Beyond the Case

THE LOGICS AND PRACTICES OF COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

Edited by

COREY M. ABRAMSON and NEIL GONG

Beyond the Case

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Beyond the Case

Introduction

The Promise, Pitfalls, and Practicalities of Comparative Ethnography

Corey M. Abramson and Neil Gong

> Thinking without comparison is unthinkable. And in the absence of comparison, so is all scientific thought.
>
> —Guy Swanson

> There is only one method . . . the comparative method. And that is impossible.
>
> —E. E. Pritchard

The social sciences have seen an increase in comparative and multi-sited ethnographic projects over the last three decades. This growth calls for a careful consideration of methodological practices. Field research methods have traditionally been associated with small-scale, in-depth, and singular case studies, yet contemporary approaches are often much broader. Further, comparative ethnography encompasses very different methodological traditions with divergent approaches toward comparative social science. Practitioners have reflected on *multi-sited* approaches within particular traditions,[1] yet the act of *comparison*, and the practical and analytical moves that this entails, requires elaboration and reflection. At present researchers seeking to design comparative field projects have studies to emulate, but few scholarly works detailing how comparison is actually conducted in different ethnographic traditions. Just as comparative historical researchers advanced their methodological toolkit with reflections on why and how to compare, ethnographers

[1] For examples see Falzon 2016 and Burawoy 2007.

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can benefit from examining our varied approaches to comparison and their analytic consequences.

Beyond the Case addresses these issues by showing how practitioners employ comparison in a variety of ethnographic traditions such as phenomenology, grounded theory, behavioralism, and interpretivism. It aims to connect the long history of comparative (and anti-comparative) ethnographic approaches to their contemporary uses. Each chapter allows influential scholars from their respective traditions to: (1) unpack the methodological logics that shape how they use comparison, (2) connect these precepts to the concrete techniques they employ in their work, and (3) articulate the utility of their approach. By honing in on how ethnographers render sites, groups, or cases analytically commensurable and comparable, these contributions offer a new lens for examining the assumptions, payoffs, and potential drawbacks of different approaches so that readers can critically evaluate their intellectual merits. For those new to comparative ethnography, this will aid in selecting and applying an approach that maps on to their research goals. For those already committed to an existing approach or tradition, engagement with alternatives may provide insights into the strengths, weaknesses, and potential avenues for improving their own work.

The remainder of this introductory chapter provides important background information about the methodological and practical challenges that comparative ethnographers face. We begin by considering discussions of both the utility and difficulty of comparative field research. We then consider how ethnography's unusually diverse set of traditions provides both unique challenges and possibilities for comparative social science. Next, we turn to the ways in which this diversity translates into divergent approaches to comparison. This is followed with an overview of the structure of the volume explaining how the chapters that follow advance comparative ethnographic methods. We conclude with a discussion of why acknowledging, maintaining, and utilizing ethnographic pluralism, rather than pushing for a single catch-all approach, can benefit both individual scholars and the field of ethnographic methodology.

The Promise of Comparison in Ethnography

Ethnographers have long reflected on the simultaneous appeal and difficulty of engaging in comparison in field research. The promise of comparative

ethnography is that it provides analytical possibilities that are challenging or impossible in traditional single-case studies—for instance, enrichening interpretation through contrast, aiding in causal inference, showing how different contexts shape ostensibly similar phenomena, or revealing similarities across seemingly different objects. Yet such comparison is also fraught with methodological questions. Are the sites, cases, or people under study truly comparable? Does such an approach require the reduction of fine-grained detail and narrative to render objects similar enough for side-by-side examination? If so, is such a reduction useful or does it compromise the purpose of in-depth fieldwork? As this volume will demonstrate, positions on these questions vary substantially among contemporary ethnographers. The following discussion of ongoing debates about the value and pitfalls of ethnographic comparison provides useful context.

In previous eras, scholars have argued that the comparison of ethnographic materials is either indispensable or infeasible. Sometimes, they argued both at the same time. The social anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard reportedly quipped, "There is only one method . . . the comparative method. And that is impossible."[2] In his influential vision of a comparative anthropology that encompassed the globe, a fieldworker "compares the structures his analysis has revealed in a wide-range of societies" (1950, 122). This was the logic driving the development of massive comparative archives like the Human Relation Area Files (HRAF) that aimed to document cultural practices around the world and facilitate a general science of human culture. Yet Evans-Pritchard saw immense analytical difficulty in reducing cases for comparative analysis. Regarding his own studies of the Nilotic peoples of South Sudan, he wrote, "I have found that even they are too heterogeneous a group for intensive comparison, with regard to environment, culture, and history" (1965, 20). If mid-century anthropologists were frustrated by the ethnological comparison of whole peoples, some later anthropologists after the post-structural turn rejected it outright—deconstructing "societies" as distinct units, critiquing the normative evaluations associated with comparing "primitive" to "modern" cultures, and seeing radical incommensurability between contexts (Jensen et al. 2011).

