# Comparison with an Ethnographic Sensibility

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To what extent can an ethnographic sensibility enhance comparison? In recent years, there has been renewed interest in controlled comparisons in qualitative research designs within political science (e.g., Dunning 2012; Gisselquist 2014; Slater and Ziblatt 2013; Snyder 2001; Tarrow 2010). Broadly, the recent work on controlled comparison—an approach that emphasizes case selection based on *either* contrasting outcomes despite similar potentially explanatory characteristics *or* similar outcomes despite contrasting potentially explanatory characteristics—suggests that the method combines the best of both the qualitative and quantitative traditions. Controlled comparisons are useful, this literature argues, because they allow scholars to trace out dynamic political processes while accounting for the effects of possible confounding explanations. Such methodological moves, however, are not without cost. In particular, this approach to case selection can lead researchers to deemphasize context and, in the process, potentially diminish the greatest methodological strength of qualitative research: providing contextualized understandings of political processes.

We contend that approaching comparison with an "ethnographic sensibility" (Pader 2006; Schatz 2009)—that is, being sensitive to how informants make sense of their worlds and incorporating meaning into our analyses—can strengthen comparative qualitative research. Adopting an ethnographic sensibility would enhance the quality of scholarly arguments by incorporating the processes through which actors ascribe meanings to their lived experiences and the political processes in which they are enmeshed. Because social-science arguments often involve accounts of individual actors' interests, ideas, and impressions, it is imperative to place such cognitive arguments in a broader cultural context. Adopting an ethnographic sensibility requires attention not only to that context but also to the political and social meanings that make it intelligible. This approach builds on recent scholarly efforts to embrace complexity in historical analysis (see Slater and Simmons 2010). However, it pushes us beyond the methods of difference and agreement that continue to guide much qualitative comparative work (for a discussion, see Slater and Ziblatt 2013) by asking scholars to make the complex meanings that often shape politics the object of inquiry—which is rare even in the best recent qualitative comparative work.

This article is organized in three sections. First, we discuss what we mean by an "ethnographic sensibility" and how such a sensibility can productively contribute to comparative research. Second, we argue that an ethnographic sensibility encourages three core shifts in how scholars think about comparison. By recognizing the limits of our ability to control in comparative research designs, appreciating the ways that meaning enhances comparative analyses, and focusing on processes as the object of comparison, an ethnographic sensibility allows scholars to think differently about how and what they compare. Third, to demonstrate the analytical use of meaning for comparative research designs, we describe a recent research project that implicitly approaches comparison with an ethnographic sensibility. We conclude by considering how an ethnographic sensibility can enhance comparative research at all stages of the research process.

## EMBRACING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SENSIBILITY

When scholars adopt an ethnographic sensibility, they observe how people make sense of their world; they seek to "glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality" (Schatz 2009, 5). The approach requires that scholars attend to how individuals' perceptions of the world are embedded in their interactions with others, commit to understanding the work that language and other symbols do, and be open to incoherence and instability as part of explanatory frameworks.

An ethnographic sensibility informs the ways that political scientists study everything from civil-war violence (Wood 2003) to the formation of public opinion (Walsh 2004) to compliance under authoritarian regimes (Wedeen 1999). Scholars often explore these topics through ethnographic research rooted in participant observation. However, despite dominant assumptions in the field, the embrace of an ethnographic sensibility need not be—and is not—limited to the domain of ethnographers. Neither does an ethnographic sensibility require the long-term immersion in field sites and participant-observation methods typical of anthropologists (Pader 2006; Schatz 2009), although both may be beneficial. Scholars can develop understandings of the social processes through which people make sense of their world by close readings of archival material, examinations of contemporary texts, interviews, and even survey data—to name just a few methods. What matters most is *how* scholars approach the material gathered from these sources—that is, paying attention to the political meanings embedded in them. Moreover, the fact that various scholars with various sources can successfully



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approach their research with an ethnographic sensibility is precisely why we think the arguments made here are important for political scientists in general. When political scientists incorporate meaning into their arguments—including all of the ambiguity and contradictions that these processes entail—they can potentially offer new understandings of well-traveled terrain and encourage new lines of inquiry, as suggested by the following examples.

