The universal and the particular

Contrasting nomothetic and idiographic comparisons

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Studying the political uses of ethnicity profits greatly from cross-cultural comparative research, because only comparisons can show the specificity of any case under scrutiny. This essay sketches out the basic characteristics of an anthropological approach to comparison by drawing on existing research on naturalizations with a cross-cultural perspective. Comparative methods are often associated with deductive-generalizing designs on the basis of a large number of cases (large-N) but the link between comparison and deduction is not a necessary one. Research in social and cultural anthropology[1] is always comparative, as it begins with the assumption of both a contrast between one's own and other societies on the one hand, and certain basic similarities common to social life everywhere on the other, thus assuming the possibility of comparison. Yet for the most part this implicit comparative perspective is not made explicit. While in anthropological work the quality of methodological deliberations is generally very high – for instance concerning the role of the researcher in the field – the methodology of comparison is often not elaborated upon when reporting on ethnographic fieldwork or *micro*-analytical case studies. In stark contrast to empirical work in sociology and political science, where the use of a comparative approach is often justified with methodological scrutiny, anthropology scholars can legitimately make do without such rigor. Nevertheless, the small-scale comparisons anthropologists make do rely on certain methods, only they are often left implicit or are not reflected upon.

1 When I mention anthropology in what follows, I am concerned with both the 'cultural' and the 'social' traditions, and do not touch upon archaeology, linguistics, or physical anthropology.

In what follows, I will use the term *idiographic comparison* to refer to the typical anthropological approach. This will be contrasted with a typical sociological/political science approach, that of *nomothetic comparison*.[2] I will argue that the idiographic approach aims at opening up the perspective, allows for alternative interpretations, and helps to find new insights, which in turn can lead to a more detailed understanding of each of the cases compared. It does not aim at creating models or (universal) theories that reach beyond the empirically analyzed cases, as is typical of the deductive-generalizing comparison prevailing in social science research. Small-scale idiographic comparisons are useful for better understanding each case at hand (by contrasting it with at least one other case) or for discovering new aspects of each case, and also for discovering connections between cases.

My own research is dedicated to naturalization ceremonies worldwide, and employs a cross-regional comparative framework. This text will therefore draw on research on naturalizations from both political and anthropological scientists, to illustrate the juxtaposition of idiographic and nomothetic comparisons. The following section explains the connection between ethnicity and naturalizations.

ETHNICITY, NATIONALITY, NATURALIZATION

How is naturalization related to ethnicity? Following Gabbert, I understand ethnicity as a process of differentiation between groups on the basis of (perceived) cultural or phenotypic characteristics, and primarily with reference to an (imagined) common origin (Gabbert 2006: 90). Among other things, ethnicity is about who can be or should become member of the We-group, and how this quality is transmitted trans-generationally. In a nation state, membership of the We-group is organized by nationality law.

Nationality in all nation states derives automatically from birth (to parents who are already members, or inside the national territory), and individuals can

2 This is not to assume that only anthropologists would adhere to idiographic research designs, because there is of course a longstanding tradition of interpretative social science research (cp. e.g. Deegan 2001 on the Chicago School of ethnography). Neither is it possible to neglect the systematic comparative tradition within anthropology, which strove to find explanations of the variations of human culture, often by comparing isolated elements (variables), and pursued the objective of producing universally applicable explanations (cp., e.g. on the "Human Relations Area Files", Ember 1997).

neither influence this nor escape this ascription. Born into a nation state, all individuals acquire their status as members by chance. To Joppke, therefore, the formal legal attribution of membership in a nation state is intrinsically an "ethnic" ascription (2003: 436). The automatic categorization of individuals as nationals or foreigners purely with reference to their origins results in the perpetuation of a collective by assumed kinship relations (in terms of Weber's *Abstammungsgemeinsamkeit*, regardless of "whether or not a similarity of blood objectively exists" (1990: 237, my translation). To this effect, the national paradigm produces an assumed similarity beyond the active will of the individuals, and national membership is ethnic in the sense that it is passed on down the generations.