Contemporary sociological ethnographers, on the other hand, have been more apt to design comparative studies. This may derive from the strong

[2] As with many such aphorisms, it is unclear whether Evans Pritchard actually said this. It never appeared in his published writings, but was relayed by colleagues (see Needham 1975).

position of comparative approaches in the discipline found in both survey research and historical analyses. Furthermore, rather than comparing at the level of "peoples," sociological fieldworkers have typically sought to compare and contrast more delimited objects of study. For instance, sociologists have engaged in comparisons of how parents from different class backgrounds engage in childrearing (Lareau 2011), how gangs in different parts of the United States operate (Sánchez-Jankowski 1991), how factories owned by the same company yet sitting on different sides of a national border treat workers (Lee 1995), how scientists reason in physics versus biology labs (Knorr-Cetina 1999), and how organizations fail in settings ranging from romance to space shuttle launches (Vaughan 2014).

Yet some sociologists have questioned even this more tempered comparative approach. Consider the recent methodological debate between, and divergent positions of, two prominent sociologists: Michael Burawoy and Matt Desmond. In his 2014 call for a "relational ethnography," Desmond identifies the comparative work of Michael Burawoy and his students, who often compare organizations in different macro contexts, as an especially problematic approach to be avoided. In selecting objects to compare based on prior theoretical assumptions, Desmond contends, these researchers reify places, assume the existence of groups, and impose other pre-existing theoretical categories in ways that do not map on to the flow of everyday life. Desmond sees these analytic impositions as a failure to break with harmful preconceptions and suggests instead following flows and associations in a multi-sited rather than comparative frame (e.g., Marcus 1995; Tsing 2011).

In his rebuttal, Burawoy (2017) responds that it is Desmond who fails to move beyond everyday categories to substantive sociological analysis precisely because he does not frame his objects as theoretical cases to be compared. Burawoy contends that Desmond's ostensibly relational research on home eviction, with its focus on transactions between landlords, tenants, and street-level bureaucrats, misses the crucial "structural relations" with larger markets and the state because Desmond does not situate the eviction process of a single city in a comparative frame that allows for broader statements. According to Burawoy, the lack of comparative thinking further prevents Desmond from offering a causal account of the patterns of variation seen in his data, and his lack of theoretical engagement (with Marxism in particular) means his take on "exploitation" leads only to bland and insufficiently "structural" policy proposals. Burawoy ultimately suggests that Desmond is

engaged in a rehashing of empiricist micro-interaction that never moves beyond the accounts of his research subjects.[3]

In the terms set by these authors, it becomes apparent that case comparison remains both highly consequential and contested. It can either trap ethnographers by reifying inappropriate objects with preconceived notions (Desmond's concern), or it is precisely the process that allows ethnographers to break with common sense, generate knowledge, and unmask the operation of social processes (Burawoy's position). Yet this debate, and the long and fraught history of comparing peoples in sociology and anthropology, can present an opportunity instead of an impasse. Rather than embrace a singular mode of comparison or anti-comparison a priori, this volume examines how ethnographers from a variety of perspectives have grappled with such issues and complicated the division. A useful parallel can be drawn with comparative historical researchers, who found themselves at a similar crossroads in the mid-twentieth century. Positioned between quantitative researchers who questioned the scientific value of "small-n" studies and interpretivists who rejected the ability to compare radically unique historical events (see Steinmetz 2004), they used the opportunity to reflect on why and how they engaged in comparison, and their position vis-à-vis the sciences and humanities.

It was a moment of both intellectual advancement and consolidation, with some scholars worried that a singular comparative method would edge out a pluralistic variety of comparative strategies. For our purposes, the development of historical sociology offers a complementary case pointing to the need for rigorous self-reflection and the possibility of pluralism. Box I.1 provides background for readers interested in the ways these issues have manifested in comparative historical debates, and how engaging with them has strengthened the field.

Box I.1 Lessons from Comparative Historical Sociology

Reacting to seemingly ahistorical social theory that perceived societies as relatively static wholes, mid-twentieth-century historical sociologists aimed to show how social systems developed over time. Most prominently

[3] Burawoy (2019) also revisits this position on the dangers of empiricism in his response to Lubet's critique of ethnography (Lubet 2017).

in the United States were thinkers like Barrington Moore and his students Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol, in what has been called the "second wave" after the classical thinkers like Marx, Weber, Durkheim, de Tocqueville, and Dubois. It was an enormously productive moment, with such classics as Moore's (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* reviving interest in, to paraphrase Tilly (1989), huge comparisons and the "big" questions. It was also marked by tension between these approaches and more quantitative models of sociology.