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## SHIFTING HOW WE THINK ABOUT COMPARISON

Approaching comparison through attention to meaning creates a mode of analysis that is useful for political science but would require rethinking the goals and objects of comparative research designs. Instead of approaching comparison with the goal of exerting control over variables, the comparative approach we propose entails incorporating the meaning-making practices at work in the cases. This attention would entail three core shifts in how we think about and use comparative methods. The shifts are relevant not only to research designs but also to how scholars formulate questions and collect and analyze data.

First, an ethnographic sensibility requires that we recognize the limitations of efforts to control for theoretically relevant variation (Sewell 2005, chap. 3; Yanow 2014). These efforts create unnecessary analytical binds by requiring researchers to make assumptions: first, about what might be theoretically relevant; second, that they can see and measure everything of theoretical relevance; third, that the same empirical phenomena work in the same way in different times and places; and, fourth, that these phenomena are independent of one another.[1] Furthermore, efforts to control through case selection can push scholars to put very different social and political practices into similar categories, thus creating the illusion of having "controlled" for a potentially relevant phenomenon. An interest in identifying similarities and differences among cases in an effort to enhance comparative analysis need not force scholars to ignore important contextual complexities. Scholars can and should go into the field and enter the archives with what they think might be relevant similarities and differences in mind. However, designing a research project so that potentially relevant factors could be dismissed through "control" would be inappropriate for scholars approaching their research with an ethnographic sensibility. "Control" would be perceived as foreclosing opportunities to understand how context-specific nuance might have important implications for the research question. Instead, they would want to understand and incorporate relevant meanings at work in the cases at hand by seeing a political phenomenon through the eyes of their informants, whether they are living human subjects or historical figures found in the archives.

For example, when we control for variables such as levels of ethnic self- identification to eliminate them as potential explanations, we assume that ethnicity does the same work across time and space or that it means the same thing in one place as in another. We also must assume that the meanings of ethnicity or the processes through which ethnic self-identification take place can be abstracted from the political and social context in which they exist. If we are conducting a controlled comparison, we take these similar abstracted "levels" of ethnic self-identification in two cases where outcomes differ and state with confidence that ethnic self-identification cannot explain the divergence. Yet, adopting an ethnographic sensibility suggests that we can claim no such thing. Ethnic self-identification may do different political work in the two cases because ethnicity might mean something different to actors on the ground—even if the "level" of identification is the same—and thus could still play a role in shaping the political dynamics at work in both cases.[2]

Because the contexts in which people identify with various ethnic categories may play an important role in the political phenomenon under study, categorizing all instances of self-identification as the same encourages scholars to create general categories that obscure important differences. In her discussion of scholarship on Islamist politics, for instance, Schwedler (2015) found that this inclination to create group categories limits our understanding of political practices; the application of an ethnographic sensibility would minimize these tendencies.[3] Finally, ethnicity should not be conceived as independent from the political systems in which it is produced, which suggests that "ethnic self-identification" and "system of government" cannot be treated as separate independent variables (Laitin 1986; Wedeen 2008). Bringing an ethnographic sensibility to these types of studies would encourage us to incorporate the complexities of seemingly obvious categories into the comparisons. Of course, much of the most highly regarded work in the qualitative-comparative tradition already demonstrates a commitment to context.[4] However, comparison with an ethnographic sensibility does more than simply bring context into comparison; it allows us to compare the ambiguous and shifting meanings at work in the political worlds under study. Through explicit attention to meaning-making practices such as the political language people use, the symbols they deploy, and the rituals in which they participate (to name only a few), comparison with an ethnographic sensibility adds unique analytic leverage to even the most context-attentive studies.

This explicit incorporation of meaning into our comparative research designs is the second core shift that we describe. When case-study comparisons require scholars to live and work in particular field sites, they often cannot help but observe what political practices mean in particular contexts. As a result, attention to meaning may be implicitly incorporated into their analysis of even the most positivist accounts

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of political behavior. However, positivist comparative practices do not *require* that scholars do so and, in some cases, the assumptions on which these studies are based produce "objects of inquiry that are incommensurable with interpretivist social science" (Wedeen 2002, 717). The effect is that more often than not, at both the design and analysis stages, scholars categorize political phenomena while ignoring the meanings that words or practices take on and how those meanings shape politics.

