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Essay

On Comparative Methodologies, or, How Professional Ecologies Vary

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Abstract

Based on the authors' own research experiences, this essay discusses the potentials of a "cross-jurisdictional" comparative methodology in the sociology of professions, which aims to describe similarities and variations in patterns of inter-professional interaction across substantively different work domains. This approach, the essay shows, stands in contrast to two more prevalent comparative methodologies in the field, dubbed here "cross-national" and "intra-national," respectively. Drawing on Andrew Abbott's seminal framework, cross-jurisdictional comparisons refrain from abstracting professional groups from their wider ecologies of inter-professional relations. On this basis, and invoking the methodological suggestions of Monika Krause on qualitative comparisons, the essay spells out key axes of variation between contemporary professional jurisdictions and ecologies, including along the lines of post-national analysis. The essay ends by highlighting more general reasons as to why reflecting further on new comparative possibilities may at present constitute a key stake for the future of research on professional change.

Keywords

Comparison, jurisdiction, Abbott, inter-professional relations, post-national analysis

Introduction

Comparative inquiry and analysis, whether explicit or implicit, enjoys a long and venerable tradition in the sociology of professions (e.g., Svensson & Evetts, 2010). Notoriously, the very concept of "profession" rests on a comparison with other occupational groups, first undertaken explicitly by Everett Hughes (Evetts, 2013: 780), pointing to differences in degree rather than kind when it comes to social status, cognitive authority, work autonomy, legal exclusionary closure, or (usually) some combination hereof. A literature review conducted a decade ago locates a steadily growing stream of comparative research on professional groups since the 1960s (Bourgeault, Benoit, & Hirschkorn, 2009). Still, the sociology of professions remains marked by a relative scarcity of explicit discussion on comparative methodologies. This is surprising and arguably hinders more concerted field-wide learning, especially when considering the sheer plurality of ways in which knowledge of professional work, organizing, and regulation may be fruitfully extended by comparative means.

In this essay, I draw on collaborative research experiences to discuss a particular approach to comparing professional interactions across work domains, one that we dub "cross-jurisdictional" (Blok, Lindstrøm, Meilvang, & Pedersen, 2018; Blok, Lindstrøm, Meilvang, & Pedersen, 2019a), in an attempt to outline new research agendas for the field. Taking the notion of professional jurisdiction from Andrew Abbott's seminal work (1988) as a starting point, our qualitative research focuses on and compares dynamics of inter-professional competition and collaboration around three sets of emerging globalized task domains. These include water-based climate adaptation (engineers, landscape architects), lifestyle disease prevention (doctors, nurses), and innovation management (business economists, management engineers), all with a view to how inter-professional negotiations partake to wider reforms in the Scandinavian welfare state setting of Denmark. Crucially for the meta-reflections that follows, this research thus aims to understand similarities and variations in patterns of jurisdictional interaction across substantively different professional groups, organizational work settings, and allied political institutions.

While the notion of professional jurisdiction is widely invoked in the sociology of professions, the number of in-depth single-case jurisdictional studies remains relatively scarce (Liu, 2018), with even fewer studies adopting a multi-case cross-jurisdictional design. As highlighted in a recent contribution (Heusinkveld, Gabbioneta, Werr, & Sturdy, 2018: 259), part of this no doubt stems from the fact that jurisdiction-level comparative analysis remains a "highly challenging research opportunity," as this essay will also reflect. Yet, with growing emphasis among research funders on collaborative multi-case research (Deville, Guggenheim, & Hrdličková., 2016), our own experiences arguably reflect a growing need across the sociology of professions to discuss further the new comparative possibilities opening up. In this respect, I draw in this essay particularly on the work of sociologist

Monika Krause (2016), whose interest in better describing the variable properties of fields—"how fields vary" (Krause, 2018)—I here transpose to our interest in professional ecologies.

