

2 In defence of bad comparisons?

Comparisons and their motivations in Indonesia's Riau Islands

Nicholas J. Long

The comparative act, in enabling a new form of recognition along one axis, perpetrates dire misrecognition along another.

R. Radhakrishnan (2013: 19)

The 'bad comparison', sometimes known as the 'faulty comparison', is a principal scourge of Euroamerican philosophy. It features recurrently in handbooks of logical reasoning and in compendia of errors that the careful thinker should avoid. In *Logically Fallacious: The Ultimate Collection of Over 300 Logical Fallacies*, Bennett (2018: 122) gives the following as a prototypical example of 'faulty comparison':

Example #1: Broccoli has significantly less fat than the leading candy bar!

Explanation: While both broccoli and candy bars can be considered snacks, comparing the two in terms of fat content and ignoring the significant difference in taste leads to the false comparison.

Perkins (1995: 47), meanwhile, draws the reader's attention to 'faulty analogies', a logical fallacy in which a faulty comparison is intrinsically embedded:

DAD: I don't see why you can't ride your bike to school, Jimmy. When I was a kid, that's what I did, and it was fine.

This, Perkins explains, would only be a good argument 'provided that Dad's situation and Jimmy's are not dissimilar in relevant ways' (1995: 47). Jimmy's journey may be quite different to what Dad's had been; if so, this too is a bad comparison. For Damer (2013: 164), such sloppy reasoning demands to be 'attacked', 'blunted' through the use of effective counteranalogy, or exposed as fallacious. 'Above all', he urges, 'do not allow a clever user of false analogies to think that simply pointing out interesting similarities between two cases qualifies as acceptable evidence for a claim about *one* of them'.

The fear of bad comparisons also haunts many anthropologists. As Miller et al. (2019: 284) note, while anthropology was initially conceived

as a comparative discipline, it is increasingly ‘characterised by a powerful particularism that implies not just cultural relativism but even incommensurability, because of our emphasis upon the specific cultural and historical context of each ethnographic case’. To compare – indeed, to even generalise a ‘fieldsite’ as a unit that can be compared – may thus be seen as a ‘betrayal of specificity’ (Miller et al. 2019: 283) comparable to that evident in Bennett and Perkins’ ‘faulty comparisons’.

Indeed, anthropologists have often used their deep knowledge of local specifics to problematise the ‘bad comparisons’ underpinning dominant ideologies. For example, while discourses of ‘meritocracy’ attribute differentials in academic attainment to divergences in innate ability or effort and motivation, anthropologists have highlighted the meaningful cultural and structural differences that shape students’ pathways through education (see e.g. Bartlett, Frederick-McGlathery, Guldbrandsen & Murillo 2002; Davidson 2011; Fordham 1996; Koh 2012; Willis 1981; Wilson 1991). In some cases, such interventions even result in comparative propositions of their own, such as Bourdieu’s (2000) argument that those with a grip on the present are most able to change the future, while the disadvantaged and dispossessed oscillate between unrealistic fantasy and despair, thereby failing to obtain the social mobility they may crave. Drawing attention to such particularities allows anthropologists to substitute a *bad* comparison with what is believed to be a *better* comparison: one that embeds a circumspect attention to cultural difference and structural inequality into its very framing. Given the symbolic violence levelled against those who do not conform to hegemonic visions of ‘success’, such policing of comparison is far from a matter of particularist pedantry: rather, it is seen as an integral part of an engaged anthropology that speaks truth to power.

Yet, despite widespread scholarly and political aversion to bad comparisons, ‘faulty’ reasoning is commonly in evidence amongst the people with whom anthropologists work. Indeed, such fallacies as the myth of meritocracy may be actively embraced by the very people that anthropologists hope to rescue from their disciplining force. So what should we do when we encounter in the field forms of comparative practice that we would roundly critique if we saw them being propagated within governmental or social science discourse? Should we attempt to actively ‘attack’ or ‘blunt’ these fallacies, as Damer (2013) recommends? Do we listen to them with gritted teeth, dutifully documenting them as evidence of how profoundly the bad comparisons circulating in dominant ideologies have shaped public consciousness? Or could we in some way ‘take them seriously’ – a response posited within some scholarly quarters as the quintessential and proper anthropological reaction (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2011)? Could we even see them as offering alternatives to our own epistemological traditions?

Refusing the polar extremes of either embracing or dismissing ‘bad comparisons’, this chapter proposes a middle ground, advocating an

anthropology of comparisons that understands them to be significant *affectively* as well as epistemologically. It does this with particular reference to ethnographic materials gathered in Indonesia's Riau Islands Province. This borderland region has a complicated (post)colonial history that has led its residents to experience a lifetime of comparing themselves (and being compared to) diverse others, from the Singaporeans and Malaysians who live a short distance across the water to their counterparts in other parts of Indonesia – comparisons in which they, as Riau Islanders, often emerge unfavourably. Numerous additional comparisons also saturate their lives – from those at the heart of everyday kinship practices to the comparative evaluations of citizen-workers routinely enacted by both local employers and the Indonesian state.

I draw on fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2018 to show how such local and personal histories of comparison, shaped by colonial legacies, globalisation, economic inequality, and kinship structure, have profound implications for the affective consequences of specific comparative acts. Such an analysis not only explains why 'bad comparisons' might routinely be made – indeed, might prove vital and be worthy of 'defence'. It also presents a challenge to the universalising and evolutionary assumptions evident in the subfield of psychology known as 'social comparison theory'. I propose that comparison and its affects are better treated as objects of intensive person-centred ethnography and analysed through the psychoanalytically inspired frameworks that have been central to that person-centred tradition. I conclude by reflecting on the implications that this discussion might have for narrative strategy within anthropology itself at the dawn of what some have dubbed the discipline's 'new comparativism' (Weisman & Luhrmann 2020: 134).