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By paying attention to how the people we study—whether they are research participants, figures who appear in archival materials, or authors of texts—understand their world, an ethnographic sensibility adds depth to our understanding of politics beyond the incorporation of context. Ethnographers ask questions about what that context means and how it shapes actors' understandings of their world. Scholars using the comparative method with an ethnographic sensibility would not control for levels of indigenous self-identification because the method itself requires an investigation of what those social "facts" *mean* to political actors on the ground and the roles those meanings play in shaping social processes. This form of comparison does not take for granted the relevance of a particular variable (how could we possibly meet the requirement of Mills's method of agreement that we know before we conduct a study what the relevant variables are?) but rather inductively problematizes both its role and meaning in context. By explicitly calling on scholars to compare the work that meanings do in apparently different times and places, bringing an ethnographic sensibility to comparison offers a way out of the analytical binds created through the illusion of "control."

Applying an ethnographic sensibility to comparative research radically alters the objects and goals of comparison—the third core shift for which we advocate. Where political scientists typically compare similar or dissimilar outcomes, ethnographically oriented comparison highlights political processes—that is, the dynamics and practices that shape political life—as the proverbial outcome of interest. By advocating for attention to meaning making, we encourage scholars to understand political phenomena as constantly evolving. The objects of a social scientist's inquiry are never fixed, frozen, or static; therefore, they need to be understood through the lens of political processes. This suggests a move away from the language of variables to one that allows scholars to incorporate fluid and potentially contradictory political processes into their analyses.

In sum, by bringing an ethnographic sensibility to comparison, scholars can rethink what comparison means and the types of insights it can produce. They can engage critically with what attempts to control for alternative explanations can actually reveal about political processes, encourage a focus on the political effects of practices as opposed to outcomes, and allow fieldwork and archival research to define the relevant points of comparison. Adopting this approach also would help scholars refine theoretical models and challenge taken-for-granted conceptual categories. The remainder of the article discusses an example of recent research that incorporates meaning into the research design and analysis in ways that demonstrate how an ethnographic sensibility may be applied to comparative research.

## THE POLITICAL PROCESSES OF MAKING MEANING

In *Ethnic Boundary Making*, Wimmer (2013) asks how ethnic boundaries are made—a crucial question to answer because ethnic boundaries structure public debate, political loyalty, and the allocation of resources in numerous states across the globe. In a broad theoretical text that draws on interview and case comparisons from Switzerland and the United States, as well as survey data derived from 24 European countries, Wimmer argues that ethnic boundaries are neither infinitely transformable nor an automatic response to institutional categories, as different bodies of scholarly literature suggest. Writing in the tradition of Barth (1969) and Bourdieu (1977), he provides a process-oriented account of ethnic boundary making to show how ethnic categories are social creations yet have remarkable structuring power for social interaction. The result is an excellent example of how researchers can take *the process* through which a given outcome is produced as the object of inquiry (in this case, the actual making of ethnic boundaries) rather than explaining a given outcome. In doing so, Wimmer implicitly adopts an ethnographic sensibility because contests over the meaning of ethnicity are at the center of the account.

Ethnic boundaries, it turns out, are created by strategic struggles defining who is inside and outside of a group. The meanings attached to ethnic boundaries (along with the emotions and resources that accompany ethnic belonging) are products of individual actions and subsequently define the actions that individuals take relative to ethnic belonging. This argument has crucial political and theoretical consequences. In particular, outcomes that appear to be products of ethnic differentiation—for example, the clustering of immigrants of a given ethnicity in certain occupations—may actually be products of other political processes, such as strategic action to secure employment in a competitive labor market, rather than preexisting ethnic similarity. Therefore, the political meanings


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of ethnicity may not have ethnic *sources* but may be the result of strategic actions by individuals solving practical problems.

We highlight Wimmer's comparison of ethnic boundary making in three Swiss cities and show how adopting an ethnographic sensibility in conducting comparison—even if implicitly—enhanced his understandings of political processes. Focusing on social ties among residents of neighborhoods with high levels of in-migration in Basel, Bern, and Zurich, Wimmer and his team interviewed recent immigrants and long-term residents using a quota-sampling strategy (Wimmer 2013, 114–16). What the researchers found about local social networks and the values attached to those networks is striking: the boundary most starkly drawn by interviewees in the neighborhood was not between immigrants and Swiss but rather between those who had lived in the neighborhood longer and those who were newcomers—even among those who shared "similar" cultural backgrounds (ibid., 123). Although "ethnic categories are taken for granted" by residents, they "tend to play the role of secondary classifications only" (ibid., 124).

