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Comparisons as anticipatory and relational practice*

Abstract: Comparisons play a central role in socio-spatial and cultural localizations. They are a necessary requirement for establishing difference, which actors require in order to position themselves in society. In this article, I discuss comparisons from the perspective of European Ethnology and, in particular, shed light on the role of anticipation and relationality in comparisons. The first step is a discussion of the criteria for quantitative and qualitative comparison. Next, the relationship between comparisons and expectations is questioned to address concepts of rationality and the contingent content of comparisons. On this basis, the significance of anticipatory and relational dimensions for comparisons is outlined. The article concludes by calling for an ethnological approach to comparisons as an anticipatory and relational practice.

*Keywords: c*omparison, anticipation, relational practices, comparisons as orientation

Comparisons have been a standard method in the repertoire of European Ethnology as a discipline of "comparative cultural studies" (*vergleichende Kulturwissenschaft*) – a term many German-speaking institutions have added to their name – and of social anthropology (Eggan 1954; Gingrich and Fox 2002), where they are used as a method for contrasting different objects or phenomena with one another. Comparisons draw on past developments to help understand current circumstances, put key figures in relation to different time periods to identify differences or similarities, and compare the properties of different characteristics with a clearly defined point in time. The stages of evolutionism in the history of science are an example of how anthropologies used comparisons between different cultures to provide information about cultural development (Morgan 1976). Ethnographic longitudinal studies are empirical means of comparison that allow processes of change – in the sense of ethnographic temporalization (Welz 2013) – to be traced and put into historical dimensions.[1] Today's cultural and social sciences increasingly engage with the methods and problems of scientific comparison (Scheffer and Niewöhner 2010; Schnegg 2014).

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1 The German *Socio-Economic Panel* (SOEP), which was established in 1984, on the other hand, is an authoritative example of a longitudinal survey of '*empirical and analytical*' social research in Germany.

These disciplines are also examining how social scientists (Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016a) and different expert cultures perform specific comparisons. Regarding being used for constant changes in cities, Thomas Hengartner spoke of "doing transformation" (2016) as a habitualized attitude towards change in which it is barely explicitly perceived. In analogy, we could use the phrase '*doing comparison'* to describe the extensive use of comparisons in different lifeworlds and dimensions. Sørensen, Marlin, and Niewöhner (2018) describe the ethnographic exploration and methodical reclamation of specialized ways of "comparing and categorizing" that are "'native' to the field" as "emic comparison" – in contrast to "scholastic comparison."

Comparisons play a pivotal role in socio-spatial and cultural contexts: Actors contrast their lifestyles or consumer practices with those of other actors, compare products or different solutions, and put their achievements and accomplishments in relationship to those of others. Comparisons are a necessary requirement for determining or establishing difference and are used by actors to position themselves on a social or political spectrum. In doing so, elements of anticipation and relating are crucial. This paper focuses on these two elements, exploring what an approach based on European Ethnology coupled with existing research on comparisons would look like and what role anticipation and relating play. The first step is a discussion on the criteria for quantitative and qualitative comparisons and, subsequently, their relationship to expectations in an attempt to better understand the concept of rationality and the degree of contingency in comparisons. This, in turn, forms the basis for answering the central question of the paper: What is the importance of anticipatory and relational dimensions for comparisons? The article then concludes by making a case for examining comparisons as anticipatory and relational practice from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

1. Comparisons as a social form

In an attempt to establish a "sociology of comparison," the sociologist Bettina Heintz conceptualized comparisons as a "basic social form" (Heintz 2010: 162) and a "social phenomenon of its own right" (Heintz 2016: 306). According to her, comparisons are not only scientific methods used in a variety of disciplines but also a fundamental social practice. In addition, comparisons represent a '*cultural technique'*[2] that actors use to cope with everyday life. Similar to how ethnographic knowledge (Köstlin and Nikitsch 1999) is used as a resource for self-stylization and identity formation,

2 Winthrop-Young (2013) discusses the genesis of the German term *Kulturtechniken*, or '*cultural techniques*.' The term was derived from the field of agriculture (to describe the cultivation of land), where it has been used since the 19th century. Since the 1970s, the term has also been employed in media research (to describe the everyday use of consumption of media and technology). In this paper, the term is used in a third sense that is based on cultural sciences and expresses the entanglement of actors, technology and objects.

comparisons can also be understood as a cultural technique with which 'lifeworldly' actors relate to others and establish their social-spatial positions, thereby relying on cultural representations or symbolic meanings to achieve this. With reference to knowledge and in contrast to scientific practices of comparison, Katrin Amelang and Stefan Beck (2010) speak of "comparisons in the wild": These are an epistemic practice with which knowledge can be organized, acquired and negotiated, including in nonscientific, everyday contexts. Helge Gerndt explains in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* [Encyclopedia of Fairytales] that comparisons, for example, as metaphors or part of a narration, are an ever-present linguistic pattern and a powerful factor for human thinking (Gerndt 2014). Such linguistic patterns also apply to scales, tables and rankings as extremely common forms of communication that visually organize and materialize comparisons. Furthermore, technology is also used to support and communicate comparisons, for example, via measuring devices or online platforms. Consequently, I understand comparisons as an everyday practice that comprises social, cultural, material, cognitive and linguistic dimensions, instead of as a methodological approach.