Initial motivations

It was 2005 when I first began conducting ethnographic research in Tanjung Pinang, the capital of the Riau Islands Province. As I went about the business of settling into a new and unfamiliar place, the town's teachers were amongst the most welcoming and supportive of my new associates. Yet their friendship came at a price: a few days, hours, or even minutes after numbers and addresses had been exchanged would come a phone call, text message, or knock at the door, summoning me to a local school. The most typical request was that I step into a few lessons and 'give the students motivation'. But what did this mean in practice? I had no idea.

I came up with an improvised motivational speech – don't feel you have to be perfect at everything; follow your interests; play to your strengths; there's more to education than a school curriculum – and delivered it with what I hoped was zest and verve. But although the pupils usually listened politely, the stony looks on my teacher friends' faces made it clear

that I had not delivered the ‘motivational’ performance they had been expecting. Eventually, one teacher, Fatimah, decided to take matters into her own hands.¹ She led me to a classroom and asked me to speak to the students. I started with my usual spiel. A few sentences in, Fatimah cut me off.

‘Mr Nick has only been learning Indonesian for five months, and he can already speak Indonesian as fluently as that!’ she barked. ‘How long have you lot been learning English? And are you fluent yet? No! The pupils in this school are lazy! Lazy! So lazy! You need to study hard like Mr Nick’. The students were silent. A few stared straight at her, most looked down at their desks. Fatimah turned to me. ‘Come on’, she said icily, ‘let’s go’. *That*, she explained as she whisked me out the classroom and towards the school canteen, was going to give them motivation.

In 2018, I was back in Tanjung Pinang, catching up with many old friends. Amongst the most determined to meet me was Suhardi, a man I had first met during a beauty contest for which I had served as a judge (Long 2007). He had turned out to live fairly close to my boarding house and we had several friends in common; our paths had crossed intermittently over the years. Suhardi was now doing very well for himself: he had married the daughter of a prominent local politician, was father to two healthy children, had a good job in the civil service, had completed a Masters degree at a prestigious Indonesian university, and had since been accepted by another prestigious institution to commence a PhD. Over dinner, he told me how surprised he had been to discover that, at 33, he was the youngest of the PhD students in his cohort. ‘Actually’, he said, laughing a little bashfully, I was inspired by you, Nick. When I saw that there was someone in my neighbourhood, living pretty close to me, who already had a Masters degree and was studying for his PhD, it gave me motivation. I thought “if he has been able to, then I should be able to”. And I have.’

This was a poignant, celebratory moment, made all the more powerful by the unexpectedness of Suhardi’s revelation. But similar narratives, shared before my friends’ goals had been fully realised, had – in my eyes – a more tragic cast. I recall, for instance, the day that Iyan, a charismatic, computer-obsessed school caretaker from one of the poorest regions of the Riau Archipelago, shared the effects that our friendship was having on his life. ‘Meeting you has given me motivation, Nick’, he began. ‘One day, I will get to England. I thought to myself yesterday, “If Nick can get over here, then I must be able to get over there.” I can do it!’ As he smiled beatifically at me, the improbability of this dream was heartbreaking. Colleagues to whom I subsequently narrated this encounter have sometimes suggested that Iyan was attempting to mobilise my sympathies in order to secure financial assistance. But Iyan, a man who was not averse to asking for money when he needed it, was speaking with the passion and conviction of motivation incarnate. His narrative seemed not cynical but sincere, a prelude to his

informing me of the radical plans he had developed to catapult himself on a pathway to cosmopolitan success.

The vignettes set out above share many features in common. They are all structured around a comparative manoeuvre in which the achievements of particular Indonesians are found wanting when contrasted with those of a visiting British anthropologist. Moreover, the realisation of that mismatch, and a desire to correct for it, serves, in each case, as a purported wellspring of ‘motivation’.

And it is here that a puzzle emerges. These are all, by conventional academic standards, bad comparisons. By presuming equivalence between the individuals concerned, they gloss over the many structural inequalities that make it much easier for me, as a British citizen, to learn a foreign language, get a PhD, or travel to another continent than is the case for my interlocutors. Indeed – and remember here the downcast looks of Fatimah’s students – these comparisons may be bad in both an epistemological *and* a morally normative sense. They seem to perpetrate both analytic and symbolic violence, responsabilising and admonishing the underperforming subject (‘Lazy! So lazy!’) for outcomes that have more complex, social origins. The immediate assumption amongst many of my colleagues that Iyan was somehow trying to draw attention to his disadvantage proves interesting in this regard, suggestive of their (and, perhaps, a disciplinary?) desire to construct Iyan as a ‘critical’ subject. That he might willingly commit such flagrant symbolic violence against himself seems difficult to stomach. And yet he did, as did Suhardi, claiming to find in those masochistic comparative operations an affectively powerful ‘motivation’. Their testimonies have, in turn, motivated *me* to think more deeply about the *affective* role comparison plays in human sociality and to reflect on what implications such an enquiry has for how we as anthropologists should go about comparison in our fieldwork and in our writing.

The psychodynamics of comparison

That comparisons can be affectively charged is intuitively obvious to anyone who has ever felt a twinge of envy, the thrill of being declared ‘the best’, or inferiority’s painful gnaw. Indeed, comparison is increasingly being indicted as a mental health issue – a toxic habit of which we need to be ‘cured’ (Sheridan 2019) – the juxtaposition of carefully curated social media feeds with the sheer mundanity of viewers’ everyday life having been found to provoke deep plunges in self-worth and to trigger or exacerbate depressive episodes (Hoge, Bickham & Cantor 2017). Such comparisons are tragically bad; not just epistemologically flawed, but psychologically harmful. However, given that my fieldwork sometimes found comparison to be motivating, rather than deflating, the question arises as to whether there are

any *systematic* or *predictable* associations between comparative practices and the feelings they yield.