There is also another reason why the current relevance of ethnicity as a political resource is first and foremost related to the rise of the modern nation state: The imagined ethnic similarity of all members of the nation became crucial to legitimizing dominance only when nation states started to define their domain by the assumed common bond among all their respective members. While pre-national imperial rule never relied on ethnic classifications to maintain political boundaries, the nation state needed to define its institutional boundaries in ethnic terms: the rulers and the ruled should be of the same people (Wimmer 2008: 991).

The ethnic legitimation of the nation, i.e. by primary reference to common descent, is sometime juxtaposed with civic legitimation.[3] According to the latter concept, membership in the nation can derive from personal will alone, through the decision on the part of the potential member to become associated. The theoretical ideal types, *ethnic* and *civic,* have been taken up as part of an influential typology of nationalism by Hans Kohn (Kohn 1944). He applied the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism in different European nation states, and contrasted what he saw as the 'civic' Western type with his depiction of the 'ethnic' Eastern nationalism.

These two opposing understandings of nationhood are often correlated with different approaches to nationality law. The transfer of membership to biological descendants – *jus sanguinis* – is understood as ethnic, while the attribution of membership through birth on national territory – *jus soli* – is deemed more civic. This juxtaposition of an 'ethnic' law of filiation and a 'civic' territorial law has been used in historical and political science literature. Early comparative studies

3 The ethnic vs civic rationale for peoplehood relies on the theoretically assumed difference between unifying criteria that are on the one hand a priori given and inalterable, and on the other hand politically shaped and influenced by the will of individuals. These contrasting attributions have been termed "Ethnos" and "Demos" by Francis (1965).

contrasted Germany with France, the United Kingdom, or the United States, and distinguished primordial from revolutionary understandings of the nation (Brubaker 1992; Gosewinkel 1998; Baumann 1999; Bös 2000). Since then, research has shown several times that it is not possible to assign the theoretical contrast between ethnic and civic to the empirical occurrence of *jus sanguinis/soli* (Weil 1996; Giesen/Junge 1998; Fahrmeir 2000; Hansen 2004: 6). In reality, the two presumed ideal types overlap much more than the model suggests. Though some scholars criticize the ethnic-civic-opposition as empirically wrong (cp. Giesen/Junge 1998 on Brubaker, and Kuzio 2002 on Kohn) or theoretically not useful at all (Sciortino 2012: 378), others suggest placing them on a continuum rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive antipodes (Smith 1991: 13). Others still have upheld Kohn's typology for the purpose of comparative arguments (Koning 2011). From a social-theoretical angle, however, it is not the supposed contrast between *ethnos* and *demos* that seems to offer an appropriate perspective, but rather it is the overlapping or consecutive "de- and re-ethnicizations" (Joppke 2003: 429) of national membership rules that becomes the research topic.

I think the issue is not about finding the right label. The main reason why a comparison of such ideal types can still be worthwhile is not because of what the respective norms are based on, but that the legal membership regimes have different consequences (cp. Schwarz 2013: 24–27). The consequences are most visibly different concerning the nationality of future generations of immigrants. In a pure *jus soli* regime, all children born inside the national territory will be considered members. Hence, incentives for families to naturalize are considerably smaller than in countries without any *jus soli* provision, because there the offspring of immigrants would remain foreign over generations, unless naturalization were possible (like the descendants of labor migrants in Germany before 2000, or Koreans in Japan today; cp. Bade 2001; Refsing 2003).

Finally, what I think is especially noteworthy in this discussion is that both in ethnic and civic contexts there can be a tendency to demand assimilation to a hegemonic culture from those naturalizing into the national collective later in life. And sometimes the civic understanding of the nation can give way to an even more forceful demand for assimilation than the ethnic. "Civic nationalism may in practice prove more 'homogenizing' than ethnic variants. While the belief that members of the nation naturally belong together may give rise to some quite relaxed views regarding allegiance, civic nationalists will be anxious to educate citizens into respect for the constitution and to instill loyalty and respect for the key values and principles enshrined in the constitution" (Baumeister 2003: 411). A similar result draw Ceuppens and Geschiere while

discussion policies of belonging in Belgium, as "both ethnic and civic citizenship can imply a process of complete assimilation, either to a specific ethnic culture or to a public, political culture that is represented as universal and, as such, is oblivious of its own culturalness" (2005: 399).

