

WHAT COMPETITION DOES

An Anthropological Theory

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Abstract: Anthropologists, like neoliberal economists, have often assumed that competition (re)orders society in broadly predictable ways. By contrast, we contend that competition always facilitates changes beyond its anticipated outcomes and disciplinary effects. We argue that the outcomes of competition are contingent on the varied and co-existing interpretations of audiences, arbiters, and competitors about the nature of competition, what is worth competing for, and how to go about it. Hence, although it is often instituted with the intention of authoritatively determining value, generating order, or engineering predefined changes, competition inherently affords alternative and unexpected possibilities for sociality. In doing so, competition mediates divergent social orders and modes of relating, rather than instituting one order or another.

Keywords: affordance, anthropological theory, capitalism, competition, cooperation, games, mediation, neoliberalism

By mid-October 2021, more than 140 million people worldwide had watched the South Korean television series *Squid Game*, barely a month after its launch. In the series, marginalized and indebted people who have fallen on hard times compete in a series of children's games, on a supposedly equal footing, for a vast amount of money. Losing, however, means instant (and often brutal) death. Since, by design, there can only be one winner, the series features a constant stream of players teaming up to overcome obstacles, before turning on one another—eventually pitting friend against friend and spouse against spouse. The competition's mysterious organizers capitalize on these tragedies by harvesting organs of the dead and selling exclusive viewing rights to ultra-rich white men wearing bejeweled animal masks. The appeal of this dystopian survival drama stems from its critique of competition as the structuring



principle of contemporary capitalism. By emphasizing competition's dehumanizing effects and the structural injustices it reproduces, director Hwang Dong-hyuk compels viewers to reflect on the unequal circumstances in which humans must compete for their lives under global capitalism (Jeffries 2021).

In *Squid Game*, simple playground competitions become a metonym for capitalism and its social ills, fostering divisive and self-serving behaviors, reproducing class structure, and commoditizing suffering. A similar conflation—of knowledge about capitalism with knowledge about competition—has come to overdetermine recent public and scholarly discourse on what competition does. Tacit analyses of competition in anthropology tend to slide into this 'capitalist slot',¹ sharing many critical perspectives about competition's effects with critiques like Dong-hyuk's. This line of thinking has two blind spots. First, competition is a common dynamic in social life writ large, rather than existing exclusively in contexts defined by capitalism. Second, although anthropologists are often critical of competition's effects under capitalism, they share with neoliberal economists (who espouse competition's benefits) a sense that competition's outcomes are broadly predictable.² An ethnographic and historicizing attention to competition in its own right, we contend, reveals something quite different—that competition always produces outcomes that exceed and diverge from purported expectations.

The anthropologies of work and neoliberalism critique neoliberal visions of competition as a universalizing mechanism that encourages subjects to imagine themselves as a "bundle of skills" (Urcioli 2008: 215) that must be constantly and reflexively improved, and to act rationally in a shared yet agonistic pursuit of maximal financial profit (Gershon 2011; Mirowski 2013; Rose 1996). Recent ethnography has emphasized the damaging effects of competition as a technique of neoliberal governance and subjectivation (Chong 2020; Li 2007; Okura Gagné 2020; Tooley 2017), one that atomizes subjects, corrodes solidarity, and reproduces established hierarchies of wealth and power. The prevalence of this critique has, however, sidelined attention to competition in its own right as an object of ethnographic comparison. In other words, capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal form, has come to serve as a placeholder for anthropological knowledge about what competition does.

In contrast to this critical anthropological orientation, neoliberal economists see competition's ordering and subjectifying effects as desirable, and the order that competition produces as being *just*, if not equal (Hayek 2008). For Hayek, as for more contemporary neo-classical economists, competition is a process that authoritatively reveals objective truths ('facts' in Hayek's words) about relative value in a given moment. Such facts transcend individual opinion, instead reflecting knowledge about, and ultimately beneficial to, *all* participants in a given market (Mirowski and Nik-Khah 2017). Competition is thus the vital 'discovery procedure' (Hayek [1968] 2002) that animates the 'invisible hand'

of the market and allows it to order society. For neoliberals, competition thus notionally ensures that prices cannot be to the detriment of consumers, and that the distribution of wealth justly reflects actors' skill in acting on the facts that the market reveals.

Despite differing vastly in their account of what competition does (e.g., maintain inequality vs. justly disseminate wealth) and to what extent these effects are desirable, both critical social scientists and neoliberal economists assume that competition has predictable effects. Either it promotes inequality to the detriment of the weak and disenfranchised, or it reveals 'facts' and justly distributes wealth. Both approaches thus take competition for granted as a dynamic of comparative evaluation that orders social life and makes subjects knowable and governable (Bateson [1936] 1958; Graeber and Grubačić 2021; Harrison 1993)—for better or worse.³

This special issue challenges the recent tendency in anthropology to approach competition as a self-evidently singular and essentially capitalist dynamic that compels individuals to evaluate themselves against a normative standard. Instead, we call for the study of competition as an empirically observable and contextually situated practice. Rather than starting from a definition of competition or an implicit understanding of what competition's effects are, we draw inspiration from the anthropology of play and games, which has moved from asking what play *is* (Bateson 1972; Caillois 1962; Huizinga 1949) to exploring what play and games *do* as forms of social action. We thus ask what competition *does* for people who engage in it (as competitors, arbiters, audiences, etc.), who are active in organizations that orchestrate it, and who join social groups that foster and sustain it.