Like jurisdiction, the notion of ecology invoked here stems from Abbott's (2005b) re-appropriation of the interactionist Chicago School tradition, allowing him to study how professions forge alliances across adjacent university and political settings in processual terms (see Liu, 2018). While entailing its own distinct emphases, such an ecological approach also shares many theoretical assumptions with what neo-institutionalist and neo-Bourdieusian approaches to professions conceptualize as fields and field-level dynamics (Suddaby & Viale, 2011). As such, much about comparative methodology that I discuss here in reference to Abbott will have relevance as well, I believe, to scholars working in these latter traditions, even as I will also draw on Abbott's own (unpublished) reflections (Abbott, 2005a) to highlight certain instances where theoretical differences between the approaches of ecologies and fields may matter.

My discussion unfolds as follows. First, I reflect on the notion of cross-jurisdictional comparison by way of sketching how sociologists of professions otherwise carve out their units of analysis and what implications such practices carry. I then turn to outline how and why a variation-finding approach to comparison, as Charles Tilly (1984) dubbed it, entails many benefits to the sociology of professions, while also posing new challenges. Finally, like Krause (2018), I sketch how ours is a project that raises the prospect of post-national approaches to professional comparison, and discuss more generally the issue of scale as relevant to understanding professional change today. I end, as indicated, with a few reflections on why comparative methodologies may at present constitute a key stake for the field writ large.

Three comparative tactics for studying professional change

In general terms, practicing comparison implies settling difficult questions as to what constitute appropriate units of analysis to compare, and in what ways. Along these lines, as Krause (2016) has highlighted, qualitative comparative methods have long been overshadowed by a particular meta-theory of the proper aims of comparison, one which she dubs "linear-causal explanation." According to this meta-theory, colloquially put, one should not compare "apples and oranges." Instead, one should compare most-similar cases (say, two revolutionary movements) in order to single out the causal factors or variables that explain divergent outcomes (say, degrees of political change). As Krause details, and as her own work on field variation shows (Krause, 2018), this dominant understanding has meant that more descriptively detailed and variation-finding aims of comparative inquiry has tended to be downplayed across the social sciences. Our own approach to cross-jurisdictional comparisons of professional change seeks to address this imbalance.

In short, then, any comparative approach is bound up with wider questions of method and theory in a specific field of research. Along such lines, it would be possible to rethink the entire sociology of professions as having evolved in no small part through the contested and historically shifting negotiation of what dominant strands in the field as a whole considers valuable and legitimate comparisons. In a recent commentary on Everett Hughes, Howard Becker (2010: 10) intimates as much when stating that what made Hughes stand out as an eminent scholar of work and occupations was his willingness and capacity to engage in "unconventional comparisons," such as when comparing how prostitutes, priests, and psychiatrists each handle the "guilty knowledge" of their clients. Today, Becker continues, students of professions are more likely to take what the literature casts as conventionally defined professions as the basis for a comparative analysis. Such, he states—not without disappointment!—is likely to prove less fruitful.

Becker's remark on Hughes surely sets a high standard. But it also risks setting us off the well-trodden trail of competing interpretations of the value of the Chicago School tradition to contemporary studies of professions (compare, say, Saks, 2016 to Liu, 2018). While we have ourselves engaged, this important discussion elsewhere as concerns Abbott's work (Blok et al., 2019a), my aims in this essay are different and more modest, pertaining simply to starting up a more sustained reflection on how comparative tactics are used and might be mobilized differently in the sociology of professions. Towards this aim, I will start here by outlining what I take to be three broad versions of such tactics, drawing on the overview provided by Ivy Bourgeault and colleagues (2009) while also adding my own methodological focus.

First, *cross-national* comparisons of the trajectories of emergence and institutionalization, in particular professions across two or more countries, have in many ways become the standard comparative operating procedure in the sociology of professions writ large. As highlighted also by Bourgeualt et al. (2009: 479), such studies tend to adopt a macro-societal level of analysis, cast in terms of variable profession-state relations, whether conforming or not to the classical distinction between "market-dominated" Anglo-Saxon and "state-dominated" Continental contexts of professionalism (see Svensson & Evetts, 2010). Intellectually speaking, such historical-comparative research may be traced back not least to Max Weber's studies of law-society relations (Larson, 1986). Similar tactics have been successfully deployed, however, to shed light on key cross-national differences in the fates of medical professions (Saks, 2015), economists (Fourcade, 2010), and many other professional groups, with work too numerous to mention.