This question has been most extensively explored in a subfield of social psychology known as ‘social comparison theory’. Through psychological experiments – primarily conducted with school and college students in the United States – social comparison researchers have identified several patterns in the affective dynamics associated with specific comparative acts. Firstly, they claim that subjects set about comparisons with others in an *anxious* attempt to evaluate the appropriateness of their conduct. This was one of the key principles set out by Festinger (1954) in his seminal work on social comparison, and also finds some support from ethnographic studies (see e.g. Miller 2001). Secondly, they have found that such comparisons often have an *aspirational* quality: U.S. high school students tended to compare themselves to peers who were performing ‘better’ in a manner that led to sympathetic identifications: they thought it was nice for the other person to be doing well and hoped that they would be able to get such good grades in future, too (Buunk, Kuyper & van der Zee 2005).² Thirdly, though, when ‘confronted with someone who outperforms them’, individuals often adopt various *defensive* postures (Buunk & Gibbons 2007: 5). These include ‘biasing the reconstruction of one’s past’ (Klein & Kunda 1993), deflecting the comparison by emphasising aspects of one’s identity that differentiates one from the standard (Mussweiler, Gabriel & Bodenhausen 2000), labelling a better performing rival a ‘genius’, or in some other way distancing oneself from the comparator (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst & Zhang 1997; Tesser 1988). All of these strategies work by suggesting that the comparison is unrealistic.

Such findings are important for the present discussion because they illustrate not only that comparisons are emotionally charged in complex ways, but also that such emotional charge can, at least sometimes, leak into epistemological claims about whether a comparison is ‘fair’ or ‘faulty’. They also, at first glance, offer a plausible explanation for the ‘motivation’ attested to by Suhardi and Iyan. ‘Bad’ though their comparisons may be, social comparison theory invites us to understand them as aspirational, sympathetic, ‘upward’ comparisons of the kind that people around the world make every day.

There are nevertheless limits to the value of social comparison theory for understanding how people compare. For social comparison theorists, comparison and its affects stem from features of human psychology that are presumed to be universal. Festinger (1954: 117, 135–6), the founder of the field, believed that human beings had an innate drive to evaluate themselves: for him, sociality was ultimately a quest for counterparts against whom one could compare oneself – and, since ‘satisfying’ comparisons could only be made with those who were relatively congruent in opinions or abilities, the urge to compare preceded and indeed led to ‘social segmentation’. More recent work has buttressed this universalising outlook with a turn to evolutionary psychology. Claiming that ‘social comparison is a

central feature of human social life [and that] the need to compare the self with others is found in many other species as well', for instance, Buunk and Gibbons argue that comparative urges have 'evolved as a very adaptive mechanism for sizing up one's competitors' (2007: 3; see also Gilbert, Price & Allan 1995; Workman & Reader 2015: 196).

The problem with such approaches is that they conflate human propensities for (self-)evaluation, which most anthropologists would concede are fundamental to the human condition (see Laidlaw 2014: 3), with particular social orders. They thus present competitiveness, segmentation, and the ability to determine 'congruence' as straightforward, natural, and psychological in origin, rather than as the contestable outcomes of sociopolitical systems that could have been otherwise. That so much social comparison research has been conducted in the competitive and highly segregated context of educational settings in the capitalist United States has doubtless helped sustain the illusion. Ironically, then, research in the field of 'social comparison' is itself an example of poor comparative practice, though the fallacy in question here is less that of the faulty analogy than that of hasty generalisation. Regardless, given anthropologists' anxieties about the 'betrayal of specificity' in cross-cultural accounts (Miller et al. 2019: 283), it is clear that a more circumspect and contextually sensitive framework is required for an anthropology of comparison.

I therefore propose turning away from social psychology and towards psychological anthropology, specifically the tradition of 'person-centred ethnography', which examines how 'the individual's psychology and subjective experience both shapes, and is shaped by, social and cultural processes' (Hollan 2001: 48). As Chodorow (1999) outlines in her manifesto for a relationally psychoanalytic anthropology, the conceptions that we acquire during our lives always carry two layers of meaning: 'cognitive' or 'cultural' meaning, which delineates the *content* of the idea, and 'emotional' or 'personal' meaning, which derives from the lived relations through which we acquired the conception, and which shapes the way we will feel about, and react to, it in future. In the words of Throop (2003: 118):

The present moment of immediate duration is always infused with the lingering traces of past experience which help to pattern the contours of our conscious (and non-conscious) life. There is a persistence and coherence to these residues of past experience that, although not necessarily shared between individuals, does often persist across time and across situations in the organization of a single individual's thought patterns, feelings, goals and motivations in everyday interaction.

From this perspective, the affects associated with any comparison will be shaped by the personal meanings attached to the objects being compared, the very act of comparison, and the comparative frame in which one is being held.

This final point – the affective significance of the comparative frame – is worth emphasising since much existing work on social comparison assumes the subject to be driven by an urge to perform ‘well’ within the context of a self-evident reference group. There are of course many contexts where this assumption holds, schools and universities being prime examples. But more conflicted feelings can surround the comparative frame in which one is held. I recall an impassioned presentation I witnessed at an academic conference on democratisation, at which Hiba, a speaker from Tunisia, voiced her frustration with Tunisia being described by political scientists as the ‘best democracy’ in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). This, she argued, was a comparative manoeuvre that lumped Tunisia together with what she saw as the world’s ‘very worst’ nations. She implored us to instead speak of Tunisia as the worst democracy in the Mediterranean. The emotional resonance of being labelled ‘best’ or ‘worst’ was, it seemed, less significant to her than the feelings surrounding the comparative frame within which she, as a Tunisian citizen, was spoken of.

