Introducing crises

Many disciplines that draw on a variant of the comparative method as an important means of gathering and interpreting empirical data perceive themselves to be in crisis, e.g. social anthropology, sociology, and political science. This applies particularly to those research endeavours which for a number of reasons are not able to isolate or even distinguish their objects of investigation from what is often referred to as context. Those disciplines able to operate with clearly defined, relatively context-free representations of reality, primarily the natural sciences and parts of psychology, employ the comparative method without much ado. Note though, that the ease with which Carus in 1866 was able to brush away all worries about context to arrive at his infamous statement ‘From comparative anatomy to comparative psychology is only one step!’ (Carus 1866: III) does not reflect anymore current natural sciences’ appreciation of context as complexity, which has begun to occupy emerging disciplines such as systems biology (Bruggeman et al 2002).

Some have argued that comparison in many areas of social research has been a “casualty of the critique of ‘grand theory’ and of a growing mistrust of objectivist, hard-science methodology in the social sciences” (Fox & Gingrich 2002). Others have suggested that the perceived crisis may have less to do with method but with the lack of theoretical development, that it is the questions which are missing not the means to answer them (Kuper 2002). Yet another perspective argues that it is in fact disagreement about posi-
tions or substantial assertions which has become confused with or projected upon arguments about method (Barth 1999).

Like no other discipline, anthropology has been plunged into self-doubt if not paralysis by this critique – and with it the willingness to employ comparison. This paper argues for a pragmatic strengthening of theory-driven empirical work, which should employ the comparative method as a central stay. In order to take up this (new) role, comparison must be reconceived with a different emphasis: rather than utilising the difference between Self and Other in order to better understand world-making in Self or Other, an explicit theoretical interest should instigate a process of co-construction, engendering meaning as resonance between research and reality.

The following sections discuss, first, comparison as a formal process, second, the reasons for the current crisis, third, a possible reconceptualisation of comparison and, fourth, implications for method.

**Basics of comparison**

Philosophers of science define comparison as “that process of generating knowledge, which relates entities to each other on the basis of quality, quantity or relation […]. The basic structure of a comparison is the two-digit relation.” (Schenk 1990) Constitutive of a comparison are at least “two objects of comparison and [the] tertium comparationis or criterion of comparison, which itself can be a physical or logical quality forming the basis for the comparison.” (Schenk 1990)

Particular properties of objects perform against a criterion and vice versa. The differences in performance reveal something about the objects and the criterion respectively. This performance of criterion and objects of investigation, intimate resonance in constant flux, neither solely quality of the object nor part of the research process, lies at the heart of the comparative method.

Some have suggested that some sort of similarity between the objects of comparison forms a prerequisite for comparison (Schmitt 2001). Others argue more convincingly that the particularities of the comparative constellation depend on what one tries to find out. Depending on the criterion, comparing two entirely different objects may be of great in-
terest. Equally, selecting a criterion that resonates with particular properties of only one object and not the other (or neither) may still generate useful findings.

Failure to construct a valid comparison commonly results from a lack of clearly defined objects and criteria respectively. It is the fuzziness of broad categories such as ‘culture’ that often lead into difficult terrain, within which objects and criterion become diffuse. This does not preclude the generation of knowledge. Yet neither does it constitute comparison. Rather it qualifies as analogy, metaphor or contrast, which are not discussed in this context. As a process of generating knowledge, comparison cannot be evaluated on a binary scale: works or does not work. A valid comparison always produces findings. Depending on the constellation, however, the method produces findings that are more or less useful for further analysis, interpretation and theory building or testing.

In its simplest form, comparing relates two independent, material objects to each other via a tertium comparationis that resonates with specific properties of both objects. For
example, one may compare the paintings in Figure 1 using ‘colour’ as the criterion. Leaving semiotics and cognitive psychology aside, little disagreement will arise that this operation reveals something about the objects, e.g. that they use more/less/different colours, and the criterion, e.g. that colour comprises at least those colours present in the paintings. The fact that ‘colour’ as a clearly defined criterion applies unambiguously to a material property of both paintings, in themselves bounded, makes this a relatively simple operation.

Another scenario, such as comparing the paintings to Stravinsky’s ballet music for the stage set of which they were originally painted, creates the difficulty, that criteria do not exist which could be meaningfully applied to both works at the immediate object level (of materiality). One option here might be to consider a historical dimension and select ‘time of completion’ as a criterion. This does not change the comparative constellation, yet it extends the analysis of the objects beyond their immediate presence to include their presence in time.