Comparison as a practice, where two or more phenomena or facts are compared from an intellectual point of view in order to determine common features or differences, serve to help us contrast circumstances with "a third variable in order to observe their differences or similarities and thus put them into relation with one another" (Heintz 2016: 307). According to Heintz, this requires an "*assumption of similarity"* that generally presumes that the phenomena being compared with one another are actually comparable and that each can be assigned to a "category that is in some way abstract." In addition to this assumption of similarity, a second requirement is the "*observation of difference*," which must refer to criteria of comparison – the third variable – in order to be able to distinguish the two (Heintz 2016: 307). It is subsequently of particular interest for European ethnologists to analyze how such classifications of comparability and criteria for comparison come about in the microperspective of everyday life: What do concrete actors compare with what, what criteria do they use, and what notions, systems and dimensions come into play?

2. Criteria for quantified and qualified comparisons

There is a wide range of very different phenomena, from standardized rankings to social distinctions, that constitute specific types and practices of comparison. For each of these, a *tertium comparationis*, or third of the comparison, is needed – it is impossible to make comparisons without comparative criteria. The *tertium comparationis* can be found, for example, in social norms, based on which actors compare themselves with others. Timo Heimerdinger used parenting practices to demonstrate how quantified comparisons with the norm – for example, the motor and cognitive development of children – are related to processes of quantification and standardization when parents compare their children to standard curves or normed developmental stages (Heimerdinger 2013). Research on recreational bicycle racing also shows how athletes measure their achievements, for example, using technical instruments and evaluation software (cf. Groth 2017) for classification in normed models and comparison with others;[3] here, however, the goal is often not to be among the best but rather to belong to a subjectified average (Groth 2019c).[4] Bettina Heintz also emphasizes quantitative comparisons that serve to establish "numeric differences" based on standardization and quantification (Heintz 2010).

However, quantitative comparison has its limits. The papers in Beckert and Musselin (2013a) show how the "classification of goods in markets" not only has quantitative elements but that aspects that are only indirectly quantifiable, such as uncertainty, ambiguity, individual preferences or moral judgments, also play a role. Classifications are not a clear-cut process but rather represent the interplay between producers, consumers and market intermediaries (Beckert and Musselin 2013b).[5] Contingency is, thus, an important part of quantitative comparisons and of comparisons as a whole. The limits of quantitative comparison become even more evident when we change perspective and, instead of classifying goods, examine situations in which things and social facts become important for the very reason that they cannot be compared with one another – or because they are construed as being incomparable. Lucien Karpik's "Economics of Singularities" (2011), Andreas Reckwitz's discussion of the importance of singularities (Reckwitz 2017), or Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's (2018) "Economy of Enrichment" come to mind in this context. Boltanski and Esquerre use the term "economy of enrichment" to describe the fact that the Fordist production and mass consumption of standardized consumer goods are no longer the paradigmatic principles of the consumer world. Instead, they claim that the "*new form of capitalism*" is characterized by the consumption of goods that are particularly unusual and unique and can, therefore, be symbolically and economically enriched (*enrichir*) by attributing a corresponding narrative that justifies their value. The goal of such examples of a more or less modernized "*conspicuous consumption*" (Veblen 2007, first published in English in 1899), for example, travel, eating out, expensive wines, artwork or luxury real estate, is public acknowledgment. Conspicuous consumption is a communicative act that establishes differences

3 From the perspective of European Ethnology, Hermann Bausinger's discussion of "personal sports statistics" (2015: 13–27) is another example of such categorical comparisons in sports.

4 Cf. Lupton (2016) and Mau (2017) on social processes of quantification.

5 Sarah May's research on regional food (2013) or Gisela Welz's analysis of European products (2015) illustrate how the value of products in these processes are connected to cultural repertoires and are part of complex negotiations that are, at times, even political.

between unique goods on the level of social and cultural capital.[6] In this respect, goods are incomparable because they are "different" from other, similar objects or their comparison is rhetorically framed as inadmissible (using corresponding phrases such as "incomparable experiences" or placing products in a '*class of their own*') – which is precisely the special nature of singularity and prestigiousness.