In what follows I will give examples of why it does not matter so much whether naturalization policies can be categorized as more or less ethnic, but rather how differently the understanding of a shared national culture can be played out.

THE THEORETICAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN IDIOGRAPHIC AND NOMOTHETIC COMPARISONS

The terms 'nomothetic' and 'idiographic' (or 'generalizing' and 'individualizing') grew out of attempts to classify natural sciences and humanities in the German philosophical tradition around 1900 (cp. Windelband 1894 and Rickert 1899). Since then, they have often been criticized for too rigidly juxtaposing the two tendencies, but I take them as pointing to exactly that: tendencies, rather than strict demarcations.[4]

The objective of *nomothetic approaches* is the production of general theories ('universal laws') or models applicable to all possible cases (generalizations). The comparison is put at center stage, i.e. the results of such comparisons aim to prove (or falsify) a hypothesis that derives from previously detected principles. Hence the process of comparison is theory-driven (deductive; i.e. the truth of its conclusion relies on the truth of its premises). This is done by categorization of cases along some (usually many) selected elements and by scrutinizing the relation between these elements (looking for patterns of co-occurrence, for instance).

Idiographic approaches start from single cases, which they aim to understand by in-depth description and interpretation. The end of any comparison within an idiographic approach is to find specific qualities of a few

4 Even if this contrast seems too rigid in light of possible nuances and combinations between the two camps I will comment on below, it is still a useful and almost classic typology that has been employed before (cp. for instance Rohner 1977 on anthropology, Seipel/Rippl 2013 on sociology, and Kaelble 1999: 26–27 on historiography). Contrasting nomothetic and idiographic approaches informed for instance Charles Tilly's famous classification of different modes of historical comparison, two of which he called "individualizing" and "universalizing" (1984: 59).

cases through an inductive (evidence-based) search for similarities and differences among them. To achieve this, cases are sampled in terms of criteria suggested by theoretical assumptions ('universal characteristics') and can be further selected theoretically to produce contrasts and parallels, but the thereby resulting comparison is not an end in itself. What is to be accomplished primarily is the more detailed understanding of specific cases – hence this approach can be considered individualizing.

More than other disciplines, anthropology allows the combining (or blending) of methods, according to the basic principle that methods have to "do justice to the complexity of the objects under study" (Flick 2002: 5). Consequentially, the methodology used should not be determined *ex ante* by the academic discipline the researcher locates him or herself in. Personally, I freely take from ethnographic fieldwork, interpretative sociology, discourse analysis, and statistics whatever tools I consider most promising to help me to understand the subject under scrutiny. Nevertheless, I see the mayor strength of anthropology as being its endeavor to generate in-depth accounts of particular social situations (usually done through prolonged fieldwork in one particular location), and believe that most anthropologists would agree with me on that. The term 'idiographic approach' is a shorthand for this.

A glance at the following examples of (comparative) studies on naturalizations will help to better illustrate the advantages and shortcomings of both types of comparison – and also make clear that I am not arguing that there would be only one 'right' way to make comparisons: both are useful, they just follow different agendas.

CHARACTERISTICS AND DIFFICULTIES OF NOMOTHETIC COMPARATIVE STUDIES ON (WESTERN) EUROPEAN NATIONALITY POLICIES

During the last decade, a number of comparative studies were conducted on the (Western) European situation regarding nationality, naturalization, and access to citizenship rights (Koopmans et al. 2005; Bauböck et al. 2006; Howard 2009; Huddleston/Niessen 2011). Such studies covered a large number of cases, from medium-N analysis of selected cases (Goodman 2014) to a number of studies covering the 15 'old' member states of the EU, to 38 countries throughout Europe in a study on ethnic preferences for the acquisition of nationality (Dumbrava 2014), some of them explicitly comparing naturalization policies (cp. for instance Huddleston 2013 who measured naturalization procedures in 35

European countries). Other works have focused on the Americas (Vonk 2015) or the Middle East and North Africa (van Waas 2014), among other regions. This type of comparative study is mostly done by political/social scientists and legal scholars.