Without going into detail, it is worth noting that proponents of the neo-Weberian approach to the study of professions highlight the centrality of comparative sociology in this tradition as amongst its "cutting edge" when compared to competing theories (Saks, 2010: 909). However, such blanket claims downplay the *internal* debates among researchers working in

a macro-societal vein. For instance, some notable scholars now question the relevance of the Anglo-Saxon-versus-Continental split, in view of globalized neoliberal changes to professional regulation (Evetts, 2012); while others stress the continued relevance of national cultural-political path-dependencies in shaping also contemporary professional outcomes (Fourcade, 2010). More generally, and importantly for my argument in this essay, to align the comparative ambition too closely with a neo-Weberian approach, as does Mike Saks (2010), is arguably to overlook or downplay the more general importance of comparative work across *all* of the sociology of professions.

Relative to cross-national approaches, our own work is more concerned with how trans-national (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2012) and trans-local (Blok et al., 2018) re-scaling processes nowadays impinge on the path-dependencies of professional relations in a Scandinavian welfare state context like Denmark (as I unfold later on). As such, while we acknowledge the potential for adding more of a cross-national dimension to our work later on, ours is initially closer to (yet not co-extensive with) a second strand of comparative tactics, one that I dub *intra-national* standing. This is work which, as Bourgeault and colleagues show (Bourgeault, Benoit, & Hirschkorn, 2009: 479), often address micro- and meso-level questions of working conditions, associational strategies, professionalization trajectories, or gender- and class-based compositions of two or more professional groups within the same country. As for cross-national studies, this comparative tactic understandably remains widespread in the sociology of professions (see, e.g., Harrits & Larsen, 2016).

Cross-jurisdictional comparison: Defining new units of analysis

From the point of view of Abbott's (1988) notion of professional jurisdiction, however, intra-national shares with cross-national comparisons the problem of risking to abstract professional groups from their wider ecologies of *inter-professional* relations. According to this view, the key dynamic of professional change is constituted by disputes among diverse expert-based groups seeking to control a specific domain of work, a specific jurisdiction. This is true historically, as Abbott (1988; 2005b) shows through case studies in England and the United States, for shifting relations and inter-professional settlements among doctors and nurses, clergy and psychiatrists, architects and engineers, lawyers and accountants, amongst many similar examples. Famously, Abbott (1988: 2) thus claims quite generally that an "effective historical sociology of professions must begin with case studies of jurisdictions and jurisdictional disputes."

Accordingly, beginning with Abbott himself (1988: 60ff), a small but important literature has sought to compare the varieties of inter-professional dispute and settlement, ranging from full control by a single profession to the subordination of one profession by another. Others' follow-up work in this ecological vein has shown the importance of standardization and commodification processes to how medical jurisdictions, in particular, unfold (Timmermans,

2002). Moreover, drawing on interactionist ideas of professional segments as sub-groups sharing cognitive techniques and senses of mission (Bucher & Strauss, 1961), related work has shown how *intra-professional* status relations among medical specialties matter for such segments' ability to exercise jurisdictional control over ancillary groups of technicians (Halpern, 1992).

Our own notion and practice of *cross-jurisdictional* comparison, as should be clear, belongs to this third strand of analytical tactics, as we seek to combine a focus on intra- and inter-professional relations in the study of divergent domains of work-based disputes and settlements (Blok et al., 2019a). Specifically, as noted, we seek in our project to describe and compare the forms now taken on by a set of professional jurisdictions emerging, or so we claim, at the intersection of globalized societal challenges like lifestyle-related diseases, on the one hand, and localized professional and organizational attempts at problem-solving, on the other hand. In other words, what ties our cases of inter-professional change together, we argue, is the fact that they involve local professional segments into new tasks of handling globalized societal challenges on behalf also of a welfare state itself undergoing restructurings and local-global re-scaling (Blok, Pedersen, Meilvang, & Lindstrøm, 2019b). Yet, the processes and patterns through which this happens and hence the forms that such emerging jurisdictions take remain quite different, motivating careful cross-case comparison.

