal of the World Nomad Games was that it presented itself as a critical alternative to the Olympics, one that featured ‘unusual’ sports and presented itself as non-commercial, drawing on the concepts of ‘wildness’ and ‘sustainability’. But while this produced a sense of liberation among spectators and participants, it also introduced new inequalities. The blatant Kyrgyz bias in a range of competitions prompted wry remarks from foreign participants, instead of the desired mark of international recognition.

Acts of comparison do not only affect the individuals who compare or are compared but also order the wider social field. These ordering effects of comparative work are the focus of Mitchell W. Sedgwick’s chapter (Chapter 7) on overseas Japanese salarymen. As already mentioned, these salarymen are entangled in a highly competitive grid by which their performance vis-à-vis their peers is constantly measured. Simultaneously, as expatriates they are also drawn into comparing ‘Japanese’ things with what they encounter while stationed abroad. Juxtaposing these internal and external acts of comparison, Sedgwick reveals how the dynamics of association and dissociation depend on context and directionality. Simply put, when comparisons are made with other groups, this serves not only as a means of relating to and differentiating from such ‘out-groups’ but also positively affects the cohesion of the ‘in-group’. Meanwhile, acts of comparison that are internal to the ‘in-group’ serve to position its members, thereby affecting horizontal and vertical differentiation and connectedness.

When ‘things’ are compared, they are not only juxtaposed but also brought into relationships of varying intimacy. In lateral comparisons, the engagement between the compared elements tends to be rather limited. Consider performance reviews where the line manager compares the teaching scores of academic staff against specified benchmarks as well as against each other, picking up on scores that fall below the benchmark or that contrast with the

average, thereby producing rationales for granting or withholding bonuses, nominations for promotion, and so forth. But such detached comparisons always have the potential to become more intimate. This happens when the analysis becomes more fine-grained ('what does colleague A do differently from colleague B in terms of providing feedback?'), or when the comparer becomes a part of the comparison, possibly due to identifying with those who are compared.

In his article 'Odious Comparisons', George Steinmetz (2004) reviews the various distortions and violations produced by the comparative act. In the act of comparison, reality is simplified, templates are imposed, incommensurability is denied, and originals are misunderstood. Hence, it is tempting to conclude that even if comparison is indispensable, 'all comparisons are odious' (Cervantes quoted in Steinmetz 2004: 371). Here, we seem to have come full circle to the start of this Introduction where we reflected on comparison as anthropology's impossible yet indispensable method. But as was emphasized throughout, the goal of this volume is not to develop 'non-odious' forms of comparison – if that would even be possible – but rather to study how acts of comparison unfold in the world. Comparison is indispensable not just in anthropology but in all life as lived. And, we suggest, this is not *in spite of* its 'odious' qualities; comparison makes a difference *because* of its odious qualities.

The reasons for why anthropologists (and other qualitative scholars) are uncomfortable with comparison resonate with the reasons for why people generally are wary of comparison, and especially of *being* compared! After all, comparison affects the compared object. The chapters in this volume illustrate this abundantly. Thus, comparison compromises the uniqueness of China (Feuchtwang and Steinmüller) and it misrecognizes the efforts of impoverished school children in Indonesia when they are flatly compared with those of a resource-rich foreigner (Long). Yet, it may be precisely because of this distortive potential that people are driven to engage in comparison. To compare is to reach out, to produce associations between things, and in the process running into its contradictions, producing difference through dissociation. Here we can reference Michael Scott's conceptualization of comparisons as 'complex forms of network association' through which all things maintain their 'continuity through discontinuity' with other things. But as he also emphasizes, there is an 'inherently agonistic' and perhaps even predatory element to comparison, which has the potential to upset the network (Scott in this volume, Chapter 4). Perhaps, then, this is a main reason for comparison's indispensable yet odious nature. Comparative acts often bandwagon on the templates and frameworks through which they work, in the process working to dominate, streamline, and simplify reality. But the agonistic element also has the potential to upset these very templates, transforming the grid such as to sketch out new horizons.

Comparing acts of comparison?