Hiba’s request reminds us that the very act of holding an entity beside another in a comparative frame, and presuming an equivalence between them, can be affectively powerful in itself, especially if the comparator is a particularly charged personal symbol. These affects, and the potency of the personal symbols involved, were inseparable both from Tunisia’s specific history of colonialism, class, and race (see e.g. Jankowsky 2010), and from the power dynamics surrounding the discursive figuration of ‘Middle Eastern’ nations in the early twenty-first century. By extension, I argue, the affects driving the comparisons made by Riau Islanders must be understood in light of the specific national and postcolonial histories of this region, as well as the specific personal and familial histories that unfolded within this context. Paying attention to such histories allows us to understand why ‘bad comparisons’ might sometimes feel intuitively compelling. It also challenges us as scholars and anthropologists to confront the power dynamics embedded in our own impulse to debunk such comparisons as ‘faulty’ and to insist on alternative comparative frames that we feel are ‘better’: more ‘critical’ or more appropriate. It suggests that if we are to develop forms of comparative framing in our writing that can feel rigorous and satisfying to both *us* and our interlocutors, we must first consider closely what is at stake in comparison within our fieldsites.

Comparison in the Riau Islands

Riau Islanders have long found themselves on the receiving end of unflattering comparisons. The Riau Archipelago was once the political and economic epicentre of the Riau-Lingga sultanate, a hub of international trade. This status dwindled during the nineteenth century as nearby Singapore became the region’s primary entrepôt and the Riau Islands became a ‘quiet backwater’ (Touwen 2001: 90–1). Its marginal status was further cemented

following Indonesian independence, when it was annexed to the Eastern Sumatran mainland and governed from the city of Pekanbaru. With the notable exception of Batam, an island close to Singapore that was selected by the national government to be a manufacturing hub within the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT), most of the islands received little investment during this period, leaving their residents with a profound sense of being left behind. They compared themselves to their counterparts in mainland Riau, on Batam, across the border in Singapore and Malaysia, and in the Riau Islands of the precolonial past, and they found themselves wanting. The resentments these comparisons engendered helped drive a campaign for provincial secession, resulting in the Riau Islands Province separating from the Sumatran province of 'Riau' in 2004 (see Long 2013). Yet not even this could quell the suspicion amongst many of my interlocutors that their province was one of the most backward in Indonesia.

Such anxieties were compounded by Southeast Asia's long history of prejudice against Malays – the Riau Islands' autochthonous ethnic group. Colonists in the region decried the 'indolence' of Malays as they refused to cooperate with colonial orders, a theme that persisted within postcolonial projects of nation-building, most especially in Malaysia (see Alatas 1977). Prime Minister Mahathir had concluded in his 1970 *The Malay Dilemma* that the stark inequality in asset ownership between Malays and Chinese reflected biological differences between the two races. Tropical 'abundance', he argued, had allowed 'even the weakest' Malays to survive and reproduce; by contrast, the hardships of life in China had led to the 'weeding out of the unfit', such that Chinese migrants to Malaysia were racially 'hardy' – pre-adapted to be entrepreneurial, tenacious, and to blow Malays out of the water (Mahathir bin Mohamad 1970: 21–4). These narratives became influential in Indonesia as well. Though the term 'Malay' has a narrower meaning in the Indonesian context, referring to a specific 'ethnic' group (*suku etnis*) rather than a broad racial category, Riau Islanders internalised the idea that Malays were at a natural disadvantage to other ethnic groups (Long 2013: 98–126). This perception was only corroborated when the lucrative employment opportunities offered by the IMS-GT were overwhelmingly offered to migrants from Java and Sumatra, rather than local-born Riau Islanders. My interlocutors spoke widely of the need to change the local 'mindset', insisting this was the only way to overturn the pernicious legacies of both structural neglect and what they perceived to be 'Malay' patterns of thought.

These political-economic factors ramified through Riau Islanders' subjectivities, and their practices of comparison, in complex ways. Their influence can be seen in the embarrassed, defensive reactions that my presence in the Riau Islands sometimes elicited, as my interlocutors projected their own negative apprehensions of the province's comparative standing onto my international eyes. ('I bet there's no forest in Britain, is there?' laughed one civil servant awkwardly as she drove me through a wooded area during

a trip to the coast, ‘Just city everywhere’.) It could be discerned in the way that teachers such as Fatimah readily put their students into a common reference group with a visitor such as myself, the key difference being our respective ‘laziness’ and ‘motivation’. Indeed, it could also be discerned in the way Fatimah herself described striving for success. She had hopes of supplementing her income as a schoolteacher by establishing a private after-school education business. To be successful in this endeavour, however, she was convinced she needed to learn how to stop herself ‘thinking like a Malay’ and emulate Chinese Indonesians instead:

Not in social terms, or with family — then I will still be a Malay. But in business terms, I will be like a Chinese. When I open my course, I won’t be like usual Malays or other Indonesians. I have watched the Chinese, and I have learnt from their experience. I had to do that if I wanted to succeed. When I run my course I will behave exactly like a Chinese.