In pursuing this aim, we simultaneously seek to extend further the processual and ecological turn in the sociology of professions to which Abbott's work contributes, in continuation of prior Chicago School commitments (Liu, 2018). Specifically, this means that we study professional change over a 20-to-30-year timeframe, from the 1990s until today, drawing on a combination of archival professional association material, interviews with professionals, and short-term workplace ethnography (Blok et al., 2019a). It also means that we conceptualize and analyze this change as enacted at the intersection of self-conscious projects driven by emerging professional segments, who seek to renegotiate the intra- and inter-professional authority relations in which they work, including by seeking out alliances with adjacent university and political agencies at local, national, and transnational scales. As I detail in the following sections, this means that what we dub inter-ecological and cross-scalar alliances become *themselves* key objects of analysis and comparison, in ways that extend also Abbott's framework in new and, we believe, fruitful directions.

For the time being, to summarize, my key argument is that the tactic of cross-jurisdictional comparison allows us to cast contemporary professional change in a new light, posing questions that neither cross-national nor intra-national tactics of comparative inquiry are suitable for pursuing. These questions have to do, first, with patterns of intra- and inter-professional dispute and settlement, which may take on widely varying forms across distinct domains of professional work, organizing, and regulation. Second, they have to do with the

wider shape of those adjacent political and university ecologies to which professional projects are wedded, across variable "trans-local" scales of organizing (Blok et al., 2018). I turn now to unfold more of how and why we believe such an approach to variation-finding across professional ecologies in general, and an attention to post-national ecological relations in particular, are likely to lead to better ways of describing professional change, relative to the current state-of-the-art.

Why and how to do variation-finding across professional ecologies?

Undertaking cross-jurisdictional case comparisons, in short, means searching for new knowledge on important similarities and differences in professional interaction across domains of expert work. Meanwhile, it entails a commitment to rendering such variation more analytically *explicit* than what is arguably usual in the sociology of professions, for reasons just sketched. As Krause details (2018), this means working to draw distinctions and accumulate insights into key dimensions of variation among professional jurisdictions, or differently put, to strive for a more fine-tuned vocabulary for describing ecological variations (see also Liu, 2018). In our own research, we hope only to commence such an exploration, which overall has the character of an extensive research agenda. Here, I will stick to some initial observations, grounding these also in specificities of Abbott's (2005a) own reflections on the dimensions of jurisdictions.

As Krause (2018) highlights for field theory, there is arguably an inherent tension to attempts at formalizing dimensions of variation within research traditions otherwise committed to thick descriptions of social relations and processes, such as in Abbott's Chicago School inspiration. Indeed, this tension seems important to Abbott himself, who compares his ecological theory to Bourdieu's field theory in exactly such terms, criticizing the "quasi-structuralism" of the latter. Hence, Abbott states (2005a), "I treat the topological location of this or that profession [in a jurisdictional ecology] as a completely empirical matter, defined by competition that can be in many dimensions, over many things, with many different groups." This is purportedly also why Abbott, unlike Bourdieu, refuses to draw or otherwise visualize his professional ecologies, for fear of reifying what his social ontology casts as situated and dynamic processes.

Theoretical niceties aside, however, what Abbott's argument here overlooks, I believe, is exactly the discussion to which Krause (2016) contributes, on how comparative tactics may be re-adjusted away from causal explanation and towards the aim of better describing relational forms. Comparison, she notes (Krause, 2018: 7), may "add to the project of grasping particularity by making forms of particularity visible that would otherwise be naturalized." Arguably, this is the sense in which a comparative ambition of variation-finding across the patterns of intra- and inter-professional relations and processes of diverse jurisdictions should be seen as eminently compatible with, and as adding valuably to, an

Abbottian sociology of professions. Indeed, Abbott's (1988) own suggestions on the various types of jurisdictional settlement is an instance of such relational, pattern-oriented comparison, and one that has helped us describe our own cases. Hence, for instance, whereas doctor-nurse relations in prevention work still carries many traits of hierarchical subordination, engineer-architect relations in climate adaptation are shaped more by horizontal interdependence, with clear implications for work coordination in the two jurisdictions.