Comparative works of this kind produce broad comparative overviews, which are very useful for the purposes of informing interested scholars about the current situation. They collect descriptions of the state of nationality law; i.e. how nationality is attributed by birth, when and how foreigners can be naturalized, and so on. They also show contrasts between different national settings and allow the clustering of different cases according to similarities, or even allow with the formulation of typologies (for instance, more inclusive versus more restrictive (Goodman/Howard 2013), or de-ethnicized versus re-ethnicized (Joppke 2003) national legislations on nationality). According to the nomothetic logic of large-N comparisons outlined above, they aim to *explain* the nature of these configurations or shifts from one type to the other. This perspective can be exemplified with the goals of Marc Howard's study, which compared the citizenship policies of the EU-15 member states. His approach stands out for its use of a rather simple and straightforward set of indicators, because he combines only three components to produce what he calls the "Citizenship Policy Index" (CPI) (2009: 19). These components are:

- How newborns acquire their nationality (numerically ranging from 0 points if there are no ius soli provisions, to 2 points in the case of the least restricted version of ius soli);
- How easy or difficult it is for immigrants to naturalize (measured in years of residence required, again resulting in scores from 0 in cases of ten years or more required, to 2 in cases of 3 years or less, reduced by either .25 or .5 points if 'civic integration' is required, depending on how difficult the tests that must be passed are);
- Whether dual citizenship is allow or not (points between 0 for policies that explicitly forbid it, to 2 points where there are no restrictions at all; ibid: 19–26). The combined scores from all three components give a CPI score for each country, ranging from 0.00 for Austria and Denmark to 5.22 for Sweden and 5.50 for Belgium in 2008, according to which they are then grouped into one of three categories: "restrictive", "medium", or "liberal" (ibid: 28). With this approach to measuring the nature of 15 different national citizenship policies, Howard outlines the theoretical arguments of his book, with the aim to "explain why four of the countries developed what can be considered 'historically liberal' policies" and "why, of the eleven historically restrictive countries, six have liberalized their

> citizenship policies since the 1990s, whereas the other five remain restrictive" (ibid: 2). He addresses these questions by taking into account the impact of colonialist histories, the evolution of democracy, and the impact of public mobilizations in the 15 cases under scrutiny.

To be able to manage large datasets, the nomothetic approach basically relies on counting and sorting. What it does well is to classify objects according to selected characteristics, and then either sort them into groups defined by one or more classifying markers or use these markers to relate the cases to each other on a numeric scale. These markers represent certain objective characteristics of the case at hand, and by taking them out of their context they are made comparable in the strictest sense, i.e. they are understood as representing the same kinds of characteristics in all cases. This method isolates the items from their context. Instead of analyzing the complex legal/administrative constellation within its societal context, this approach dissects isolated elements that in some way represent the subject under scrutiny (hence the proliferated term 'indicator'). Each indicator can be measured individually, and their combination ostensibly allows the assumed totality of the specific issue at hand to be measured. Consequently, to answer its theoretical questions the nomothetic approach is primarily concerned with the question of the criteria according to which the cases should be sorted. The peril of reductionism is countered by defining increasing numbers of categories, resulting in ever-growing number of separately coded indicators (the *Migrant Integration Policy Index*, for instance, combines 148 indicators; cp. Huddleston/Niessen 2011: 212–213).

But every single category/indicator has its own associated problems. As an example, one can count the amount of persons naturalized. Such total number has the advantage of being objectively comparable – e.g. higher figures represent more naturalizations – and can seemingly be formally interpreted in a precise way. In this example, more naturalizations ostensibly indicate a more liberal or more inclusive immigration regime. But obviously such interpretation must be contextualized; that is, the figures should be given as relative amounts: as a percentage either of the total population, or of the foreign population, or of the foreign population eligible for naturalization. Which would be the most appropriate relation (a dissent elaborated upon by Bauböck/Helbling 2011)? This first short example shows how difficult it is even to identify the precise unit of comparison.