Here, however, emotions, such as envy and jealousy as "social comparative orientations of action," as Frank Nullmeier (2016) phrases it, begin to assert their influence. They, too, are based on comparisons: Habitus and practices of social distinction entail comparative elements, and the perception of difference implies distinction tied to comparisons. Envy and jealousy, as well as admiration and generosity, emphasize '*qualitative*' dimensions of comparisons. Consequently, restricting the focus to quantitative comparisons alone becomes problematic: The quantification of envy and jealousy may be an econometrically practicable method, but it is not appropriate for an approach based on European Ethnology. Part of the problem with reducing comparisons to their quantitative dimensions is the existence of indirect comparative effects or indirectly quantifiable elements of the consumption of goods in which, for example, the incomparability of goods is constructed. Furthermore, when goods are compared, so are the corresponding social relationships, consumer practices, lifestyles and attributions. From the perspective of European Ethnology, the specific approach to comparisons is that we cannot begin our analysis by separating the comparison of goods, services, characteristics or expectations into different categories. What is being compared with one another is relevant for contextualizing '*constellations of comparison, even though' it* does not offer the possibly of fundamentally abstracting different forms of comparison. Nadine Wagener-Böck's (2015) and Moritz Ege's (2013) studies on vestimentary (consumer) practices show how the comparison of styles or the assessment of clothing can be understood as practices that are intergenerational or characteristic of specific social groups. They investigate how people consume goods not by focusing on their quality but rather on the social-comparative effects that emphasize membership to a social group or the differences and similarities between generations. They show how this process helps to produce the very features of the objects that make them special. If consumption is understood as a cultural practice, the social embeddedness of goods becomes the focus of interest (cf. Groth 2015b)[7]. This practice requires contextualization to show how sociocultural, cognitive and communicative presumptions play

6 Boltanski and Esquerre go even further: Not only do they look at social distinction, they also examine the increase in economic value and the connected processes of valorization that go hand in hand with the economy of enrichment.

7 The term "embeddedness" was used by Marc Granovetter (1985) to describe the sociocultural basis of economic action and suggest a perspective that would incorporate models of rational decision-making and social contexts in which decisions are made. Economic action is, thus, no longer reduced to formal models but neither is the role of social behavior overemphasized. The term is

into comparisons, for example, when attempting to construct objective procedures for comparison in the form of tests or rankings This perspective can also be found in European Ethnology research on (cultural) property that examines social relationships by means of these objects (as a process of recognizing or distinguishing the desire for an object) instead of examining the goods themselves or their possession.[8] Research on the sociocultural embeddedness of goods in the sense of the "social life of things" (Appadurai 1986) or the role of things for biographies and social positioning (Miller 2010) is closely connected with this approach. Since property relationships are socially constructed, comparisons of goods or by means of goods are always comparisons of social relationships as well. In this context, differentiating between the comparison of goods, as Beckert and Musselin discussed, and comparisons of, for example, vestimentary practices and the social relationships connected with such practices (bearing in mind comparative effects such as appreciation and jealousy) would introduce a reductive dichotomy.

Comparison as a social practice is, thus, not restricted to the very small subsection of '*quantitative*' dimensions of comparison. On the other hand, a fixation on '*qualitative*' elements may be a meaningful emphasis in certain cases, although doing so bears the risk of being overly reductive. It is necessary for an analysis of specific and situated constellations of comparison to show how comparisons integrate these two elements, as well as material and technical artifacts, in everyday contexts.

3. Comparisons and the future

A look at what comparisons have to do with the future enables important insights into how such an interplay of elements and artifacts can be conceived. In order to achieve this, it is important to recognize that consumer practices are connected with expectations – especially when it comes to conspicuous consumption. When actors seek distinction, for example, via consumer goods, they compare their expectations with those of others. This comparison provides information about the probability of successfully achieving distinction. One essential element of social and cultural capital is the ability to judge the temporality of distinction, i.e. will today's practices produce distinction in the future as well? This is not simply a "capacity to aspire" as Appadurai (2004) describes the capacity of actors to collectively aspire to and follow future developments, but also a more individual '*capacity to anticipate*.' Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) based their premises on the fundamental principles of pragmatic sociology, which assume a dedifferentiation of lifestyles (i.e. the deconstruction of social categories and criticism of the idea that practices are reproduced),

used in economic anthropology in the formalist-substantivist debate and further discussed, cf. Spencer (2002).