(in Long 2013: 123)

Fatimah justified her approach by claiming it was ‘common knowledge’ that Chinese people were more successful than Malays and that this was evident both in her school and in the town’s economic landscape, where Chinese-owned businesses were far more visible in the central marketplace than those owned by Malays. This was a bad comparison: one which invoked differences in ‘mindset’ and ‘behaviour’ to account for attainment differentials that can easily be attributed to settlement patterns and longstanding forms of structural disadvantage within the town centre and her school’s catchment area (Long 2013: 115–26). That Fatimah made such a comparison doubtless reflects both the broader discursive environment in which she lived and her own personal history. She described being mercilessly bullied as a teenager for being stupid and for not having made it into a ‘good school’. Chinese students from the local accounting and secretarial school had been amongst her most vindictive tormentors. To prove her equal worth, she had devoted much of her life to proving that she, a Malay of poor rural background, could be a success. She had already shown that going to a dimly regarded school was no obstacle to becoming a respected teacher. Now she would prove she could do everything that a privileged urban Chinese businessperson could. Yet doing so required her to distance herself from those aspects of herself that others deemed ‘Malay’. As in the U.S. case described by Fordham (1996: 236, 248), racist discourse led to a subjectivity ‘riddled with self-doubt and friction’, at once ‘raceless’ (obtaining acceptance and legitimacy by disavowing her Malayness) and yet compelled to compare in ethnoracial terms.

The internal battle that Fatimah’s self-mortification involved, with the ‘lazy’ impulses she coded as ‘Malay’ waging war against a fantasised entrepreneurial Otherness, could also explain the distinct affective tonality of her own attempts to ‘motivate’ her students. For if the ‘laziness’ that she

disparaged in them was not merely the invocation of a colonial stereotype, but also a reviled aspect of herself that she was struggling to disavow, then this could readily explain her anger and her coldness.³ Regardless, her introjection of derogatory attitudes towards her as a Malay, coupled with her projection of similar disregard onto her students (of whom many were Malay), risked the perpetuation of the very insecurities that her efforts to ‘motivate’ her students – and her decision to become a teacher – had intended to overturn.

(Post)colonial power dynamics, including the psychic ramifications of political and racial comparisons, are thus profoundly implicated in impelling and naturalising destructive forms of comparative practice in the Riau Islands. These are comparisons that an anthropologist might well want to subject to critical scrutiny. Fatimah’s comparative practice is bad not just epistemologically, but in terms of what it does in the world: she is left filled with self-righteous anger; her students feel cowed; there was little evidence of anyone feeling the ‘motivation’ her comparison was intended to produce. A critical account could allow Fatimah and others like her to better understand how structural oppression has shaped her interval world, affording the opportunity for her to think about herself and those around her in other, and perhaps newly generative, ways.

But against such a backdrop of persistently humiliating and shame-saturated comparative practice, in which the Riau Islands and its inhabitants have been repeatedly positioned as the worst of the worst, how should we understand the positive testimonies of motivational power attributed to ostensibly similar forms of ‘bad comparison’? And what implications might that have for whether and how anthropologists should police comparison in and through their work?

Comparison’s motivations: person-centred perspectives

In July 2011, I was invited to discuss my research with students at a satellite campus of a local university, situated in the south of the Riau Archipelago. Ramadan closures left only one option available for breakfast – a noodle joint run by an elderly Chinese man. As I was eating, two young men in the corner seemed to be taking an intense interest in my presence. Hearing me order another round of coffee, the younger of the two asked me if I could speak Indonesian. When I replied that I could, he immediately invited me over to his table.

This was Iyan, the school caretaker I introduced at the start of this chapter. He was there having breakfast with his housemate Yanto.⁴ In his subsequent recollections of this encounter, Iyan told his friends that we instantly ‘connected’ (*nyambung*). The conversation had certainly flowed very easily as we discussed everything from my research plans, to his parents’ historic relocation from Java under the government’s ill-fated ‘transmigration’ project, to Yanto’s enterprise in trapping the wild pigs that were devastating

transmigrant agriculture. Before long, I was invited back to Iyan's house to meet his family.

Iyan's mother had died some years previously, after a short-lived battle with cancer. His father, Husrin, was an alert, sinewy man, who had recently retired from a stone quarry. He introduced himself to me by immediately comparing himself to the other Indonesians he had worked alongside. All the other workers at the quarry had been jealous of him, he told me, because he was the manager's favourite: the 'golden boy' (*anak mas*). His big break had come from alerting his supervisor when his manager inadvertently left a large pile of cash in his car. As a reward for this honesty, Husrin was given a monthly bonus throughout his final four years of employment and was immediately moved from the back-breaking work of sand shovelling to a less onerous job in the packing department. He was also repeatedly called on for special jobs, such as chauffeuring guests, for which he would be given small bonuses. Other workers might have wondered why they weren't offered such opportunities, but Husrin felt they had made trouble for themselves, always thinking they knew better than their foremen and therefore not doing what they had been told. Husrin, by contrast, carried out instructions to the letter; he had earned his status as a favourite by repeatedly proving himself to be competent and trustworthy.

It was on a similar comparative basis that Husrin had decided Iyan was his least favourite child. He revealed this unprompted to me one day when Iyan was late arriving home, running through each of his children in turn. His first-born, Saskia, had impressed him with her frugality and generosity. She had been such a good person that after her heart failed, hundreds of people came to see the body – even the local subdistrict head. His one surviving daughter, Sinta, was also a good person, although he had little else to say about her. Fio, his oldest son, who worked as a primary school teacher on the remote island of Delapan⁵ was 'the brains of the family'. Husrin pointed to a computer. 'Fio's the one who's good with this!' he told me proudly. There was then an awkward pause. He knew I was closest to Iyan. 'Iyan's started getting into computers now', he conceded, 'but he only got interested in them because of Fio. In truth, Fio's the one who knows how to use them'. I smiled blandly. Husrin went on to explain how he had tried to convince Aras, his youngest son, to learn about computers too. Aras, however, had shown little interest in technology. His passion was for foreign languages. This had disappointed Husrin: he wanted his sons to have skills that were appropriate for the times they were living in. But he had let it be. It had been a surprise when, several years later, Aras was deemed to have good enough English to work as a waiter in a privately-owned island resort. This was no mean feat – few locally-born workers were ever employed in such businesses – and it had rendered Aras the family's biggest earner by far. Yet Husrin seemed, if anything, rather put out that Aras's wages were greater than Fio's. That didn't make sense. Fio was the talented one! All Aras had going for him was that he was hard-working; perhaps, Husrin reflected, it was his sheer doggedness that had allowed him to get ahead.