As alluded to earlier, one reason for developing a book on *How People Compare* was that in contrast to the proliferation of works on how anthropologists (ought to) compare, anthropological studies of the comparative practices of others have been few and far between. This lack of empirical attention to comparative practices is felt more broadly across the social sciences. The most notable exception is the so-called social comparison theory tradition in (social) psychology.¹⁵ Starting from Leon Festinger's (1954) article 'A theory of social comparison processes', social psychologists working in this tradition have studied how individuals compare themselves to others in projects of (self-)evaluation and orientation. Their findings show that the practice of comparing oneself with others intensifies in conditions of uncertainty (Buunk and Mussweiler 2001). This confirms that such comparisons play a navigational role, allowing individuals to carve a space for themselves and to chart forward trajectories. They have also documented the varying effects of acts of comparison on the comparer. For 'confident' individuals, upward comparison (that is, comparison with those at a higher standing) is aspirational and energy-boosting, while downward comparison has a soothing effect on them. By contrast, for 'insecure' individuals, upward comparison is more likely to be depressing and downward comparison anxiety-inducing (e.g. Suls and Wheeler 2000; Lee 2014).

These insights resonate with several contributions to this volume, including James' analysis of how debtors use comparison to find a way out of their predicament, Gardner and Huang's point about how development agencies use 'exemplars' to incentivize entrepreneurs, and Long's reflections on how young Indonesian men and women use comparison in envisioning their futures. But there are important differences in approach. Psychology's 'social comparison theory' focuses exclusively on the perspective of the individual comparer, leaving unseen various other actors and factors that impinge on the comparative practices concerned. By contrast, the anthropologies of comparison collected here do not limit the comparative act to the mental activities of individuals, but see these as situated within broader networks. The insights they offer in this direction include the following: (a) The outcomes of acts of comparison are partly determined by comparative 'grids' or 'frameworks', but these too can be challenged; (b) Different comparative techniques differently affect the 'things' that are compared, which is also why they may be deployed or avoided; (c) Indeed, comparative techniques are never neutral; they need to be understood in relation to the values that undergird them; (d) Studying all these aspects in a range of social and cultural settings reveals the complexity of the seemingly simple act and demonstrates how central comparison is to human existence.

The consequence of our 'holistic' approach is that it reveals comparative practices to be diffused and distributed, rather than fixed and clearly

defined. The chapters do not adopt a singular definition of comparison but instead explore what it means to compare and be compared, what kinds of epistemic techniques this entails, and how these are mobilized for specific purposes. Future research will possibly allow for more solid cross-situational or even cross-cultural comparisons of comparative practices, but this has not been the primary aim of this volume (but see Walker's concluding contribution, Chapter 10). Rather, the mode of comparison we have employed ourselves is more dialogical, showing variation in comparative practices, and revealing their significance for governmental, aspirational, and ethical projects. In short, rather than producing systematic comparative claims, this volume aims to dig a bit deeper, and reach a bit further, in our understanding of what it means to compare, and to be compared.

Because this book is an edited volume, it unavoidably compares acts of comparison. After all, putting such a volume together is an (incomplete) act of comparison in that it juxtaposes the ideas and findings of a set of authors, having made them commensurate by placing them in a textual grid. To say that edited volumes follow a Tinder-like structure may be a bit of a stretch, but they undeniably draw on the same logic. As is typical of academic volumes, this one has a table of contents, an index, and short bios on the authors, who were asked to produce chapters of similar length, addressing the same topic, written in a similar style. All of this allows the reader to compare chapters and authors. Moreover, the comparative grid of this volume is entangled in the grids of academic hiring and promotion, and of measuring academic performance at subject and university level, such as through the Research Excellence Framework. Having semi-voluntarily placed ourselves within this elaborate grid, we are complicit in the objectification of our own work. And yet, it is vital to emphasize that this is not all.¹⁶ The mentioned objectifying practices undeniably affect scholars and their research, but they are not fully defined by them. As is true for all comparisons: the ground is unstable, and the connections are prickly.

The chapters in this volume show that when comparative grids become increasingly rigid, they lose their efficacy, and prompt those who are negatively affected to ignore, resist, challenge, and circumvent the comparative straightjackets, which they do with varying effects. It is also clear that 'objectifying comparisons' form only a subset of comparative techniques. They are accompanied and sometimes replaced by the 'subjectifying techniques' of recognition and translation, techniques that establish more direct and intimate connections between the compared elements. Which is not to say that such techniques are necessarily more benign or more likely to do epistemic justice to that which is compared: the violence of abstraction gives way to the violence of appropriation.