8 Cf. Groth (2011: 14, 2015a: 66); Hann (1998); Kojève (1969: 40).

due to which, relatively stable expectations are no longer possible. According to this theory, the pluralization of options for legitimate differentiation (as everyday tests and in critical moments) also means that expectations for the future are very diverse. Boltanski and Thévenot and other representatives of pragmatic sociology particularly emphasize the fragility, uncertainty and disarray of social life and, thus, the plurality of interpretations, which increases the complexity of dealing with expectations. These expectations are a type of complex and contingent social-spatial positioning for comparisons and other forms of relating one thing to another. As the outcome of the comparisons, they show (or appear to show) the social position of the person drawing the comparison within a comparative space. Furthermore, this person must always anticipate the future: What expectations are connected with actions that are guided by the future?

How can we come to a better understanding of such expectations? Firstly, I would like to make a cursory excursus about expectations from an economic perspective in order to explain some of the important aspects of what I would like to call '*anticipatory comparison*.' Some economic theories of rational expectations, for example, by Robert E. Lucas, assume that actors use the information available to them to form rational expectations, based on which they act to maximize their utility (Lucas 1972). Expectations about market trends can, according to this, be, to a large extent, rationally justified. To a large extent because, in contrast to neoclassical economics, Lucas does not presume the existence of 'perfect markets,' which are characterized by absolute transparency and an absolute rationality of market participants. Central to rational expectations is that market participants only have access to "*incomplete*" observations of previous (Windmüller 2018: 362–365) and current developments on the market and that these observations are used to progressively find rational solutions. Paul Davidson also remarks that "future outcomes are merely the statistical shadow of past and current market signals" (Davidson 1996: 480)[9]. The fact that information is incomplete and that rational expectations are contingent is emphasized even more strongly in new institutional economics and, specifically, by the principal-agent theory (Jensen and Meckling 1976). Here, the information asymmetry between market participants ("hidden characteristics," Akerlof 1970) and their "bounded rationality" (Simon 1982) are highlighted. Due to these factors, expectations are contingent, their rationality is limited and they are not completely efficient. From the perspective of neoclassical economics, the resulting uncertainty can be reduced to a – as André Orléan puts it – "probablizable list of events that can be defined in advance" (Orléan 2014: 70). Possible options can then be compared and weighed against one another. Keynes, in contrast to this, sees intuition and "animal spirits," i.e. practices based on human nature, as

9 Friedemann Schmoll (2008: 74) quotes Alfred Schütz, who took a similar view, claiming that "knowledge about the future [is] simply a form of the past being projected to the future."

fundamental factors that determine how we respond to contingency spontaneously (Keynes 1936: 141f.). The comparison of different options can, thus, either remain implicit or play no role at all. It is assumed in behavioral economics (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) that actors deal with this relative uncertainty by, for example, using heuristic shortcuts (relying on practiced routines and rules instead of comparing all possible options with one another) or that their decisions are influenced by the way in which certain tasks are framed (which can change the criteria for comparison). In the wake of the worldwide financial crisis of 2007, which – public critics claim – cannot be explained by economic theories of efficient markets and rational assumptions regarding economic behavior, Akerlof and Shiller (2009) outlined these '*irrational*' elements of the market, thus, combining Keynes' assumptions with newer theories of behavioral economics in order to incorporate psychologically, intuitively and socioculturally defined and affective practices into economic theories. This includes comparisons with the partially rational expectations of others that actors use to orient themselves in imperfect markets.

The ethnologist Stefan Leins discussed "affective elements" of prediction and the central role of narratives for making expectations plausible in his recently published study on the *Stories of Capitalism* (Leins 2018: 96f.), which looks at financial analysts who predict market trends and make recommendations for investments. The method Leins describes for dealing with contingency is subjective and influenced by sensual practices and cultural forms of narration. This contingency and partial subjectification of financial markets is, however, not a fundamental problem but rather – according to Jens Beckert's work on "fictional expectations," recently published in German – the driving force behind capitalist dynamics. Contingency is, thus, not seen as a problem but rather as an opportunity (Beckert 2018). Similarly, Arjun Appadurai (2016) describes the financial crisis as a "failed promise" that can be traced back mainly to verbalized expectations in contracts on the derivatives market. Appadurai illustrates the relationship between insufficient regulation, ignorance and irresponsible risk-taking. According to him, linguistic power reinforced this relationship, resulting in a kind of snowball system of expectations. These linguistic promises could not be upheld and culminated in the financial crisis. At the same time, however, such promises are the foundation for value creation: 'Banking on words' is based on 'promising' profits that are fictional in the sense that not '*all*' of them can be fulfilled. The work of Appadurai, Leins, and others illustrates that in order to understand expectations, the practices of actors, when understood as socio-material arrangements, are just as decisive as their actions and decisions and the rational or irrational basis on which they are made. Other factors that play a role include, for example, how financial analysts and brokers combine technical systems, news feeds and indicators, use screen technology, such as "trading screens" as “scopic media” (Knorr Cetina 2012) and communicate with other actors in order to compare expectations and assessments in these kinds of arrangements.