As a second example, in order to analyze the naturalization procedure one could also compare the legal requirements – for instance, the minimum time of residency required for naturalization. This seems like a conveniently isolated,

numeric item, because every country inside the EU defines a threshold, based on the number of years immigrants must have been living within is territory before they can become citizens (between 3 and 12 years). Even while EU member states' policies are relatively similar, in contrast to those in other regions of the world, a closer look shows that it is not an easy task to compare even this item, because 'residency' might mean different things in different legislations (i.e. permanent or temporary; lawful or *de facto*; uninterrupted or considered as total amount; directly prior to application or within a certain time range; or not specified at all; cp. table 2 in Goodman 2010: 41). On top of that, to be able to evaluate how easy or difficult it is for immigrants to naturalize in the countries compared, it is crucial to take into account how difficult it is to become a lawful resident – and the category 'residency requirement in years' does not account for that at all. Last but not least, the only statement possible in this context is about 'ordinary' naturalization, while some countries (like Germany) allow for an additional discretionary naturalization, for which fewer years of residency are required.

Even if the former problematic of how to define the unit of comparison could be solved by cooperative work by country experts who, in the manner of idiographic case studies, really get "the characteristics of the case at hand right" (Tilly 1984: 59), the second group of examples points to an enduring problem. This is the danger of falling prey to *faux amis*: some indicators seem to be similar enough to be compared numerically or by exact sorting techniques, but in fact they are not. Translators know of this pitfall in the potential for hastily assuming similar meanings when a similar-seeming term appears in several languages. Every German speaker knows the joke 'Can I become a beefsteak?', which picks on the similarity between the German *bekommen* ('to get') and the English 'to become'. The trap in translating such *faux amis* is obvious and well known, and nomothetic comparisons are not exempt from it. There, however, the problematic arises not during the interpretation of data, but in the process of sorting, as I have just illustrated. To generate universal terminology out of specific emic vocabulary is an inevitable difficulty for large-scale, multivariant, generalizing, comparative designs.

In summary, the nomothetic comparison dissects the subject matter into isolated units. Thereby, it can at best detect the essential details. At worst, however, the fragmentation makes any reference to the actual subject matter disappear (almost) completely, and the result might even be a mere artefact of the respective question.

DIFFICULTIES AND BENEFITS OF IDIOGRAPHIC CASE STUDIES OF NATURALIZATION PROCEDURES OR CEREMONIES

Parallel to the above-mentioned large-N comparisons of nationality policies has emerged a growing number of detailed case studies on how the policies of naturalization are carried out, from the legal basics (like the introduction and the content of citizenship tests, e.g. van Oers 2014) to administrative practices (such as how naturalization interviews are carried out; Fassin/Mazouz 2009). Some of these studies take complex social situations as their point of departure and either view them from a historical angle or follow an ethnographic approach, or use a combination of both, which places empirical and observable interactions in a context in which broader power relations play out. Especially regarding naturalization ceremonies, there are a few detailed cases studies from Western countries (Damsholt 2009; Aptekar 2012; Byrne 2012).

The problems facing any inductive-individualizing approach that attempts to engage in comparisons are obvious. If more than one case is to be studied thoroughly, the workload and the demands on the researchers increase linearly. While in large-N deductive-generalizing designs, one national dataset may be more or less like another in terms of study design or data-processing power (admittedly, getting access to the data often requires tedious work), in ethnographic fieldwork, gaining access to more than one site and data-gathering there requires time funds to be spent many times over. The more distant the locations are from one another, the more demanding movement between them becomes. And, most importantly, if different cases are to be analyzed in depth, a high level of specific competency is needed, including knowledge of various languages.