Beginning in the early 1980s, a group of historical sociologists and political scientists attempted to scientifically ground and justify their practice relative to hostile critics. One tactic was to view rigorous *case comparison* as the key distinction from purely narrative history and the humanities, as it might allow for theoretical generalization of explicitly causal processes. Widely cited pieces like Skocpol and Somers (1980) typologized varieties of historical comparison, and a series of edited volumes linked these new works to the foundational ambitions of classical social theorists. Consider Skocpol's identification of three main types of comparative historical work (1984). First, sociologists may attempt to apply an ostensibly universal theory to multiple cases to show how it does and does not fit. A second strategy, used by "interpretivists" in historical work as well as field research, is to use comparisons to clarify particularities through contrasts. For instance, Geertz compares Islam in Indonesia and Morocco, the poles of the Muslim worlds, so "they form a kind of commentary on one another's character." Finally, a third strategy is to explain variation in causal regularities in history, such as Skocpol's own work on revolutions in France, Russia, and China.[4]

The productivity of this moment was matched by criticism from multiple directions, and new debates. Quantitative researchers (e.g., Lieberson 1991) in turn criticized the "small-n" research as unscientific. This prompted further responses, including the notion that qualitative comparative research that drew on variable logics might attain scientific status in relation to idiographic or descriptive history (e.g., King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Brady and Collier 2004), as well as elaborations of case-based approaches (Ragin 2004). Prominent comparativists worked to create a new subfield—drawing sociology and political science together with

[4] Of course, each position has spawned a dialog that includes critiques, responses, and counter-responses that have implications for methodological comparison more broadly (cf. Burawoy 1989; Gorski 2004).

historians, and creating conferences, awards, and other institutional infrastructure. Mahoney and Rueschemeyer's (2003) celebrated volume helped brand a "comparative historical research" that was interdisciplinary, institutionally viable, and scientifically respectable. Noticeably, the interdisciplinarity extended to political science and history, but generally rejected postmodern and literary approaches. That is, in the formation of what would be scientifically respectable, there were clear forms of boundary work to exclude specific "cultural" approaches.

What should ethnographers interested in the potential of comparative research learn from the evolution of comparative historical methods as they grapple with these challenges to their works' scientific status? On the one hand, there were significant developments in knowledge and method. The period saw extended debates on whether and how to compare units, the utility of variable logics versus case logics, and where the comparative historical fit in with humanistic or social scientific strains of social analysis. Mahoney and Rueschemeyer's volume further clarified different logics of comparison, and how these did and did not align with quantitative research. Some of these distinctions—causal versus interpretive, hypothesis testing versus narrative—may seem overly simplistic now. Yet for a generation of researchers, both the substantive works and methodological reflections offered models for how to produce rigorous, creative scholarship.

On the other hand, there was reason for caution. Even in the immediate years after Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, scholars cautioned that these battles over legitimation had drawbacks. As Rogers Brubaker argued in 2003, one could read the emergence of comparative historical research as a useful and even necessary act that was, by then, already stifling creativity. He wrote,

> At a particular moment—what one might call the Skocpolian moment—it was useful to represent comparative historical sociology as a distinctive enterprise, founded on a distinct method. In retrospect, this can be seen as a strategy of academic legitimation and institution building . . . One token of its success, however—about which one can be ambivalent—is that today we see a routinization of comparative work, sometimes involving a rather mechanical and intellectually dubious application of a Millian "method of difference," or some other method. (Brubaker 2003, 4)

Titling his essay "Beyond Comparativism," Brubaker was troubled that creative modes of comparison were being superseded by the institutionalization of dogmatic methods toward "truth." The point was not that institution-building is somehow illegitimate or that methodological papers positioning a distinct comparative method were purely acts of scientific "boundary work," but rather that the mechanical application of methods without reflection could produce mechanical and unreflexive scholarship. Still, the growth of comparative historical research as a sociological subfield and area of interdisciplinary inquiry stimulated important reflection on how to produce good comparative research as well as the limits of comparison. That is what we hope to offer in this volume.

This volume takes cues from the lessons of historical scholarships' examinations of comparative methods to chart different approaches to ethnographic comparison and what each might yield. Doing so, however, requires that we first outline the diverse set of approaches subsumed under the label of "ethnography."

The Meanings of Ethnography and Ethnographic Comparison

Any discussion of ethnographic comparison must begin with a simple but important acknowledgment: ethnography is not a single method. For the last five decades the term has been used by scholars in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology to refer to vastly different approaches for understanding the social world—from the direct extension of conventional scientific concerns with producing valid behavioral data, on the one hand (Cicourel 1982; Sánchez-Jankowski 2002), to philosophical reflection and skepticism of the very possibility of empirical social science, on the other (Clifford and Marcus 1986).[5] Consequently, ethnographic approaches lack a unified model of inquiry, let alone comparison. In an influential article from 1999 titled "Participant Observation in the Era of Ethnography,"

[5] The use of the term "ethnography," and the deployment of ethnographic methods, goes back much further (cf. Atkinson et al. 2001). Our point here is simply to acknowledge that in the period between World War II and the present, the term has been used to refer to drastically different traditions that frequently coexist in both time and professional space (Abramson and Dohan 2015; Atkinson 2001; Jerolmack and Kahn 2017).