The dual role of imaginations for fictional expectations, language for promises on derivates markets or narratives for investment advice,[10] as discussed by Beckert, Appadurai, and Leins, as both a problem and an opportunity has practical and affective dimensions. The work of these authors not only examines presumed chains of cause and effect and rational reductions of contingency but also looks at the question of what a limited rational response to contingency looks like both ‘*in*’ practice and ‘*as*’ a practice. Intuition, orientation to others, cultural repertoires that address uncertainty and narratives about the future play an essential role in this response. The focus, thus, shifts to the fact that the imagination, narrations and language shape expectations and evoke questions about when scenarios of prediction are credible and when they are not. These aspects are not limited to economics but rather play an equally important role in comparisons in other fields. Here, quantifying and qualifying practices of expectation and comparison come together. Within the context of assessing consumer goods, Gisela Welz refers to this as “*qualculation*” (2006) – a term used in analogy to Michel Callon and Fabian Muniesa. Intuition, judgment and appraisal collide with quantitative elements that appear to be standardizable and, thus, rationalizable. Comparisons – in Welz’s case of “European products” – are not limited to quantitative elements, and their scope is expanded to include the dimension of the future.

The linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein (2004: 640–644) demonstrates how ‘*oinoglossia*’ (‘wine-talk’) as a linguistic register for wine consumption indicates not only a speaker’s social status but also reveals expectations and promises of quality in comparisons between wines. Talking about products and the practice of consuming them (which includes other aspects, such as consumption itself, one’s surroundings or objects like wine glasses or wine labels) constitute the “cultural basis for the aesthetic experience” (Silverstein 2006: 484). In addition, the linguistic construction of the ‘*connoisseur*’ as a social figure reduces the complexity of unpredictable markets.

Specific aspects of comparisons are central in this comparison of products and in comparing experiences of consumption: The indexicality of social status as a social phenomenon is culturally coded as wine expertise. Based on this, consumption is cognitively processed as an aesthetic experience and communicated in the register of ‘*oinoglossia*’ in specific settings (wine tasting, wine ratings, wine purchasing). Furthermore, other elements come into view that can be a component of comparisons: They function as the interplay between irrationality and rationality by referencing different perceptions of rationality. This includes differentiated at-

10 Cf. e.g. Heid 2017.

tempts to categorize and evaluate contingency (in wine ratings when explaining different taste factors or referring to knowledge about terroir, types of grapes and vintages) and 'gut decisions' as an affirmation of nonrational moments of aesthetic perception. This wide range from the construction of absolute rationality to the negation of rational criteria is coupled with elements of quantification and qualification. Quantification and qualification are intertwined in the assessment of goods, in particular, but also in other cases of lifeworld comparisons, becoming qualculation, making it difficult to separate one from another. An apparently purely quantitative choice of a particular wine, for example, based merely on its price may also be related to an explicit or implicit assessment of the value of quality.

This is precisely the reason why everyday cultural comparisons of this kind should be understood as a practice that involves making and rationalizing decisions, which, however, can only be explored at the interplay of a wide variety of factors: Perception and aesthetics, rationalization and quantification, mediatization and materialization. Another aspect that is connected with the question of rationality – although it goes even further – is the role of intuition and affects. Intuitive or affective elements of decisions can be rationalized *ex post* but – due to their epistemic quality of immediacy and pre-reflexivity – cannot be entirely subsumed as part of decision-making. The intuitive assessment of a wine may, thus, be made plausible by training one's palate, which is a habitual and cultural codification '*of its own'* that is socially acquired. By contrast, I use the term 'affect' to refer to the "precultural 'first step' in an emotional process" (Scheer 2012: 198). Scheer rejects the term "affect" for research on emotions because it reduces the focus to this first step, evokes a linear sequence for generating emotions and is decoupled from sociocultural aspects. But in my analysis of comparisons, I am interested specifically in affects as unmediated cognitive elements *per se* that have not yet been integrated into processes of comparative practice. These elements may be culturally coded and cognitively categorized; they have a different epistemic quality that is difficult to grasp from a methodological perspective but which, however, plays an important role as an aspect of comparisons in interactions with others.