Iyan, however, was neither talented nor hard-working in his father's eyes. He was a disappointment. The crunch point in their relationship had come when Iyan was studying for his bachelor's degree at a university in mainland Sumatra. The degree had been expensive, a pressure compounded by the costs of renting a house (it was a mistake, Iyan said in retrospect, to rent more than a single bedroom). Perhaps there were other profligacies too: Iyan occasionally referred to his student days as a time of drinking until he 'lost control'. Regardless, he was struggling to pay his fees. He had asked at the campus for bursaries and had received them. After two years, however, he decided that his financial situation was hopeless. He dropped out.

From Husrin's perspective, this turn of events was difficult to explain. Neither Fio nor his daughters had encountered such problems when studying. Besides, he had sent Iyan 'a lot of money' when he first went off to Sumatra. Nevertheless, Iyan seemed to be constantly phoning to complain that it wasn't enough. Eventually, Husrin had drawn on (and thereby jeopardised) his good standing with his managers at the quarry, asking for several months' advance payment in order to support Iyan in Sumatra. Life at home had been marked by hunger and hardship as Husrin raced to clear the debt. And yet, despite everything, Iyan had returned home without a degree. Husrin 'told' me (but in an enquiring tone that suggested he was seeking corroboration of his conjecture's plausibility) that there must have been a lot of corruption at that university. He rubbed his thumb and forefingers together whenever he spoke of the institution. And yet his need to preface every other sentence in his account with 'Oh, that Iyan' suggested that he considered his second son as culpable for his failure as the situation with which he was grappling.

Upon getting to know the family better, I discovered aspects of the children's life histories of which Husrin appeared unaware. He seemed not to know, for instance, that Iyan had helped support his older brother Fio while they were both studying in Sumatra, nor that Fio, his own 'golden boy' (in whose attainments and qualities I suspected Husrin saw a reflection of himself), had supplemented his income by taking on morally murky jobs of which he now felt ashamed. Nevertheless, Husrin's apprehension of his children's relative merits and faults had embedded Iyan firmly in a comparative matrix in which he emerged as deficient, however much Husrin rubbed his thumb. This was the evaluative gaze that Iyan was subjected to every day as he lived alongside his father, and of which his status as a mere high-school graduate proved an especially potent reminder.

The affective force of this intrafamilial comparison was only compounded by the government's declaration, shortly after Iyan had abandoned his studies, that all schoolteachers must have at least an undergraduate degree. Iyan's hopes of following in the footsteps of Saskia and Fio were dashed. He might never be anything more in the school system than a janitor. The new system, he argued, had led to him being 'completely undervalued and overlooked'. He told me he knew lots of people who felt the same way: they

were looked down on because they were ‘mere’ high-school graduates, regardless of their potential and skills.

Iyan’s complaint chimed with my own observations. My interlocutors – especially the most educated – would often talk of being ‘S1’ (i.e. with a bachelor’s degree) or ‘S2’ (with a masters degree) in an almost caste-like way: graduates, they said (themselves included), had little interest in socialising with those who had not been to university (see also Schut 2019). These were people who thought in fundamentally different ways to each other; they would ‘not connect’ (*tidak nyambung*). Iyan, by contrast, considered it important to judge people not on their certification, but on their knowledge and potential. He had received As and Bs in the exams he had taken before dropping out and felt many people who had graduated from his course knew far less about the material than him. He and Fio had even raised money for their studies by writing dissertations to order for other students. With nothing more than a title, a few key words, and their own research prowess, they had been able to produce work in a wide range of disciplines besides their own, all of which had received satisfactory scores – easily high enough to pass.

Given that he inhabited a social system that routinely disparaged him because of his relative lack of qualifications, Iyan’s repeated narration that our first meeting involved an instant ‘connection’ takes on a distinct significance. Whereas I, who had also sensed a ‘connection’, was inclined to attribute it to something mysterious – a ‘click’ or ‘chemistry’ that marked Iyan out not just as an ‘interlocutor’ but a prospective friend – I now suspect that for Iyan, this ‘connection’ warranted persistent announcement less because of what it said about the closeness of our friendship than because it attested to his ability to ‘connect’ with a highly educated person: someone who also ‘connected’ with (or at least spoke to) academics and politicians, introduced him to other educated people (such as the lecturers at the satellite campus), and thereby allowed him to put himself in a different comparative frame to that through which he was habitually viewed in both his private and his public life.

It is against this backdrop that we must also interpret his claim that meeting me had given him ‘motivation’. He had seen, he said, how I had studied, ‘increased my awareness’ (*tambah wawasan*), and consequently been able to travel the world. If I could do it, so could he. This was not, however, a claim made by someone oblivious to structural disadvantage: Iyan was all too aware of it – if also, perhaps, conscious that some of his difficulties stemmed from his own decisions over how to spend the money his father had sent him. His was a wilful comparison, fuelled by a determination not to let his present predicament define him. Rather than comparing his prospects to those in a similar situation to his own, he wanted to keep his frame of comparative reference wide. ‘These days we don’t get a chance because we’ve only graduated from high school’, he elaborated, ‘but when I was at primary school, I had dreams and ambitions just like anybody else’.

By insisting on his essential sameness – to me, to his former schoolmates, to the university students who had graduated by submitting dissertations he had written – he not only defied the cruelty of the comparisons around him that deemed him of low value. He also conjured a ‘figured world’ (Solomon 2012) in which it was still possible for his potential to be fulfilled, and in which he could frame his life as one of participation in a global cosmopolitan ecumene: an enterprise which, as Luvaas (2009, 2010) has documented, is a key grounds on which contemporary Indonesian youth find a sense of value and purpose in their lives.