Another option may employ ‘function’ as a criterion. Function, however, is bestowed upon an object, person or institution (Thiel 2004), which implies the presence of some
kind of system or process within which an object may perform a certain function. The comparative constellation of object A/B and criterion, again, does not change. Yet the analysis has to consider the objects in context in order to ascertain their function. This context needs to be specified as part of the criterion definition. Hence, in the case of the paintings and the ballet music, ‘function’ alone creates ambiguity as the context remains diffuse: the paintings’ function, for example, in 1920 at the Ballets Russes was very different from the one in 2005 in the Musée Picasso. Specifying a function in its precise context, however, can rapidly lead to a large number of further specifications and an infinite regress. For instance, the comparison ‘paintings and music in their function as stimuli of an aesthetic experience in 2005’, will undoubtedly raise more questions about whose experience under what circumstances etc.

Hence moving objects and criteria out of the safe haven of immediate materiality soon raises the issue of drawing meaningful boundaries. Meaningful, however, seems less amenable to investigation by preformed concepts such as criteria of comparison. Geertz and others have referred to this turning point as the difference between experimental and interpreting science. Interpreting science contests that the use of rigorous categories fosters our understanding of social life. “If one is interested in symmetrical elements of meaning, that are not connected anymore to the complexity of the matter from which they stem, and then goes on to relate their existence to autogenic ordering principles, universal qualities of the human mind, or vague, \textit{a priori} world views, one creates a mirage of a science, that does not exist, and develops a reality, that is not present.” (Geertz 1983: 29)

Formal comparison demands that the researcher be in a position to define objects and criteria in a meaningful way prior to engaging in the comparison. The interpretative stance challenges this position and argues for a more equal distribution of definitional power. Does this make comparison impossible and, if not, what may a comparison look like that devolves power to its objects?

\textbf{Comparison in time}

\textit{Early days}

Evans-Pritchard is today remembered arguing that “there is only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method – and that is impossible” (Evans-Pritchard recalled in Needham 1973). This statement, certainly to be taken with a pinch of salt at the time, has today acquired a new seriousness. If, as Law and Mol suggest, “[t]hings add up
and they don’t. They flow in linear time and they don’t. They exist within a single space and escape from it.” (Law & Mol 2002), it is easy to appreciate why widespread confusion if not paralysis has taken hold. How could it come to that?

From an outside, non-native perspective, the comparative method in anthropology, and with it the entire discipline, seems to have undergone three distinct phases, the last of which has formed a delta of paralysis in the social research of the present. Rather than considering these phase transitions in isolation as if they depended on internal forces only, the following sections briefly sketch a development in the context of broader lines of social research and its methods.

The time when the godfathers of anthropology roamed the planet, was a time when Western Societies saw a growing interest in systematically collecting and analysing data on the human condition. Weber, Durkheim and Freud, for instance, grappled with the organisation of the individual, social interaction and society using empirical data. Aided by the taming of chance (Hacking 1990), a different view about social life emerged from theoretical work built on large data sets rather than reflection of impressions or anecdotal evidence (e.g., Berg & Harterink 2004).

The early modern anthropologists, i.e. those without a primary interest in exhibiting in Europe all things foreign, were out and about in the lesser known world living, listening and writing. Their findings were necessarily interpreted in front of a backdrop of their home context. In fact, in most but the exceptional cases, the home context functioned as a matrix with which to bring order to what they saw – an approach perhaps more akin to analogous reasoning or contrasting than comparison. Social and psychodynamic theories on European societies had advanced to some level of breadth and depth and did not resonate all that well with the reports of anthropologists. The search for law-like patterns on the one hand and on the other hand the detailed descriptions of foreign cultures did not inform each other to a great degree.

The great contribution of early anthropology was hence not related to its methodological, comparative finesse. It attracted attention not because it compared but primarily because the object of comparison, the Other, was exotic, bizarre and strange – an interesting object in itself, never mind the comparison (Peacock 2002). With describing the exotic, anthropology had its work cut out and succeeded in developing a body of formal theory at a
certain level of abstraction. Kinship, ritual, exchange etc. began to fill a new theoretical space.