Moreover, comparisons should be understood as the point of ambiguity between promises and disappointments: By dealing with uncertainty, contingency and, thus, the risks involved, the expectations that comparisons arouse are *per se* risky, contingent and uncertain. A wine that has been compared to others and deemed good may disappoint, just as fictional expectations of markets may flip-flop. This is due partially to limited information, limited rationality and the relative unpredictability of future wine quality or market trends but also to the fact that the logic of legitimacy in cultural areas is very disparate and is based on different concepts of rationality; the fact that there are no homogenous groups with shared expectations or universal taste preferences; and the fact that cognitive and affective processes and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative moments play an important role in comparisons.[11]

Examining comparisons that focus on the future from the perspective of cultural theory instead of concentrating on methodological individualisms illustrates the complexity of comparative mechanisms on markets, during consumption and in other everyday contexts. This is particularly the case when predictive categories of expectable events are involved, i.e. fictional expectations based on socioculturally and institutionally embedded imaginations. Assuming that comparisons are social phenomena, then comparing the expectations of others becomes a central aspect, for example, stock markets as a reflexive comparison of expected market trends that results in acts of purchasing and selling based on predictions that are only rational up to a point. Expectations become uncertain predictions that are represented in market ratings, materialized in purchasing recommendations, lead to the signing of contracts or serve as the basis for consumer practices.

4. Anticipatory comparisons

Prediction, however, appears to be the wrong term for describing everyday cultural comparisons for three reasons: Firstly, people must take action in order to make predictions. The theory of rational expectations, for example, restricts assumptions, to some degree, via complete information and rationality, but it still assumes that actors think in a cognitively rationalizable manner in order to deal with incomplete information and, thus, achieve maximum benefit. This is also the case when predictions are made using qualitative and non-standardizable dimensions. Comparative practice, on the other hand, can be understood, in some cases, as active behavior based on rational principles, although it goes beyond that. Secondly, predictions require a reflexive and standardizable comparison of expectations, which can be influenced by affects and intuitive practices but, in essence, draws on rational principles, causalities or models – causalities, which are based on assumptions of regularities and rules, are the "decisive factor for predictions" (Schmoll 2008: 81). Thirdly, qualitative and affective dimensions of everyday cultural comparisons and of the comparison of consumer goods are considerably more pronounced and, in particular, do not imply inaccuracy (i.e. inefficiency, market failure or modeling failure).

I would like to suggest using the term 'anticipation' for everyday cultural comparisons as a whole. This term incorporates the pre-reflexive, affective, emotional and cultural dimensions of comparison more strongly without excluding predictive

11 In addition to Akerlof and Shiller, Slovic et al. (2007) ("affect heuristic") and Kahneman (2011) ("fast and slow thinking") also emphasize affective and instinctive elements for decisions that have since become important for behavioral economics.

elements of quantification and standardization. Passive, habitualized and implicit elements also become clearer by using the term anticipation. According to Polanyi (1966), "*tacit anticipation*" is a cultural technique used within the context of uncertain futures. What Andreas Hartmann and Oliwia Murawska (2015) call individual, collective and cultural storage that focuses on the future and future opportunities also comes into view: Culturally constructed ways of dealing with expectations and the future as part of the cultural coding of comparisons. This is also an argument for including affective, habitual and implicit dimensions of anticipatory comparison in European Ethnology research that link qualitative and quantitative aspects and sees comparisons as socially situated and culturally coded everyday practices that can serve as orientation for actors.

Increasing the scope of '*comparison as a form of subjectification*' is also important because comparison with oneself has become a common social form. Manifestations of "*audit culture*" (Shore and Wright 2015; Strathern 200) and the entrepreneurial self (Bröckling 2007) gauge the potential of the self and draw comparisons in view of future developments; these comparisons are connected with expectations but they also represent one method for how we currently deal with contingency. One example from the academic world: Many Ph.D. students ask themselves how long others needed to write their doctoral dissertation. This presumably familiar question is not only important as a source of information, but the answer can also help to gauge one's own performance and can be either a relief or a burden – depending on whether the other person took more or less time than one's own anticipated time frame and whether their time frame can be construed as representing the norm. The information does not only serve to appreciate or reject current plans of action, but also to guide actions in the future. According to Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková (2016b), scientists are not only agents but also objects of comparison and comparative standards. They are embedded in comparative regimes that put publication outputs, the total number of applications submitted and career paths into relationship with one another; not (only) are these aspects standardized and quantified, but they can also pertain to qualitative, non- or only partially quantifiable elements. This can include aspects such as originality, excellence, and subjective and affective elements of comparison and individual life scripts. The fact that academic comparisons with oneself cannot be constricted to quantifiable criteria is demonstrated by Fochler, Felt, and Müller (2016), using the example of Austrian doctoral and postdoctoral candidates and their comparative practices. Fochler, Felt, and Müller refer to "narrowing evaluative repertoires" whereby doctoral candidates are placed in "heterarchical" regimes of valuation with multiple, parallel comparative dimensions (instead of in a hierarchic constellation of comparison with a single overarching evaluative principle) that does not focus solely on scientific aspects but also takes other private interests into account. A recent report on a study on student orientation carried out by the corporate consultant *Ernst & Young* spoke of a "triad of family, friends, and free time" (Stoldt 2018) that '*still*' plays a role for doctoral students. Postdocs, on the other hand, have a clear hierarchy that emphasizes 'academic tokens' – academic achievements are, therefore, more important to them than any other criteria.