Such ideal-typical settlement patterns, however, still do not amount to a full-fledged search for more general *dimensions* of variation among professional ecologies. Again following Krause (2018), this would rather mean searching for and systematizing a vocabulary to articulate variation in key dimensions of professional ecological structuration, such as the degrees and kinds of inter-professional hierarchies, the degrees of contestation or consensus amongst professional segments, and the types of symbolic and epistemic oppositions and alliances shaping any given jurisdiction. As hinted, to my knowledge, there is at present little work along such lines in the sociology of professions writ large, neither in the Abbottian tradition nor indeed as regards field-based or other approaches. Yet, as Krause suggests (2018: 8), this situation should be seen as problematic, because it fails to push the Abbottian (and other) research program(s) in the sociology of professions "to develop and differentiate its vocabulary and specify its hypotheses."

Differentiating inter-ecological relations: Some initial steps

To reiterate, we ourselves do not claim for our research to have gone far in this general direction, although we do claim to have helped forge some of the methodological stepping-stones needed for doing so (including as discussed in this essay). Where we *have* made head-way, however, is along a more confined track that we conceptualize as the *inter-ecological* alliances at work in professional projects seeking to lay claim to emerging jurisdictions, or what we have come to dub "proto-jurisdictions" (Blok et al., 2019a). Under these circumstances, we show how professional segments must forge and stabilize new alliances with resourceful agencies across university and political ecologies; alliances which professionals may in turn leverage as part of renegotiating workplace task allocations and management-infused organizational scripts. In short, along Abbottian ecological lines, our comparative work seeks to differentiate the kind, the strength of, and the moral bases for diverse professional alliances to university and political agencies.

Not surprisingly, the specific nature of professional inter-ecological alliances turns out to vary greatly across the three proto-jurisdictions in our research. For instance, whereas the prevention-active segment of nurses in Danish hospitals gain leverage vis-à-vis medical doctors in part by leveraging state-sanctioned World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines (Pedersen, 2020), landscape architects seeking to strengthen their standing vis-à-vis engineers over climate adaptation depend in particular on their ability to ally with municipal

sustainability agendas (Meilvang, 2019). Relatedly, expanding the institutional base for university expertise in innovation management proves central to the professional project of management engineers, who pursue a strategy of "epistemic arbitrage" (Seabrooke, 2014) by engaging in international standard-setting efforts meant for re-import into Danish companies and new MBA education programs (Blok et al., 2018). By contrast, such university connections are far less prominent for environmental engineers active in urban climate adaptation, who rely rather on long-standing state backing.

More surprisingly, perhaps, our comparative endeavors *also* help uncover and conceptualize a set of broad-based *similarities* in how diverse professional segments seek to expand their jurisdiction. Specifically, we show how segments as diverse as adaptation-active landscape architects, prevention-active nurses, and innovation-active management engineers, in each their settings, simultaneously pursue three modes of boundary work (Blok et al., 2019a). First, at the everyday workplace level, professionals engage in "pragmatic boundary reshuffling," at times reinforcing and at times softening the boundaries marking off their task domains from those of adjacent professions. Second, at the organizational level, professional segments engage in "tactical boundary renegotiation," trying to ally with or take on mid-level management positions with importance to fostering their project. Third, as noted, professionals engage in "cross-ecological alliance seeking," trying to secure critical resources for themselves inside networks spanning into university and political settings. Rather than choosing any one of these levels as the sole site of analysis, then, our argument implies the need to simultaneously study how professional projects work across them.

This observation in turn raises many research-practical questions about methods and data, beyond the scope of this essay (see Blok et al., 2019a for an extended account). For present purposes, and to sum up, my key argument in this section is that an Abbottian approach to professional change entails not only the promise of cross-jurisdictional comparisons, but also enables a broader research agenda of searching for the key dimensions of variation in professional ecologies across diverse substantive domains, all the while remaining true to the processual and relational assumptions of ecological analysis (see also Liu, 2018). Our own work on the modes of boundary work enacted by professional segments within emerging trans-local proto-jurisdictions testifies, I venture, to how a comparative methodology may be productively leveraged for such twin descriptive and concept-developing purposes. My hope with this essay, ultimately, is to inspire or provoke others to join in—or indeed to criticize—this suggested wider research agenda.