But this is too negative. It fails to do justice to the creative potential of comparison, a potential that I commented on above, and is evident in the chapters ahead. What I am hinting at can be clarified with reference

to Michael Lambek's (1991) distinction between first-, second-, and third-person comparisons, doing so rather liberally. Third-person comparisons are made from an external and privileged perspective, mapping differences and similarities between that which is compared, with objectifying effects. First-person comparison 'translates' to the self, and its self-centred dynamic is both intimate and possessive. Second-person comparison (which includes second-person plural) is the space of dialogue, of conversation, and of exploration. This more tentative space of comparing is unhelpful to those who govern (in a modernist vein), and it is unsatisfying to those who require an intimate sense of belonging. But it is clearly a part of many comparative practices that we find in the world, one that provides a creative space in which differences and similarities can be explored. Even if as mentioned, an edited volume such as this one relies on its own fair share of objectifying and subjectifying comparative techniques, it hopefully has retained sufficient second-person qualities to offer a productive exploration of comparative practices, resisting closure while stimulating creative conversation about How People Compare.

Notes

- 1 Haun Saussy (2019: 23) labels this un-reflexive comparison, as contrasted with reflective comparison in which similarities and differences are actively considered.
- 2 Several stand-up comedians have made good use of Tinder's dynamics of objectification. An example is: www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/arts/tinder-live-lane-moore-dating-app.html?searchResultPosition=6
- 3 In formulating the issue as such (on the back cover of Candea 2019), Keane may well have taken his cue from a statement attributed to Evans-Pritchard: 'There is only one method in social anthropology – the comparative method – and that's impossible' (quoted in Needham 1975: 365).
- 4 Lambek writes that 'anthropology without comparison would be the sound of one hand clapping' (1991: 43).
- 5 Anthropology's cross-cultural dimension makes the generalizing comparative effort particularly apparent, but it is also true that that all inductively produced scientific generalizations rely on comparison.
- 6 This comparison between *kula* objects and crown jewels is thought provoking because the observed similarities concern objects from very different contexts, thereby challenging assumptions of incommensurability.
- 7 And because comparison always involves translation, it helps us to penetrate the 'other', just as it helps us to produce a mirror through which we see ourselves with greater clarity, as the authors of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* famously demonstrated (Marcus and Fischer 1999).
- 8 Wittgenstein had initially followed Galton's 'composite portraits' in trying to identify what is 'typical' in a metaphorical family, but later adopted a much looser notion of family resemblances (Ginzburg 2004: 539), one that emphasized the complex crisscross of similarities between the members of a 'family' without erasing differences, and instead acknowledged the 'flexible, blurred, and open ended' relations between those members (2004: 549).

- 9 This is taken from a discussion of (in)commensurability, a topic to which we will turn later. But to offer the full quote: ‘Talk about differences and comparisons presupposes that some ground is shared, and that is what proponents of incommensurability, who often do talk of comparisons, have seemed to deny’ (Kuhn 1982: 670).
- 10 Although employing broader categories is a *common* precondition of comparison, there are ways to circumvent categorization, at least in part. These relational or topological modes of comparison will be addressed in the next section.
- 11 As Walker shows in this volume (Chapter 5), such comparative inclinations are not equally present everywhere, and asking such comparative questions may be avoided because it risks revealing one’s ignorance of how and why things may be done differently elsewhere.
- 12 When Freud picks up this the parable (1975[1921]), he discusses it in relation to ‘narcissism’, offering various examples the clearest one of which is: ‘Of two neighbouring towns each is the other’s most jealous rival’. In later work, he refers to this idea as the ‘narcissism of minor differences’.
- 13 As Mair and Evans go on to write, ‘It is not that incommensurables are not translated ... it is that they are left untranslatable’ (2015: 218).
- 14 The position of comparer and ‘compared object’ influences the affective value produced by the act of comparison. It explains, for example, why classicists hold on to the incomparability of Greek civilization (Detienne 2008), and why German right-wing groups insist on viewing the Holocaust as comparable to other conflicts (Saussy 2019).
- 15 Another and recent exception is Willibald Steinmetz’s edited volume *The Force of Comparison* (2019). He similarly argues, for the discipline of history, that comparative practices in the world have rarely received explicit attention.
- 16 Objectification, inescapable in our modern world, is not necessarily problematic. As Hastrup has usefully written, all (academic) writing involves ‘a temporary objectification of relational knowledge, from which others may then proceed’ (2004: 458). Problems arise when temporary objectifications become permanent and fixed.

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