In this case, comparative criteria are narrowed down, making it evident that comparisons of oneself are situative and dependent on the situation and, therefore, have biographic and temporal components as well as being oriented to the future. The repertoire of comparisons is reduced by a restricted range of possibilities, i.e. by the assumption of contingency with a view to future 'chances of success' in the university system – risks, however, are not considered. Comparisons are situative and highly subjectified; they, therefore, appear to be both an opportunity and a restriction of opportunities (Groth 2019a, 2019b). They are oriented to the future and must anticipate future comparative criteria ('*capacity to anticipate*'), for example, by gauging how certain achievements will be evaluated in the future and what criteria will be used to do so (and who will be the judge). This example shows that comparisons are also linked to other comparisons. The idealized setting of the comparative triad of compared elements, the *tertium comparationis*, and the comparative criteria is just that: An idealization that is supplemented by other comparisons through empirical observation. In academia, therefore, not just comparison based on 'academic tokens' but also the comparison of comparative criteria: How do these tokens compare to other motives such as the triad of family, friends and free time?

5. Relational comparison

Furthermore, the example of comparison within the economic system shows that comparisons ignore certain dimensions while emphasizing others – comparisons are, thus, also a focusing, a reduction of contingency, that makes a selection using comparative criteria. While some economic theories speak of narrowing down a list of probable events that are determined by rational criteria (Orléan 2014), these processes can indeed be implicit, spontaneous and situative and are coupled with emotions – this can include omitting dimensions of comparisons with negative emotional connotations. For these kinds of comparisons, others also play a role with whom we compare ourselves, for example, in terms of academic achievements or time required to complete dissertations. Fochler, Felt, and Müller (2016) argue that changeable sets of factors must be considered that put the elements under comparison into relationship with other interests or motives. This constellation of comparison, in which a comparison to other actors is linked to different motives, also applies, for example, to recreational cyclists: Here, motives to do sports and train are pluralized and personalized that can then be used to analyze how different comparative criteria relate to one another (Groth 2014). The idealization of the codification of winning and losing in sports as the deciding comparative criteria (between winners and non-winners) is, thus, insufficient for everyday cultural interpretations, including competitive comparisons. Other motives for doing sports – health benefits, work-life balance – must be reflected in a stratification of motives in order to be able to analyze situative comparisons. Comparisons are, thus, not only a technique for differentiating between winning and losing, they are also an *'instrument for relating'* that puts their socio-spatial positions in relationship to other actors (Groth 2019c).

In the context of recreational bicycle racing, athletes orient themselves through social comparison – for example, at public races – with the aim of finishing somewhere in the middle. Recreational athletes who participate in such races are highly motivated and train a great deal. However, their competitive orientation focuses either solely on improving their own performance (i.e. increasing their performance from one season to the next) or on comparable groups who are at a similar level – the same age group, athletes with similar experience or one's training group. It is less often that these athletes strive to be one of the best; instead, they compete for average (Groth 2019c). By doing so, they distinguish themselves from the top athletes in a positive sense both from those above and those below them, using a stratification of motives that places less emphasis on the competitive side and highlights aspects such as work-life balance or health benefits. Instead, *'relative comparative dimensions'* can be determined, such as improving one's own race time or comparing one's achievement to other groups who represent 'realistic' benchmarks. Achieving these relative goals – being in the athletic average – is, nevertheless, highly demanding and requires athletes to distinguish themselves from those at a lower level, i.e. poorer athletes. By contrast, following the absolute goal of being the best would be inefficient because it is too risky, too much work or because athletes realize that they simply cannot be the best in this field.[12] In recreational sports, competing for the average is connected with restricting oneself to average goals. Instead of setting absolute goals that are to be achieved by competing with other actors, goals are relativized in relation to other actors who can achieve the same or similar goals. Here, the average is relational and dynamic: If an athlete improves their own performance or requires less training, then the average may be raised or

12 It is important to note that even in recreational sports, especially in endurance sports, drugs and, specifically, other means of improving performance do play a role. Non-steroidal antirheumatic drugs, in particular, are consumed for "pain management" (Nina Degele refers here to "pain normalization," 2006) during training and races (cf. Groth 2014: 52f.). Even cases of doping have come to light in recent years. Most of these cases, however, involve top athletes in recreational sports and are not usually a mass phenomenon. One study on recreational triathletes also showed that athletes are more concerned with the general improvement of their achievements than with top performance in a specific race (Dietz et al. 2013: 8). It is, thus, unclear – despite existing studies on the use of drugs – to what extent doping plays a role among average athletes.

lowered as needed. Comparisons may also be drawn to oneself by contrasting current performance with previous achievements.