Columbia sociologist Herbert Gans noted that ethnography had become divorced from its anthropological and sociological roots in participant observation. He quipped that in contrast to participant observation, "empirical ethnography is now a synonym for virtually all qualitative research except surveys and polls" (Gans 1999, 541).[6] What Gans's commentary minimizes, however, is that even social scientific approaches that employ participant observation fieldwork vary widely. If we hope to facilitate understanding different approaches to ethnographic comparison, and learn from both their contributions and mistakes, we must begin by acknowledging substantial contrasts in underlying assumptions about the social world and how to study it.

Divergent Logics and Languages

In the two decades since Gans's "Participant Observation in the Era of Ethnography" was published, the bounds of both participant observation and ethnography have continued to expand. In sociology, there is renewed attention to the potential of multi-researcher collaborations and scaled observational projects for both science and policy (Abramson et al. 2018; Bernstein and Dohan, this volume). The quantitative–qualitative fissures that led to assiduous battles in mid-twentieth-century social science have been eclipsed by a recognition that different methodological approaches can contribute to understanding the social world (cf. Brady and Collier 2004; Lamont and White 2008; Porpora 2015; Ragin 1994; Small 2009). Mixed-methods approaches that explicitly integrate and compare aspects of participant observation data with data from surveys, interviews, and historical analysis have assumed a new prominence and growing legitimacy in both academic disciplines and applied research (Small 2011).[7] Diachronic studies

[6] Gans's piece laments the proliferation of approaches that moved away from traditional fieldwork in the wake of the postmodern turn—literary deconstructionism (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986), analyses of historical data (Biernacki 1995), textual dialogs with theorists, and biographic "autoethnographies" (Lochlann Jain 2013). Gans's hope was that a more traditional form of participant observation would once again become the coin of the social-scientific realm, even as he acknowledges that the new forms of contemporary ethnography are here to stay. While Gans critiques the current state of affairs, he concludes his piece by acknowledging that while he finds the rise of these forms unfortunate, he is confident that participant observation will always have a place in social science because it is one of the most useful ways to understand how and why people behave the way they do.

[7] For a critique and discussion of the potential dangers of mixed-method tokenism, see Hancock et al. 2018.

and revisits have made their way back into a method that was at times defined by immersion and exit (cf. Burawoy 2007; Collier 1997). Anthropology has witnessed an expansion of approaches in response to its ostensible postmodern turn, ranging from a revival of immersive fieldwork and collaboration with indigenous peoples to understand radically different "ontologies" (e.g. Kohn 2013) to the fictionalization of field research in comic book form (Hamdy and Nye 2017).

While the bounds of ethnography remain contested in disciplines like sociology and anthropology (Abramson and Dohan 2015), postwar traditions such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), interpretivism (Geertz 2000 [1973]), the Chicago School of Ethnography (Deegan 2001), and positivism (Gans 1999; Sánchez-Jankowski 2002) continue to exist alongside slightly more contemporary alternatives such as postmodernism and poststructuralism (Tyler 1986), relational sociology (Desmond 2014), analytic ethnography (Lofland and Lofland 1984; Vaughn 2004), carnal sociology (Wacquant 2015), the extended case method (ECM) (Burawoy 1998), and feminist institutional ethnography (Smith 2005).[8] Finally, of particular importance for this volume, comparative ethnographic approaches have continued to grow and evolve within and across traditions.

Understanding why ethnography can take on such different forms requires understanding the role of divergent approaches to examining the social world, and the comparisons we make in trying to understand it. Rather than representing a unified qualitative block, ethnographers from different traditions rely upon radically different, and sometimes incompatible, philosophical logics and practices. Put simply, ethnographers may appear to overlap in *basic procedures* (e.g., participation in, observation of, and documentation of human social action) but differ in *what they aim to do* (e.g., describe, explain, critique) and *how they approach it* (e.g., through the deployment of conventional scientific logic or alternatives drawn from humanistic inquiry). The underlying philosophical differences in ethnographic approaches can be tremendously consequential for how research is conducted, the comparisons ethnographers make, and how their work is evaluated.

Often, those who are not directly involved in these debates underestimate these divides. Consider the following example. Several years ago, one of the

[8] For a more in-depth review of various traditions see Atkinson et al. 2001.

authors of this chapter (Abramson) was discussing the state of ethnography with a well-known survey methodologist in sociology. The methodologist was genuinely puzzled by the level of disagreement and in-fighting in ethnography, since it is all "qualitative" research. That individual noted that quantitative scholars do have heated disagreements about measurement and model specification, but the dialog rarely regresses into direct public attacks or claims about illegitimate methodological philosophy. Such talk, according to this person, was largely a waste of time that could be spent working on measurement. Abramson responded that while ethnographers should certainly avoid ad hominem attacks, they actually do not have the luxury of sidestepping discussions on the philosophy of method. In survey research it is possible to disagree heatedly on the deployment of the conventional scientific approach without invoking ontology or epistemology. However, that is because such a disagreement around surveys presupposes shared understandings about the research enterprise—such as that there are real social phenomenon, social scientists measure these in the most objective way possible, and their claims are evaluated based on how well they correspond to data.[9] Survey researchers have a shared language that uses agreed upon terms such as validity, reliability, generalizability, and replicability. Ethnographers do not.