Not surprisingly, there are only few explicitly comparative studies so far; for instance the recent interpretative comparisons of naturalization ceremonies in the US, Canada, Australia, and Great Britain (Byrne 2014), all English speaking countries. Another explicit comparative project was designed with considerable historical depth and takes into account 18th and 19th century political culture to unravel the roots of current naturalization ceremonies in West European countries (Damsholt 2008a). Apart from this historical perspective, the work of Tine Damsholt placed a lot of emphasis on the participant observation of current ceremonies in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Great Britain. Her ethnography shed light on the material practices: how citizenship is 'ritualized' at the ceremonies, and how it is 'materialized' in (for instance) the form of certificates, medals, gifts, etc. (2009). During her participant observations at the ceremonies, Damsholt systematically looked into – or rather, listened into – various 'soundscapes'

created by the social and special arrangements of the rituals. Among them was the collective recitation of oaths, the performance of folk music, the collective singing of national anthems, the noise of children playing in the background, and of course silence (to produce a 'sacred' atmosphere, ibid 2008b).

Damsholt's approach seems to me to be a very important contribution to the study of naturalizations, because with her focus on the emotions, sounds, and activities of those involved in the ceremonies she stresses the importance of experienced or even embodied communities in the everyday functioning of the 'imagined community' of the nation state. If it was still necessary to underline the value of participant observation, the focus on subjective participation in such ceremonies and on the perspective of the attendees makes the point. Observational data of that kind can hardly be standardized, because the ethnographers' impressions are also highly subjective, hence no objective reproduction of what happened at the ceremonies is possible. How "national soundscapes" (2008b: 61) are to be compared across cases is a question that cannot be answered with a nomothetic approach.

Oskar Verkaaik, a Dutch anthropologist, looked at the way in which local civil servants organized and performed naturalization ceremonies in the Netherlands, and detected some unintended consequences that their interpretation of the national imagery had. The political decision-makers, he wrote, intended the ceremonies to be "a kind of disciplinary initiation ritual" (Verkaaik 2010: 69): they were meant to remind the new members of the nation of seemingly typical Dutch "norms and values" (ibid: 69), and were meant to stress their "duties" (ibid: 69) as good citizens. In doing so, the ceremony, which was actually meant to be a "welcoming gesture" (ibid: 73), depicts the nation as something already there, constituted to large extent by a national "culture" (ibid: 77) that immigrant others can be initiated to.

Verkaaik's interpretation of what was actually happening at the ceremonies is quite different. Many of the civil servants (those determining how these ceremonies are actually conducted) felt embarrassed by the government's ideal of depicting Dutchness at the ceremonies. Hence, they ridiculed the way in which Dutch folklore was presented, or they presented it in an ironic way, and thereby distanced themselves from any assumed duty to assimilate to it. Or, if they had the power to organize the ceremonies the way they wanted to, they sometimes made them resemble other ceremonies they used to run in their town halls, such as weddings, without any reference to the Dutch nation and without featuring any key symbols (ibid: 76).

Though only implicitly, Verkaaik also used a comparative method when he chose to look both at political speeches and mediated debates on the one hand,

and at local bureaucrats and their practices on the other; in this way he discovered a stark contrast between strategically intended and actively practiced self-representations of the Dutch nation. In addition, he chose various different locales for his observations, including smaller and larger municipalities, and more rural and more suburban settings. In investigating different locations, he observed very similar things going on, and he assembled them to form a pattern: the national was spelled out in terms of *local* food, crafts, or celebrities. "Whereas Dutch intellectuals were busy defining Dutch culture in terms of European civilization, the naturalization ceremony linked it to nationalist history and local folklore" (ibid: 74). But he also made out differences among the local ceremonies, which led him to interpret the ceremonies as a form of disciplinary initiation ritual, as mentioned above. This conclusion he draws, at least partly, from insights gained from a comparative perspective. Only by observations in more than one location did he notice that in some municipalities some of the local civil servants actively opposed the exhibition of Dutchness as defined by the state. They thereby made visible what would otherwise have largely remained (and in other places continued to be) implicit.

This contribution is of great value, because it shows how much more insight scholars can gain from looking at how things are actually done than they might from focusing only on how things are intended to be, or on how people talk about them. Because a lot of knowledge is tacit or embodied, it remains largely non-verbal, and must be observed in what people do. In other words: though time-consuming, participant observation can be worth every moment spent.