Similar findings have been made regarding work life. Here, striving for average is based on statistical average values, such as average income. However, in order to explain their income, actors then refer to their immediate social environment – i.e. friends, relatives or colleagues. Limiting or restricting oneself to the average is, thus, relational to one's own lifeworld and, to a lesser degree, to static or statistical values. These, too, can be adapted depending on the situation or when changes take place in one's social environment, such as work performance and company structure. In such cases, comparisons are based on one's social self, i.e. on the achievements or positions of one's social environment. What is deemed average is subjective and negotiated in relation to one's own lifeworld. In these cases, comparisons are based on the direct social environment and, to a lesser extent, on average values, such as average income. The direct social environment is no longer limited to direct contacts but can also include acquaintances from online forums and platforms where, for example, recreational athletes compare themselves with one another (Groth 2019c; Krahn 2019). An important aspect is that it is not the overall reference group that is considered but only a selection that is made according to variable sets of criteria, such as comparable age and weight, a similar (athletic) career and performance level,[13] or direct or indirect acquaintance.

Allowing average achievements to guide our actions is a form of social comparison, in the sense that these actions are relational and subjectified. This does not involve fixed social-demographic characteristics or political self-positioning but rather subjective and situative interpretations and interactions that reflect a varying degree of stability. The middle and average are, thus, not clearly differentiated or objectively determinable positions that are expressed by a certain income, a specific apartment size or a clearly definable performance level. We are, therefore, dealing with different criteria for guiding behavior based on different social relationships. In this context, comparison is a social practice comprising a subjectified, relational and situational construction of comparative benchmarks that include the selection or omission of certain comparative dimensions. Another dimension for comparison, thus, comes into focus for which not only the comparative criteria but also the reference groups are situatively and subjectively adapted – i.e. who is one comparing oneself to? For recreational cyclists, the answer has been linked to an athlete's own anticipated performance, i.e. the expectation of observing a specific difference. If, for example, an athlete assumes that they will be significantly worse than the best, a relationing may take place in which athletes use their own age group or direct social environment as the reference group.

13 For more on evaluating and measuring performance in recreational cycling and the role of technical aides such as instruments for measuring performance, cf. Groth (2017) with further references.

6. Comparisons as an anticipatory and relational practice

Comparisons can be understood as a social practice that is culturally coded, cognitively categorized and processed, communicated in different ways and which has material and technical dimensions. Comparing oneself with others, the comparison of goods as a comparison of social relationships, a comparative perspective on the self over the course of developmental processes: Comparisons in different contexts and constellations are drawn without necessarily being an explicit act. Comparisons can provide orientation for dealing with uncertainty, contingency and complexity and function as an intermediary between irrationality and rationality by referencing different concepts of rationality. Elements of quantification and qualification are combined and become incomplete 'qualculations' in lifeworld comparisons, making it difficult to separate the two again. Their dual role of promise and disappointment is just as relevant as anticipatory elements of comparison: When recreational athletes compare themselves with better athletes, they do not simply determine different performance levels but also gauge their options for performing similarly in the future; in the sphere of work, comparisons with the careers and performance levels of others serve to assess one's own career chances or financial situation after retirement. These and other examples are not systematic but rather anticipatory comparisons that provide information on future developments based on uncertain and selective data. They can be understood as a form of subjectification that helps to determine individual responses to social demands. Here, comparisons with oneself are situative and dependent on the situation, i.e. have both biographical and temporal components and are linked to other comparisons. They are dynamic instruments of relating as well as subjective and situative interpretations and interactions that can have varying degrees of stability. An essential element for drawing comparisons is the subjectified, relational and situational construction of comparative benchmarks that can include the selection or omission of certain comparative dimensions. In order to understand comparisons as a social practice, it is important to look at how such comparative benchmarks are constructed, when comparisons are deemed legitimate and when not, how people use predictions about the future to deal with uncertainty, and how the social practice of comparing serves to anticipate future developments or circumstances. Within this context, the role of imaginations and narratives is linked to nonrational, fictional expectations of possibilities.

Not only comparative criteria but also reference groups (with whom one compares oneself) can be situative and subjectively adapted. Seeing comparisons as a social practice allows us to analyze both comparisons and adaptations to their results, but not to confuse the two: When actors compare things or themselves, they are already practicing a socially acquired way of dealing with comparison, with one's own expectations and the expectations of others. In summary, comparisons are a multidimensional, everyday practice that has relational and anticipatory elements.

A concept of comparisons based on European Ethnology, as I have outlined in this paper, is, thus, capable of analyzing specific comparative constellations in their various dimensions – particularly both rational and affective – and to grasp their importance for different fields.

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