The Challenge and Potential of Ethnographic Diversity

The fact is that ethnographers from different traditions lack consensus on the shared aims and common language quantitative scholars take for granted. Participant observers operating in realist approaches descendant from positivism often use the same general criteria and terms as quantitative scholars, and evaluate work according to those measures. For them validity, reliability, and generalizability are central concerns for all research, and participant observation's value is its ability to provide contextualized data other methods cannot (Cicourel 1982; Sánchez-Jankowski 2002). Others reject social science in a positivist vein as a fantasy, preferring humanistic traditions of

[9] Philosophical differences affect other forms of research as well, but the effect is often less stark and central. Of course, there are growing debates about whether this ought be the case. In recent years, scholars have argued for the need to return to a more philosophically grounded form of social sciences and that researchers might benefit from grappling more directly with meta-theoretical questions shaping their consensus (cf. Gorski 2013).

hermeneutics and interpretation (Clifford and Marcus 1986). These methodological critiques often dovetail with longstanding political critiques, from postcolonial theorists who note anthropology's historical complicity in the colonial project (e.g., Said 1991), to neo-Foucaultians who see the human sciences as integral parts of modern systems of power (e.g., Rose 1998). Many approaches operate in the space somewhere in between an embrace of conventional science and a radical critique (e.g., Burawoy 1998; Desmond 2014; Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Ethnographers' differences extend to their core assumptions about social research. Practitioners disagree about the fundamental nature of the social world (*ontology*), how to best understand or study it (*epistemology*), and how to relate to human values and politics in social research (*axiology*). Recognizing the variation in these positions is more than methodological navel-gazing; it can shape all aspects of the research process including if and how ethnographers use comparisons. While this variation allows the method to speak to numerous disciplinary audiences, the variation can create immense challenges and frustrations when goals and criteria of ethnographic scholarship are unclear or misinterpreted. This is true for both ethnographers who are frustrated with their work being evaluated using classical positivist criteria they reject as misguided (e.g., Burawoy 1998) and those who are frustrated with being evaluated with the literary or political criteria they see as irrelevant to science (e.g., Abramson and Sánchez-Jankowski, this volume).

These disagreements have implications for public work and standards of evidence that reach beyond academic debates (Lubet 2017; Burawoy 2019). While some might hope ethnographers would collectively acknowledge that there is utility (and an opportunity for dialog) in maintaining their pluralism, in practice we often talk past each other.[10] Box I.2 provides additional

[10] Sociology provides an ironic case study in pluralism and reification. Sociologists have long recognized the utility of methodological pluralism. The underlying notion, hegemonic to much contemporary "post-positivist" social science, is that while approaches such as survey research, comparative historical analyses, and participant observation produce different types of findings, each can fruitfully contribute to understanding the social world. That diverse methods can coexist under a newfound pluralism is near consensus in contemporary sociological discourse (cf. Lamont and White 2009; Porpora 2015; Small 2009; Singleton and Straights 2005). This newfound coexistence, which provided an alternative to the assiduous quantitative–qualitative divide of mid-century American sociology, frequently relies on a distinction between case-oriented (often qualitative) and variable oriented (often quantitative) approaches (Goertz and Mahoney 2012; Ragin 1994; Small 2009). The comforting thought that quantitative and qualitative research can coexist because they employ fundamentally different and complementary logics appeals because it purports to offer a way out of a once impassible quantitative–qualitative. However, an unintended consequence is a heightened methodological "tribalism" on the "qualitative" side (Lamont and Swidler 2014), where those who

background information on how key philosophical differences translate into sometimes irreconcilable forms of social science and how this relates to the confusion and contestation in contemporary ethnography.

Box I.2 Divergent Philosophies of Social Science

Being knowledgeable about (or at least aware) of the different philosophies that shape various ethnographic traditions is necessary for representing different approaches accurately. At minimum, it is necessary to look at interconnected aspects of "meta-theory" that guide inquiry (e.g., ontology, epistemology, axiology), and the relationship of various traditions to dominant models of quantitative social science.