IDIOGRAPHIC COMPARISONS AS TRANSLATIONS

The analogy to the practice of translation, which I have already used above, holds true for the inductive-individualizing comparison. Its core element is the relation of certain social configurations in one context (i.e. specifically combined characteristics) to comparable configurations in other contexts – not merely to relate collections of artificially isolated characteristics to one another. Hence I suggest viewing this approach as a form of translation. The direct, unambiguous transfer of the meaning of a text written from one language into another language is just as impossible as the objective, universally valid comparison of two cultural configurations. A good translation is never based on mere literal equivalence, but rather creates a consistent image, a text that 'works' in the target language. Comparisons in the idiographic approach can be seen as an ongoing process of translation back and forth that never exactly reproduces the

meaning, but rather connects and mediates between cases. This mode of comparison seems to me to involve a change of perspectives on the subject, which cannot lead to an 'objective' or definite description, but which should account for the differences between the distinct perspectives (cp. Kaschuba 2003: 347). Hence, the idiographic approach can help uncover unexpected dimensions of the cases, even if the scientific attention was not directed at them in the beginning. What is more, alongside comparable elements, the inductive idiographic design can integrate formerly unknown transfers and entanglements between the cases more easily than the deductive design can. And after all, a possible finding of an idiographic comparison may well be that the cases are not comparable at all – in terms of an inductive research design, this is a legitimate and useful result.

As has been mentioned above, an idiographic approach always requires a small-N design. The interest in the context of social interactions usually necessitates prolonged fieldwork as the preferred method, instead of the short-term contact involved in, say, gathering survey data with a questionnaire. This may give results that seemingly lack significance when compared with those of large-N studies, because the degree to which the results can be generalized is limited. Therein lies another difference from nomothetic designs: the applicability of the results does not extend further than the cases under scrutiny. The deeper understanding of single (few) empiric cases is the final goal, not the discovery of 'general laws'. Nevertheless, even in the absence of generalizations, it is perfectly possible to build a typology of the few cases under scrutiny.

THE TWO MODES OF COMPARISON COMPARED

This text explained the special features of the anthropological approach to comparison, which I have called an *ideographic* comparison. Its main specificity is to focus on only a few cases, to consider them as complex constellations, and to compare them to each other with the main aim of better understanding both the specificity of each case at hand and the parallels, or connections, between them. I contrasted this approach with a *nomothetic* approach, whose aim is to formulate universal laws or establish universal models that can help to explain all possible cases.

The juxtaposition of the idiographic and the nomothetic approach is somehow artificial, insofar as few disciplines in the humanities and social sciences are 'purely' idiographic or nomothetic. Furthermore, many actual studies might in fact integrate both perspectives, or might draw on methodology

from both camps. In this article, the contrast between the two serves the purpose of stressing conceptual particularities. Among the differences between the two approaches, one stands out: the nomothetic perspective engages with its cases via isolated, decontextualized features (variables), while the idiographic approach understands each case as a complex configuration of social relations within their societal context. This results in very different problems associated with the respective approaches, some of which I commented above.

While it certainly cannot have gone unnoticed that I support the idiographic approach, let's not forget that the nomothetic comparison also has much to offer. Only macro-comparative approaches allow for theory-building around encompassing models; for instance that of a 'restrictive turn', or of 'converging policies' among member states of the EU (Hansen/Weil 2001; Goodman/ Howard 2013). To produce a broad overview is legitimate for some purposes, but to my understanding should not be the end of comparisons. Without in-depth cases studies the question of what is really happening on the ground would not be addressed. A comparison between two (or more) cases should aim to *open up* the perspective, to allow for alternative interpretations by contrasting one case with others, and, at best, to help to find *new* insights. It can help to draw attention to possible parallels and differences between the cases compared, which in turn could lead to more detailed understanding of each of them.

The examples of idiographic studies of naturalization policies I mentioned above hint at what idiographic comparisons can accomplish: Not only discerning *whether* those policies stem from an ethnic concept of the nation, and *whether* they are prone to push immigrants more or less to assimilate, but also finding out *what* they are asked to assimilate to, and *how* this is forced upon them – and even how the participants navigate and partly undermine these assimilatory attempts.

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