Post-national analysis: Comparing professions across scales

From the outset, as should be clear, our research seeks to challenge what, from a casual reading, might be seen as Abbott's (1988) methodological nationalism: the fact, that is, that his analyses of professional change assume ecologies organized primarily at the *national* level. Importantly, however, our attempt to question this assumption and to pay attention

to trans-national and trans-local relations is itself *facilitated* by the ecological theorizing of Abbott and others (Liu, 2018). This is true since, overall, ecological theorizing gives priority to empirically based (rather than *a priori*) observations of relations of variable scope and extension, as seen also in Abbott's (2005) own work on historical shifts in local-national profession-state relations. Hence, rather than taking the Danish national political-economic context as externally given, our study compares also how that "national context" is *itself* being reworked, in part under the influence of new forms of professional authority that extend both sub- and trans-nationally (Blok et al., 2019b).

This is why we conceptualize our object of study as emerging "trans-local" (proto-) jurisdictions (Blok et al., 2018), whose socio-spatial characteristics in terms of authorized professional relations and interactions are themselves objects of analysis. Here, for instance, not only are interactions between doctors and nurses over lifestyle disease prevention work in Danish hospitals nowadays shaped by guidelines emanating from the WHO, serving as transnational resources for local professional projects. We also elucidate how regional differences amongst Danish hospitals in how such guidelines are translated into organizational routines create local, sub-national variations and inequalities in support for profession-driven prevention initiatives (Blok et al., 2019b). Similar dynamics are at work in the domains of urban climate adaptation and innovation management, yet with many variations in effective patterns of relations—cross-scalar patters which, from a post-national point of view, must themselves be compared.

The key move here, in short, is to stop posing the challenge of transnational professionalism in purely epochal terms—as if implying a wholesale shift *from* national *to* transnational professional jurisdictions (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2012)—and to instead render such change subject to a differently configured comparative ambition. What this means, overall, is that socio-geographical scale itself should be identified as an additional dimension of variation among professional jurisdictions and ecologies. Consequently, our work seeks to "trans-localize" (Blok et al., 2018) Abbott's framework such that issues of scale and scale-making, from the local to the global, become endogenous to our study of contemporary professional projects. In other words, far from theorizing scalar structuration as pre-given, we need to conceptualize professions and professional segments as themselves agents of scalar re-negotiation, whose acts of seeking out alliances to political and other agencies across dissimilar scales have consequences, potentially, for broader organizational and societal understandings of the proper ways of dealing with globalized challenges.

The domain of urban climate adaptation vividly illustrates these points about scalar re-negotiation. Such happens, for instance, in new networks of local municipal, university-based, and professional consultancy actors joining forces to develop so-called surface-based solutions to problems of drainage, as more and heavier rains threaten to regularly inundate urban areas (Blok et al., 2018). These networks frequently seek inspiration from similar

efforts in other countries, and they often orient to and justify new profession-driven regulations in reference to United Nations-backed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, the professional standards guiding these cross-scalar efforts are themselves negotiated mainly at the national scale, through the leveraging of long-standing "hinge" organizations (Meilvang, 2019) between the Danish state and the engineering profession, in particular. Professionals active in this proto-jurisdiction, in short, routinely orient to reference points from across different scales.

As for the other dimensions of variation in professional ecologies, we only claim for our own research to have started to scratch the surface of how scale-making happens differently as part of contemporary (or indeed historical) jurisdictional developments. The same is true for other scale-related aspects that should ideally form part of the wider research agenda sketched here, including how scale becomes a stake in competitions among professions within a given jurisdiction and the relative value accorded to transnational resources across divergent domains of professional work. To be sure, there is now research in the sociology of professions that valuably raises such questions, such as Marion Fourcade's (2010) on the role of transnational influences in structuring national jurisdictions of economists. What is still largely lacking, I argue, is the attempt to address such questions more systematically by way of a cross-jurisdictional comparative tactic, in search of conceptual tools for better describing ecological variations.