It can be helpful to think of the philosophical and practical responses to the challenges of studying social life in contemporary social science traditions as part of a set of continuums. Ontological positions about the nature of the social world range from an embrace of realism (i.e., the notion there is a real, observable, extra-individual social world that exists outside the mind) to forms of anti-realism (postmodernism, phenomenological subjectivism, and other approaches that take their rejection of realism as a starting point). Epistemological positions on how to understand or explain the social world, and how to evaluate attempts to do so, vary similarly. On one side of the spectrum is a focus on correspondence and validity (the notion that explanations are evaluated by virtue of how well they map onto the world). On the other side is a rejection of such criteria, favoring evocative and coherent narratives, aesthetics, or usefulness for critiquing the status quo in a society. Positions about how to relate to human values (i.e., axiology) vary in parallel ways. Some embrace value neutrality, the notion that while values affect what social scientists study they should not drive (or even affect) their findings (Weber 1949 [1917]). This stands in contrast to explicitly political projects, which often reject such assumptions as both unrealistic and complicit in domination and advocate for explicitly political work (de Beauvoir 1949). Finally, approaches vary in what they consider a good explanation, model, or representation. For instance, even among realists there are debates about whether

claim to pursue a particular approach to a method jostle to have their model legitimated as the appropriate contribution by "big tent" methodological pluralists.

explanations ought to be causal or whether description is enough (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). Some of these key axes of philosophical variation are represented visually in Figure I.1.

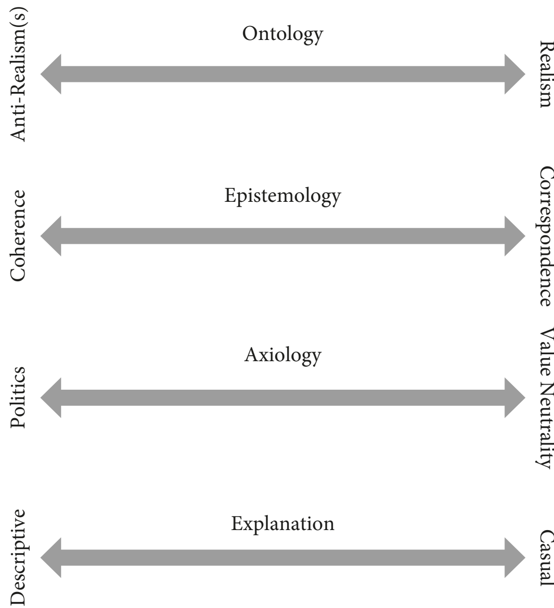

Figure I.1 Key Axes of Philosophical Variation in Social Science Research

Where traditions are positioned on these scales have wide-reaching consequences for their approach to comparative social science. On one side of the spectrum is Durkheim and his notion of social facts. Social facts are real, discernable, extra-individual phenomena that vary from other types of facts (e.g., physical, biological), primarily because they would not exist without people (Durkheim 2014 [1895]). For Durkheim, sociology is a positive science that examines a substantive domain (society) that other sciences cannot. Durkheim is both a realist and an objectivist, even in his examinations of mental phenomena. His epistemic approach focuses on correspondence (i.e., models are evaluated by how they map onto facts). Explanation for him is causal. According to Durkheim, when sociology is done properly it can produce covering laws similar to those in the physical and biological sciences. These laws reflect the objective nature of social reality, and as such should emerge regardless of the values of individual researchers. Comparison serves this purpose by using variation (e.g., difference in suicide rates) to get at invariant principles (the

importance of social connection and solidarity). He represents social scientific positivism in the extreme.

On the other end of the spectrum are forms of anti-realism. Postmodern anthropology often rejects the principles central to Durkheim's positivism (Tyler 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Reed 2010). Drawing on subjectivism and the egoism of strong phenomenology (i.e., Husserl 2015 [1931]), some question the notion of a real, or at least objectively knowable, external world (Husserl 2015 [1931]; Bunge 1993). They are less concerned with correspondence or causal explanation. They find greater value in literary or aesthetic merits and deconstruction of the taken-for-granted (Clifford and Marcus 1986). This is often, though not always, tied explicitly to political projects, with a belief that analysis is intimately entangled with a scholar's position (de Beauvoir 1949). In anthropology, this is tied to reckoning with their colonial legacy (Said 1991), and the Foucaultian analysis of the human sciences as key components of modern power (Rose 1998). In sociology, this is tied to a longstanding concern with inequality and domination (Collins 1990). Many eschew explanation as a chief goal or a goal at all.

Weber's neo-Kantian interpretivism, Simmel's work, and Bourdieu's attempt to connect the first and second order objectivities of the mental and external social world lie somewhere between.[11] Furthermore, intellectual traditions are often diverse, and combine positions in various ways. For instance, feminist standpoint epistemology was often painted as relativist, but ranged from the general privileging of women's claims to knowledge about gender, to post-structural rejections of the category "woman," to empirically based claims that certain women do have special knowledge, such as the intimate observation many black women gained of white families via relegation to family service roles (Collins 1990). The former are philosophical axioms, and the latter is empirically observable. Likewise, realist traditions concerned with causality, such as analytical sociology and critical realism, diverge sharply in the way they deal with human values and causality (Little 2012; Porpora 2015; Hedstrom and

[11] In the modern era, philosophical positions have loosely mapped on to disciplinary responses to the challenges to conventional positivism. While some social sciences (e.g., economics and psychology) have largely embraced a model of normal science, sociocultural anthropology has largely rejected this model— particularly after the postmodern turn while physical anthropology had embraced it, and sociologists remain split (Steinmetz 2005). It is not entirely surprising that ethnographers, who are most typically sociologists or anthropologists, operate in the most contested philosophical spaces.