Iyan had a plan for how this might be done. First he would move to Delapan – a small island with no mobile phone signal, where Fio currently worked as a teacher in the island’s only school. At the time, this only provided education to junior-high level, but the head teacher wanted to expand the school so it could have a senior high school offering. The Department of Education had approved this plan but had found it impossible to recruit teachers for such a remote location. The head teacher had therefore agreed to employ Iyan, despite his lack of an undergraduate degree. There was nobody else who could teach computing to senior high school standard (not even Fio, whatever Husrin might have thought) and so Iyan would be the new computer science teacher. Iyan was delighted – this arrangement, he said, had ‘already allowed him to become a kind of civil servant’, and he had acquired it, he emphasised, on the basis of his skills. Once in the job, he hoped that his natural potential would shine forth, so that, within five years, he would be offered a permanent job in the Ministry of Education. In the meantime, he would set about saving his salary to fund a diploma in computer hacking, which he planned to undertake, if possible, at the London School of Economics. There were no designated programmes in computer hacking in Indonesia, he explained, but he figured that in the United Kingdom there must be lots. Having acquired the diploma, he would return to the Riau Islands, hack the local government network, and make every civil servant’s computer screen go black.

‘It’s like this, Nick’, he said with deadly earnestness. ‘If I’ve hacked their systems, then let’s see whether the people who are employed in the district government can fix the hacking and get the system up and running again! If they can’t – and I bet they can’t! – they’re going to have to admit they’re employing the wrong people. Actually, as a hacker, I will have information that I’ll be able to share with people, and that I can use to make Indonesia more advanced!’

Finally, Iyan hoped he would be compared with others on the basis of his skills, knowledge, and potential – and come out on top.

In *The Power of Feelings*, Chodorow (1999) draws on clinical case studies of various white, heterosexual women from the United States to show that gender is both cultural and personal. It is personal in that every woman’s experience of gender is shaped by her specific lived history of social relations.

But it is also cultural, insofar as every woman ‘emotionally particularises’ selected aspects of shared gender scripts and symbologies and, most importantly, has her inner world profoundly shaped, albeit in different ways, by the gender inequality running through U.S. society. Similarly, the ways that Riau Islanders relate to and are affected by comparison are personal and idiosyncratic, yet recognisably moulded by common features, notably the experience of marginality and the psychic burdens associated with the problematisation of ‘human resource quality’ within Indonesia’s contemporary ideologies of development (Gellert 2015; Indrawati & Kuncoro 2021; Long 2013: 173–205).

Strikingly, and despite living in a province where there are widespread discourses of neglect, cultural inferiority, and backwardness, Iyan – unlike Fatimah – never spoke of his difficulties in terms of what it meant to be a Riau Islander, or to have been raised in a Malay cultural environment (his ancestry was Javanese, but he claimed that growing up in the Riau Islands had made him Malay). His narrative of himself was not grounded in difference. He did not, as others might, attribute his problems with money management to the ‘live-for-the-moment’ mentality stereotypically associated with Malays; he saw no need to emulate or internalise aspects of a thriftier Other. Nor did he frame his opposition to current political arrangements in terms of the additional support (sponsorship, bursaries, fee waivers, etc.) that should be given to university students from disadvantaged backgrounds such as his own. This was not to say that his outlook was either disconnected from Indonesia’s postcolonial history of developmentalism, or in any way depoliticised. Iyan’s quarrel with the state was precisely that it put him in a category of difference (‘mere high school graduate’), overlooking his essential sameness, even superiority; overlooking his potential. Tellingly, this was a form of political disregard that echoed the contempt he received from his father, for whom Iyan’s status as the ‘least favourite’ had been cemented by his failure to secure an undergraduate degree. And cruelly, that self-same failure had also deprived Iyan of straightforward pathways to the respectable employment through which he might achieve some form of redemption in his father’s eyes.

Although Iyan’s circumstances gave him multiple grounds on which to take issue with state policy, the political discourses surrounding him had become particularised in ways that reflected the emotional currents animating his relations with his father and siblings. These currents appeared to result, at least in part, from Husrin projecting the fantasised split between obedient ‘golden boys’ and obdurate workers who thought they knew better (the comparative frame that had become so integral to his own sense of status and value) onto his own three sons. They led to Iyan himself conducting ‘bad comparisons’ in ways that he found necessary to sustain his sense of himself, to ‘motivate’ him to continue. His sense of whether any given comparison was fair or unfair, of whether it was motivational or deflating, of whether it should *even be made* was – just like those of Fatimah and Suhardi and,

one presumes, the participants taking part in the experiments conducted by social comparison theorists – not reducible to evolutionary dynamics, or a desire to size up one’s competitors. It was profoundly shaped by intertwined postcolonial, national, and personal histories. What comparison meant for him, and which comparative frame felt apposite or necessary, emerged from a specific matrix of intersubjective relations that was at once irreducibly individual and patterned in ways reflective of his prevailing political and social context. It is such intricate interconnections between the psychological and the political that ethnographic methods – particularly those conducted in a person-centred tradition – are ideally placed to excavate, and that need to be foregrounded in any account of how (and why) people compare.