**Structure & function**

A second phase started some time after/around World War II, coincided with the rise of structuralism/functionalism and drew on the preceding theory-building work as a repertoire to be operationalised and scaled-up. Sociology’s structuralism, functionalism and the mixed breeds in between aimed to extract parameters out of empirical data about social life, which possessed a certain generality and validity making them suitable for modelling. In anthropology, this development reached its pinnacle with the use of human relation area files (HRAF). In an attempt to understand the set-ups and workings of different societies as well as the laws that were thought to govern life in large groups, enormous international, standardised data sets were amassed and statistically treated.

In such a controlled environment, comparison of course was straightforward. Variables were standardised, context under control, which meant that ‘meaning’ only varied along preformed spectra, a ‘more or less’ along a given axis. Comparing became merely a matter of statistical technique. Once the data set was assembled, i.e. once the complexity of social life had been arrested onto a spreadsheet, multiple regression et al. could be used to search for significant patterns. The interest lay in answering questions about global patterns of relationships, such as between income and certain kinship systems etc. At a certain level, the data sets performed well and the international comparisons provided a new picture of difference (e.g., Lagace 1977).

This rather coarse approach was never going to survive the late 1960s and early 1970s unscathed. Critique grew louder mainly on three levels:

1. **Empirical**: The law-like patterns that were used to explain societal structures and functions had difficulties incorporating detailed empirical data at the micro level, i.e. comparison only worked because it cut out the detail, which now was beginning to become of interest to people.

2. **Statistical**: The degree of variance that could be explained with the models that resulted from statistical analyses was less than convincing. Apart from issues of data quality and analysis, the remaining variance loomed large and demanded a different kind of methodology.

3. **Ideological**: The rather centralistic, somewhat neo-imperialist reign of the statisticians did not gel with the emerging liberal spirit of the time. Resistance to out-of-
date structures of power and an empowerment of the people had set in in the West and swept away the old approaches with a new constructivist, bottom-up thinking.

**Farewell to scientific method**

From the seventies onwards, grand theory about social life and the human condition was largely wiped out as reductionist and subcomplex. How could a general pattern ever be meaningful when each individual and social life as a whole was so intricately complex? Post-structuralist thinking primarily of a French façon led the way to a new kind of critical thinking based on bottom-up analyses of microstructures. Researchers were enabled to deconstruct the grand themes of power and domination and relocate them in(to) the microstructures of human (inter)action. An understandable development as it was to focus on the details after decades of macro-analysis, for the comparative method post-structuralist and constructivist thinking meant the beginning of difficult times.

Anthropology has since struggled intensely to find new certainty between reduction and complexity. These efforts are flanked by two extremes. On the one hand operate those that continue to use container culture models and rather simplistic versions of diffusion etc. On the other side stand those that reject the possibility of any meaningful comparison. Social anthropology, so the protagonists of the latter approach, should rid itself of the remnants of scientific method that have always fostered reductionism and a lack of appreciation of the complexity of ‘culture’. ‘Writing culture’ as a style of working (or an ideology?) has supposedly freed itself from unnecessarily restricting forces. The comparative method in this context means a corset that does not allow the researchers to be true to the people and contexts they write about. The *tertium comparationis* itself as an imposed category of analysis already limits the possibility of letting true context express itself. Hence comparison in its formal sense does not help to bring out meaning. This critique has led to many experimental ethnographies that are interested in particularities following the pattern “This is how I, as an X, from background Y, came to see and understand Z” (Peacock 2002: 48).

In between the two extremes struggle those that try to find some kind of comfort and certainty in the middle ground. Many of these have argued that anthropology is now in the business of understanding processes of generating meaning. Hovering in between two different contexts may allow the anthropologist to compare perspectives to say something about the generation of meaning in either or both of them. Melhuus even
goes a step further to suggest that anthropologist do not operate on the level of meaning anymore but instead compare contexts – though it remains unclear whether a relevant difference exists between the two (Melhuus 2002).

**Co-construction and resonance**

Most recent compendia on comparison, in social anthropology, comparative sociology or political science (Bowen & Petersen 1999, Crow 1997, Gingrich & Fox 2002), that attempt to develop a coherent position on comparison struggle before they get to specifically comparative problems. Rather, it is the getting to grips with context or meaning which causes the problems.