To reiterate, one reason this post-national comparative ambition matters greatly to the present juncture in the sociology of professions, I believe, is to move beyond the rather sterile debate associated with competing claims either to the neoliberal near-eclipse (Evetts, 2012) or the continuing over-importance (Fourcade, 2010) of specifically *national* frameworks of professional regulation. Here, it seems more productive to reformulate such alternatives into competing hypotheses for the empirical study of diverse professional jurisdictions, in that nation state-based regulations conceivably play widely varying roles across diverse contemporary professional projects and jurisdictions. Such, for instance, is visible in domains of so-called "corporate" or "management" professions believed to operate mainly in loosely organized transnational fields (Heusinkveld et al., 2018). While this observation is relevant also to our own study of innovation management, comparing to other domains leads us also to question the strong assumption that national-scale resources would no longer co-shape such a project of corporate professionalism. Rather, what needs emphasizing are cross-jurisdictional differences in the *kind* and *degree* of such influence.

To summarize, we take a post-national comparative aspiration attuned to diverse professional projects of scale-making across local, national, and transnational spaces as integral to the wider agenda of articulating the varieties of professional ecologies that this essay sets forth. Such an aspiration, it should be noted, in no way annuls the continuing importance of doing also cross-national comparative research into professional change, in

ways that may qualify also our own findings from a Scandinavian welfare state context (Blok et al., 2019b). Yet, it adds new dimensions to this well-worn research tactic, in that it forces analysts to pay attention to how professional projects emerge within and through hinges to university and political ecologies whose scalar, socio-geographical characteristics may themselves vary, across jurisdictions in the same country and across countries differently situated in world-wide political economies. Going forward, and as Ellen Kuhlmann in particular has argued (2013), a fully articulated comparative agenda for the study of professional change may well want to strive for a truly global yet persistently context-sensitive reach, going beyond the traditional Anglo-Saxon-versus-Continental European frame.

Coda: New comparative possibilities in the sociology of professions?

My ambition in this essay has been to leverage our own collaborative experiences from studying professional change in and beyond Denmark as a springboard for articulating a wider research agenda in the sociology of professions, one based on a sense of comparative possibilities and ambitions still underarticulated in the field at large. Following Andrew Abbott's (1988; 2005b) seminal contribution to reengage with classical Chicago School ecological theorizing, I conceptualize this as an agenda of cross-jurisdictional comparative tactics attuned to variation-finding across diverse domains of professional work, organizing, and regulation. In particular, I suggest that such an agenda pays close attention to varying patterns of intra- and inter-professional dispute and settlement, to variations in those inter-ecological alliances and modes of boundary work supporting professional projects, and to patterns of how local, national, and transnational scales of organizing matter differently to historical and contemporary negotiations of professional change.

There are, I believe, three main reasons why meta-reflections on comparative possibilities in the sociology of profession may be particularly important at the present juncture. The first has to do with the fact that one finds in this research field surprisingly little by way of sustained dialogue and mutual critique at the level of comparative methodologies, even as comparative ambitions have always mattered greatly to how the field has developed and how its theoretical struggles have played out. As I have suggested, this relative lack has allowed *some* rather than *other* comparative tactics to become standard operating procedures in the field, procedures that may not be appropriate for all empirical and theoretical purposes. Second, becoming aware of such self-limitations and alternative possibilities seems particularly acute at present for quite quotidian reasons, including the way changes in research funding scripts at European and other levels increasingly favor multi-researcher or multi-country projects with some comparative element (Deville et al., 2016). Consequently, responding creatively and with methodological acumen to such change seems important to the field's future.

Finally, following Monika Krause (2016) whose methodological work on comparative possibilities in many ways sparked this essay of mine, the third reason is more general and shared by sociologists of professions with many fellow researchers across the social sciences writ large. Stated briefly, this entails the prospect, as Krause (ibid.: 45) nicely puts it, of "free[ing] the academic practice of comparison from its theory", that is, from what I previously called its meta-theory of the proper aims of comparison. Quite standardly, as noted, this meta-theory limits legitimate comparisons to a search for causal inferences across standardized, variable-based, or otherwise linearly construed cases. Instead, I have suggested with Krause, decentering such assumptions would mean freeing up more space for leveraging comparative tactics towards the aim of better describing and better conceptualizing the situated and context-specific variations in professional interaction, organization and regulation, whether conceptualized or not in Abbottian cross-jurisdictional terms. Indeed, I believe this would have the added bonus that, Abbott's (2005a) own hyperbolic suggestions aside, it might serve to place his ecological theorizing more on a par with other key developments in the research field, showing that it is interesting but surely not "beyond comparison."

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