Ylikoski 2010). Many veins of critical realism lean toward the right side of the spectrums discussed here, with the exception of their axiological position, which views values as a central to the research enterprise and places "human flourishing" as an explicit goal (Gorski 2013).

The differences described in this section are not surface issues nor are their effects abstract. Different ethnographic approaches can have irreconcilable philosophies that have an "elective affinity" with particular approaches to social science, which are often contested even within academic fields with pluralist inclinations.[12] Abramson and colleagues (2018) explain that ethnographic diversity and contestation translate into persistent definitional challenges and confusion:

> While ethnography's epistemic diversity can be a strength, it also creates definitional and positional challenges, particularly for those taking the NST [Normal Scientific Tradition] approach (Abramson and Dohan, 2015). The label "ethnography" is used to describe a variety of approaches (Gans, 1999; Atkinson et al., 2001) that are often premised on incompatible meta-theories and postures towards NST research. For instance, those who embrace a broad NST tradition argue that ethnography or, more precisely, participant observation, can make substantial scientific contributions within the logic of that approach (Cicourel, 1982; Gans, 1999; Jerolmack and Kahn, 2014; King et al., 1994; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002; Sánchez-Jankowski and Abramson, forthcoming). In contrast, a second camp rejects these propositions and argues ethnography's role is to be a critical corrective, and alternative to, the problems of positivist science (Burawoy, 1998; Decoteau, 2016; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). A third group posits that ethnography can, and should, have a fundamentally different, but potentially complementary, case logic (Ragin, 1994; Lofland, 1995; Small, 2009). A fourth group rejects the notion of scientific inquiry in general and positions ethnography as a humanist enterprise within the general field of cultural

[12] For instance, in recent years, rather than being seen as an umbrella term that encompasses diverse approaches, some scholars have framed sociological ethnography as a broadly (and inherently) interpretive method, the strength of which lies in descriptive depth and connection to the understandings of subjects (cf. Lareau and Rao 2016; Katz 2004; Cobb and Huang 2015; Desmond 2014). This sort of interpretation is problematic in that it 1) Conflates analytically distinct ethnographic approaches; 2) limits vibrant ethnographic epistemic diversity; and 3) legitimates one approach at the cost of others. As the discussions of traditions in this volume suggest, this is not the result of any intrinsic characteristic of ethnography's history or tools, but the result of historical and professional processes.

> production (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; see also Hartblay, 2018). The theoretical foundations, research practices and evaluation criteria of these approaches are in many cases fundamentally incompatible with one another. (Abramson et al. 2018, 257)

A key takeaway is that this historical and philosophical variation profoundly shapes what ethnographers do, how they relate to one another, and how audiences of non-ethnographers both within and outside of the academy interpret the value of ethnographic work (Burawoy 2019; Goldthorpe 2000; Lubet 2017).

Shared Challenges in Ethnography

Yet for all the differences described in the previous section, there are shared methodological issues that all approaches to ethnographic fieldwork must address (Abramson and Dohan 2015). The major ethnographic traditions in social science each have models (implicit or explicit) of how to address the following practical and scientific dilemmas:

(1) how researchers position themselves in the various social settings they encounter;
(2) how to handle the effect of their presence on a site or in a situation;
(3) how to manage long-term relationships with their subjects;
(4) how to use or attempt to bracket prior knowledge that affect experiences and observations in the field;
(5) how to relate to theory;
(6) what to record and formalize as data;
(7) how to analyze their observations;
(8) how to represent their findings to a broader audience;
(9) how to position themselves vis-à-vis quantitative social science; and
(10) if, and how, to engage in comparison.

In the day-to-day practices of actual research, ethnographers with different positions may converge. Furthermore, our contributors show nuanced responses to challenges and critiques from other traditions. Nonetheless, it is revealing to examine the strong differences in how ethnographers' approach shared challenges.

Consider the following examples of responses to shared challenges:

Field Presence

Positivists and behavioralists view the presence of the researcher as both necessary to observing behavior outside the lab and a potential source of bias. Consequently, they advocate for extended immersion and other strategies that minimize the long-term impact of the researcher on the patterns of behavior they are trying to understand (Sánchez-Jankowski and Abramson, this volume). In contrast, many symbolic interactionists view the presence of the researcher as a central aspect of the situations they are studying. Rather than minimize presence, interactionists and ethnomethodologists often use the researcher's presence as a tool to disrupt and understand the microdynamics of social situations (Garfinkel 1967).