Implications for anthropological practice

Having understood the complex cultural and personal meanings underpinning what ostensibly appear to be ‘bad comparisons’, how should anthropologists respond? A person-centred approach allows us to think of them not as epistemological crimes, fallacies that need to be policed, attacked or blunted (cf. Damer 2013), but rather as important moments of self-cultivation and social action, undertaken for particular reasons, shaped by specific histories, and consequential in particular ways. This is not to say that they should be straightforwardly endorsed. As ethnographers, we can expose the consequences of these comparisons, trace their genealogies, and reveal the interests vested in them; as anthropological writers we can suggest alternative comparative frames. If, for instance, we conducted a longitudinal comparison across Iyan’s life, we might notice that he never seems to finish the projects he begins. (Indeed, his time on Delapan was cut short when he fell in love with a woman over Facebook – although their eventual marriage itself ran aground a few years later.) That could lead us to a conclusion not unlike Husrin’s – that he really does have a character flaw. But we might also note a repeated tendency to emulate his older brother, and speculate whether that might stem from the constant comparisons visited on him by his father. The failure of his aspirations might stem not only from his socio-economic marginality, but also, as in Lemelson and Tucker’s (2017) study of Estu Wardhani, a decision to pursue pathways to which he was not best suited in a desperate search for parental regard. These analyses – grounded in the kinds of comparisons that a psychoanalyst or therapist might make – could prove helpful insofar as they could lead him to reflect more critically about the patterns in his life. For Iyan, such insights may be as illuminating and valuable as it would be to call Fatimah’s attention to the structural racism that shapes her own comparative practice. Nevertheless, many anthropologists might be perturbed by the way these analyses ultimately hold Iyan – or, perhaps, his father (who can easily emerge as a villain despite making many sacrifices to support his son) – responsible for the difficulties he has encountered.

We might therefore prefer to embed Iyan in a comparison attentive to dynamics of class and privilege. Such a comparison would see him as just another ‘working class kid’ who got a ‘working class job’ (following Willis 1981) because he and his family lacked the capital (psychological, social and economic) to get him through the challenges of his degree programme, and whose fantasy of redemption exemplifies Bourdieu’s (2000) portrait of the wild fantasies of the dispossessed: a narrative resource that might restore some dignity to his life but offers little prospect of actual social mobility. This reading might help stoke ‘critical consciousness’ amongst readers; highlighting the injustices that inequality can produce. But it would dismiss as ‘fantasy’ the very truths that Iyan might want to assert: that he is a being of considerable potential, even if that must be performatively reasserted to himself and others through both daydreams and felt ‘connections’ in the face of pernicious systems of disregard; and that he is, for all his disadvantage, still a participant in a globalised world.

What becomes clear from this discussion is that any comparative frame involves a necessary ‘simplification’ – in Callon’s (1984) sense of the term. Complex social actors are reduced to the qualities that are most relevant to the comparison. In this sense, all social comparisons are ‘bad’; by bracketing out relevant details, they risk ‘dire misrecognition’ (Radhakrishnan 2013: 19). Insistence on one particular comparison as the best way to understand an ethnographic puzzle may thus reveal more about the sublimated desires that the anthropologist is seeking to gratify through their comparison than it does about the complexities of the case study in hand (see also Weiss 2016: 633–4). It is a risky strategy, especially when we are writing of emotionally volatile subjects such as inequality. On the one hand, we face the prospect that our interlocutors might find our comparisons demeaning or injurious (recall here Hiba’s fury that academics classified Tunisia as a MENA nation); that our interlocutors’ lifeworlds and modes of reckoning are recklessly violated in pursuit of our own comparative gratifications. On the other, we may unwittingly play into public metanarratives that overconfidently attribute the responsibility for unequal outcomes to singular factors or variables (bad parenting; individual choices; essentialised differences of race, class, and culture), with the result that, far from encouraging people to take more considered, self-reflexive approaches to the world, we inadvertently help reproduce cycles of toxic comparative practice. This is neither politically nor intellectually sound.

As anthropology bounds towards a ‘new comparativism’, allegedly full of ‘epistemological confidence’ yet nevertheless wondering how we can compare without losing sight of the lessons of our self-critique and the implicit bias of our categories (Weisman & Luhrmann 2020: 132–5), we would do well to remember the key insight that a person-centred exploration of comparison can afford: that any single individual or group is enfolded in multiple frames of comparison, each of which operates at a different scale, and each of which carries distinct intellectual, political, and emotional

stakes, not just in its own right, but because of the personal meaning each comparative framing takes on in relation to others. How we compare is always a choice, and one that we can consider making differently.

This insight has implications for comparative anthropology's narrative strategy. It points to the value of adopting a textual format in which – not unlike my discussion of Iyan in this paper – different comparative frames are held side-by-side, with the emotional logics underpinning them laid bare. That way, readers – whether our interlocutors, our colleagues and students, or the public – can not only adjudicate the respective merits of these parallel accounts but also, and no less importantly, reflect critically on the impulses that dispose them to compare themselves and others in particular ways, and on the affective and social consequences that particular forms of comparison could have for others. In this regard, a 'person-centred' analytic orientation is not only concerned with unpicking the relations, histories, and psychodynamics that shape how people compare in the field, but also bringing a sensitivity to comparison's ramifications into the way we advance and debate comparative propositions within our own scholarly discourse. Rather than acting as 'the comparison police', demonising 'bad comparisons', and insisting on either 'critical comparisons' or ethnographic particularism, anthropologists are ideally placed to use their writings to encourage more mindful, self-reflexive comparisons, allowing every work of comparative anthropology to also be an anthropology of comparison itself.

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Notes

- 1 All personal names are pseudonyms.
- 2 Intriguingly, such sympathetic dispositions correlate with actual improvements in performance, leading some to theorise 'upward social comparison' as adaptive (e.g. Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons & Kuyper 1999).
- 3 See Layton (2014: 164) for a discussion of how a comparable process of 'splitting' may underpin public contempt for the struggles of the poor.
- 4 Though both were Muslim, neither was observing the fast: they were doing heavy labouring work and needed energy and nutrients to keep going. Strict observance of the fast was, Iyan explained, a privilege of the rich.
- 5 This is a pseudonym, to help protect the family's identity.

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