Given that our theories of ethnic politics predict that ethnic boundaries would be primary, how might this be? Wimmer argues that we can understand the primacy of neighborhood tenure over ethnic filiation through attention to the symbolic fields structuring neighborly behavior—that is, the fields of meaning in which residents are enmeshed. Ethnicity straddles existing symbolic dimensions to which long-term neighborhood residents have comported themselves over time—most important, a set of ideals for "decent" public comportment. Keeping streets clean, maintaining ordered public spaces, and being quiet to avoid disturbing neighbors become values by which established residents identify "insiders," even if they are of a different cultural background. Indeed, Swiss members of the alternative or punk scene who disregard these "petit bourgeois" values are perceived as outsiders (Wimmer 2013, 117–18), as are second-generation youth who resist the strictures of elder propriety (ibid., 123). In discovering that public comportment becomes the primary mechanism by which neighborhood residents identify allies, rather than ethnic identity, Wimmer shows the importance of actors' strategic action to align themselves within the existing symbolic field.

In other words, Wimmer brings an ethnographic sensibility to the question of immigrant incorporation by looking at the meanings of ethnicity and communal belonging that residents bring to their interactions, rather than assuming a priori that the experience of being an immigrant or having ethnic difference is the most important factor determining whether they are incorporated into Swiss society. Prioritizing meanings and the strategic interactions that they produce also leads Wimmer to take seriously the processes by which group belonging is constituted and contested. This attention to local meanings highlights how some immigrants are incorporated whereas others are not, with ethnicity surprisingly playing a secondary role in that process.

## CONCLUSION

What we as political scientists choose to compare and how we make those comparisons fundamentally structures the questions we ask and the knowledge we produce. If we bring an ethnographic sensibility to the formation of our questions, the design of our research projects, and the evaluation of our data, we can ask new questions and improve our contributions to long-standing debates.

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Adopting an ethnographic sensibility at the research-design stage creates new possibilities for the process of case selection. As illustrated above, cases need not be selected for their ability to address potential alternatives through "control" but rather for how elements of their processes speak to one another in theoretically relevant ways. As with most qualitative approaches to comparison, researchers must remain flexible—that is, willing to change cases and rethink categories—during data collection. However, this adaptation would result not from discovering, for example, that a case did not provide the necessary variation but rather from developing an understanding of what the interactions and events mean to the people who are directly involved. Here, the design and analysis stages overlap as scholars redesign their projects in response to new information gleaned during the research process.

Our goal is not to provide a "how-to" guide for bringing an ethnographic sensibility into research projects at each stage. Rather, we encourage scholars to think differently about how they view the goals of comparison in the first place by bringing an ethnographic sensibility to their work. Adopting such a sensibility also has the potential for wide-ranging effects by allowing the viewpoints we encounter to reflect back on and potentially challenge the analytical categories with which we began our research. Moreover, bringing an ethnographic sensibility to comparative research is not reserved for ethnographers. Scholars engaging in comparative historical analysis (e.g., Lawrence 2013), large-N statistical studies (e.g., Beissinger 2002), network analysis (e.g., Wimmer 2013; Parkinson 2013), and even game-theoretic approaches (e.g., Meierhenrich 2008) can—and sometimes do—incorporate meaning into their analyses. When they do, they challenge us to embrace the ways in which meaning shapes political structures and how attention to meaning can produce novel insights about political life. ■

## NOTES

1. George and Bennett (2005, 155) identified three slightly different assumptions: (1) a deterministic causal relationship that is either necessary or sufficient, (2) the identification of all causally relevant variables before

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analysis, and (3) the cases represent all possible causal paths. We do not disagree with the importance of these assumptions but argue that even if met (a highly difficult condition), the additional concerns we discuss here must be considered.

2. Sewell (2005, chap. 3) made a similar point about the problems of controlling for alternative explanations in historical-sociology research. See Madrid (2012) for a good example of how ethnic identification can do different work across time and place.
3. Notably, Schwedler (2015) states that we would "do well to…make different kinds of practices and processes as our objects of analyses."
4. See, for example, Locke and Thelen's (1995) discussion of contextualized comparisons.

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