*In reality*, meaning, similarly to function, arises in dynamic, networked practice. It is conditional upon subjectivity and forms of interaction. Meaning is rarely a stable entity and neither are the processes by which it is generated. Analogous to Ingold’s conception of the ‘person’ (Ingold 1990), one might think of meaning as temporarily stable nodes of higher density within a multidimensional space of practice or a matrix. Processes of generation perform like vectors creating, altering, shifting and dissolving nodes. The fluctuating matrix looks different from different perspectives and at different times. “It remains up to the reader to pick his or her way through the differing positions and contexts of the speakers. Mere points of view [...], these contexts have ceased in themselves to provide the organizing frameworks for the ethnographic narrative. “ (Strathern 1987: 265) It is this contingency of meaning that fundamentally changes the nature of comparative work. The ‘natural setting’ that might once have formed a valid basis for investigation and comparison has ceased to exist.

Reality as a dynamic matrix of practice has a life of its own and (re-)assembles itself in response to a research process. Some areas of social practice will appear coherent and stable over time and may be referred to as epistemic cultures (Knorr-Cetina 1999). Others will be fluid and contradictory and disappear when confronted with research practice. Research as practice is to be understood in the broadest possible sense including all aspects of subjectivity, knowledge and (inter)action.

The anthropologist encourages reality to talk back in order to elicit meaning. The process of mutual engagement between research and reality may be understood as co-constructing resonance. Meaning takes shape in resonance. Meaning as resonance remains dynamic, conditional upon the research process and contingent. Understanding
social life, therefore, has less to do with finding out about something but engaging in a process that brings reality in a position to resonate with research practice, including first and foremost the researchers themselves, their thinking and experience.

Comparing means giving reality more than one chance to resonate.

**Power and fairness**

The brief sketch of the development of social anthropology has illustrated that research has commented on meaning in very different ways over the last century. This raises the question of evaluation: How can we differentiate between good and bad accounts of meaning? I will not attempt to apply science studies reflexively and examine the conditions for the development of theory and factoids in social anthropology – though this would certainly be an interesting undertaking. Instead, a more pragmatic approach will have to suffice.

Meaning as resonance emphasises the importance of co-construction – a form of partnership between research and reality. Partnerships have fundamentally to do with power. In essence, they demand a sense of shared ownership. A fair distribution of power between research and reality, therefore, marks a central evaluation criterion for the quality of research. In pragmatic methodological terms, fairness translates into two key concepts: humility and transparency.

Any empirical research needs to balance power, i.e. balance an honesty and responsibility towards a relevant body of theory with respect or humility for reality, particularly the people who aid the co-construction. HRAF as well as writing culture both fail to achieve this balance; the former with a tendency to dominate the partnership, the latter with a tendency to be dominated.

The notion of resonance is pragmatic, emphasises the partnership and encourages research to start with a theoretical concern and to bring this into resonance with different constellations of reality. In formal comparison language: the act of comparing is not instigated anymore by an interest in a particular Other. Rather, it has shifted toward the *tertium comparationis*, which, in science, ought to be a theoretical concern. Co-constructing resonance between this theoretical concern and reality establishes objects of comparison. Akin to grounded theory’s notion of theoretical sampling, the process of co-constructing objects of comparison is driven by theoretical concerns as well as reality.
(Corbin & Strauss 1990, Strauss & Corbin 1990). Maximising or minimising difference, snow-balling and other strategies seem appropriate.

It is important to note at this point that humility does not exclude or favour particular methods. The researcher needs to choose methods that engage reality in a way relevant to theory and fair towards the people involved. This could be a structural equation model as much as it could be participant observation.

Fairness toward the people involved also demands transparency. It is not enough to develop an empirically and conceptually dense contribution to theory. Equally important is the ability to demonstrate the process which has led to that contribution. It allows partners in research to check their contribution and reveals the balance of power in the research process, i.e. enables evaluation. Particularly qualitative approaches struggle with this demand.

**Conclusions**

In principle, comparing is a straightforward process as the formal analysis has shown. The difficulty for microsocial research arises not from the requirements of comparison but from the conditionality and contingency of its objects. This paper has argued to take this contingency seriously and conceive of research as a process of co-construction with the aim to establish resonance between oneself and reality. This framing makes explicit the issue of power and fairness in the research process and deduces from that humility and transparency as two guiding principles of empirical work. It might only be a shift in rhetoric in the end, but it aims to change the emphasis from comparing contexts to developing theory by co-constructing contexts.
Bibliography