Prior Knowledge and Theory

Those who employ the ECM see their task as using ethnographic data to extend and modify existing theories, such as Marxian models for explaining the dynamics of global capitalism (Burawoy 1998; Sallaz 2009). They enter the field with a specific theory in mind and reflexively use it to explain what they are seeing, modifying and extending the theory in the process. Traditional grounded theorists, on the other hand, try to eschew entering the field with any strong prior analytical frameworks. They see doing so as an imposition of their own biases and overdetermined social scientific models on the lives of the people they are studying (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Cognitive sociologists and behavioralists believe that using prior knowledge (including both folk and formal theories of social action) is an unavoidable aspect of being human. They see the strong grounded theory position as impossible and the ECM as unnecessarily overdetermined in the selection of a single theory (cf. Sánchez-Jankowski 2002; Cicourel, this volume). Abductive researchers similarly chart a middle ground, drawing on grounded theory's coding procedures but encouraging wide-ranging theoretical engagement (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Explanation and Evaluation

Interpretivists following in the tradition of Clifford Geertz view coherence and "thick descriptions" of social life as the central ethnographic goal, eschewing causal statements or predictions (Geertz 2000 [1973]). Theoretical coherence and evocative writing are central criteria for how these

ethnographers evaluate work (Geertz 2000 [1973]; Lareau and Rao 2016). In contrast, critical realists, behavioralists, and cognitive sociologists are fundamentally concerned with producing explanations that chart causal mechanisms and typically judge explanation by their correspondence with observable patterns of social life (Decoteau this volume; Sánchez-Jankowski and Abramson this volume).

Extension and Generalization

Different approaches vary in the scope of their statements and how they extend their explanations. Behavioral approaches focus on generating a sample that represents and can be generalized to a large population of a given unit of analysis such as people, organizations, or neighborhoods, in order to evaluate existing theories and generate new ones. The ECM uses specific cases to extend and contribute to social theory. Ethnomethodologists focus on the organization of experience and cognition and aim to uncover (sometimes hidden) rules. And again, there is diversity even within traditions. For instance, some symbolic interactionists eschew generalization beyond the construction of meaning in a given situation. Others, however, may seek to uncover transposable interactional structures that share general features across a variety of situations.

These differences are paralleled in, and directly connected to, the way ethnographers from different traditions compare.

Approaches to Ethnographic Comparison and Volume Structure

Contemporary ethnographers vary substantially in how they use comparison. They vary on *what they compare*—such as people, cases, variables, mechanisms, understandings, sites, or situations. They vary in their *mode of comparison*—such as using similarity and dissimilarity, focusing on case boundaries, or identifying invariance. Finally, they vary in the *goals of comparison*—establishing generalizable patterns of behavior, showing variation in sociohistorical contexts, uncovering causal mechanisms, or allowing more imaginative theorizing. In each chapter, this volume's contributors clarify their positions and how they translate into different forms of inquiry.

The first section of the volume begins by examining the evolution of classic behavioral and phenomenological approaches to ethnographic comparison.

In chapter 1, “Foundations of the Behavioralist Approach to Comparative Participant Observation,” Sánchez-Jankowski and Abramson argue that while ethnography is often pitched as a critical alternative to the (typically) quantitative, variable-based approaches associated with the conventional scientific tradition (CST), this is not inherent in the method. Comparative participant observation actually provides an irreducible tool for those operating in the CST framework by allowing the observation of situated causal processes that other methods are ill-suited to capture. Chapter 2, “Conducting Comparative Participant Observation: Behavioralist Procedures and Techniques,” builds on the methodological scaffolding outlined in the previous chapter to show how behavioralist principles translate to procedures and techniques for charting causal mechanisms—specifically, a variable-centered approach to multilevel sampling, pattern observation, and replicable comparative analyses that leverage both variance and invariance in field data to produce generalizable explanations.

Chapter 3 turns to a contemporary approach drawing on phenomenological traditions. In “The Thematic Lens: A Formal and Cultural Framework for Comparative Ethnographic Analysis,” DeGloma and Papadantonakis outline a comparative framework for ethnographic analysis that uses insights from Simmel’s formalism, social pattern analysis, symbolic interaction, and the strong program in cultural sociology. They advocate the identification of key interactional dynamics or meanings from one case and use it as a thematic lens through which to view other cases, revealing connections across ostensibly different phenomena. Chapter 4 turns to Cicourel’s approach to cognitive sociology, which has long aimed to link the micro and macro, phenomenological and behavioral. In “Comparative Ethnographic Views of Social Structure: The Challenge of Linking Micro and Macro Levels of Analysis,” Cicourel revisits divergent concepts of social structure and their application to ethnographic comparison, arguing for the need to uncover often overlooked connections between micro-structure, macro-structure, and forms of representing social reality.

The volume continues by turning to contemporary variants of critical approaches including the ECM, critical realism, and an abductive approach descendent from grounded theory and pragmatism. In chapter 5, “An Ethnography of Comparative Ethnography: Pathways to Three Logics of Comparison,” Lee reflects on the comparative use of the ECM to show that there are several forms of comparison used by practitioners, each of which contributes to the central aim of extending theory. She describes her initial