New Directions: Affordance, Contingency, and Ambiguity

Studies of play and games are key for rethinking approaches to what competition does. Play enables people both to have fun for the sake of it (Graeber 2014; Hamayon 2016), and to reflect on and creatively stretch the normative bounds of prevailing social orders (Handelman 2001; Steinmüller 2011; Swancutt 2021). Competition, we argue, also facilitates critical and creative reflection on established norms. Yet in scholarship on games and play, competition has again largely fallen by the wayside. Play tends to be conceptualized as a generative, pro-social disposition that is distinct from the contrived, structured interactions of games (Malaby 2007). Despite this, competition often remains an implicitly animating dynamic of both play and games, and the ways in which it contributes to their diverse outcomes are underexplored.⁴ Competition may also be pursued in contexts that are decidedly unplayful and not recognized as games—for instance, as a quality of relationships (e.g., between

siblings) or as formalized interactions (e.g., job interviews). Hence, we call for an emphasis on competition itself, rather than subsuming it within the study of games or play.

Whereas anthropologies of capitalism often assume competition's outcomes in advance (whether implicitly or explicitly), this collection emphasizes the indeterminacy, contingency, and ambiguity that competition generates. To explore these moments of contingency, we attend to what we call competition's affordances. The notion of 'affordance' has previously referred to the possibilities for action and outcome that emerge when agents interact with particular material objects (Norman 2013) or from certain social dynamics. Preserving a focus on the relationship between interactions and outcomes, we use affordances to refer to the diverse possibilities that engaging with or in competition—whether as an arbiter, competitor, bystander, organizer, audience member, or from any other position—offers for (re)making meaning, subjectivity, relationships, and other outcomes. Focusing on competition's affordances constitutes a new theoretical perspective on competition as a *process*. This creates a framework to analyze both *what* competition does and *how* it does it.

Our aims in this issue are threefold. First, as an ethnographic project, the collection highlights competition as a distinct (yet diverse) mode of relating and explores how competition shapes social life and forms. Second, in drawing attention to competition's affordances, we foreground the central yet understated position of competition in anthropological and social scientific theory. We take issue with the extent to which critiques of neoliberalism have come to stand for anthropological knowledge *about* competition, as well as with canonical understandings of competition as a mechanism for defining value or instituting and reinforcing order. Instead, we ask, how do ordinary people, institutions, and states operationalize different ideas about what competition does? How do these parties deal with unfulfilled expectations about competition's effects? And are 'winning', 'losing', and the production of order always the most (or only) meaningful outcomes of competition?

Third, we build a theoretical framework to address these questions, which emerges from the ethnographies featured in the collection. Our articles show that competition always generates affordances and changes that exceed its prescriptions, conventions, rules, and intended outcomes. These affordances emerge as people evaluate one another's competitive actions in different ways, and always go beyond classificatory categories of 'winning' and 'losing', which anthropological analyses of competition have tended to focus on. Despite the contingency that competition produces, it also suggests the possibility of authoritatively determining value and creating order for (and among) its participants. We therefore argue that competition results in ambiguous and unpredictable outcomes precisely because it involves the under-determinate application of rules and conventions, rather than ambiguity and unpredictability emerging

despite these rules. These dynamics of order and disorder, ambiguity and authority are central features of what competition does in the world.

As competition facilitates affordances that surpass its prescriptions, it emerges as a site and practice of mediating between different spheres of value and divergent social orders (see Gershon 2019). This collection attends ethnographically to the ways competition allows people to compare, evaluate, switch between, merge, and integrate different visions and practices of organizing the world, rather than simply instituting one or another. As a mediative process, competition thus emerges as a key ethnographic site for understanding how humans deal with multiplicities of meaning and social organization—practices that involve both bounding *and* transcending particular spheres of value and modes of relating, as people and ideas circulate between them (*ibid.*: 414). As our articles show, processes of competition involve both boundary maintenance and transcendence in ways that are inseparable from one another. Hence, an anthropological attention to competition provides a perspective on that perennial problematic in anthropological theory, that is, the relationship between stability and change in social life. Before elaborating this framework, we begin with a genealogy of competition as a concept in anthropological and social theory to explain why anthropologists have often been reluctant to think with and about it.

Competition in Social and Anthropological Theory

Cooperation's Other

In socio-cultural anthropology, assumptions about what competition does have been carried over from the social evolutionary frameworks that jockeyed for influence at the discipline's inception. Regardless of their underlying political values, these nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century frameworks were all concerned with the merits and limits of conceptualizing the progression from one stage of human history to another as mediated by competition. The assumption in these visions of socio-historical change was that the specific changes competition precipitated were a function of the extent to which competition also involved dynamics of cooperation. For Hobbes ([1651] 1909), Rousseau ([1762] 1979), or Adam Smith ([1759] 2002, [1776] 2009), competition could provide a basis for progressive social change through innovation and emulation only if the possibility of envious and belligerent antagonism could be held in check through impartial arbiters, that is, if a degree of cooperation could also be ensured among competitors.

This assumption was variably elaborated and qualified. When liberals such as Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and Henry Maine caricatured Darwin's theory of evolution by positing that competition between individual organisms

over shared interests and limited resources accounted for deep socio-historical change, they assumed that the negative outcomes competition could precipitate were a thing of the past. After all, theirs was a Whiggish narrative arc, in which Victorian England epitomized the morally redemptive consequences of combative social systems comprising self-interested individuals who held each other in check through contractual relations (Stocking 1987). The previously noted problems that competition seemed to pose for sociality were seemingly overcome, and competition was thenceforth zealously and confidently posited and imposed as an ordering dynamic in social, economic, and political life.

Other voices were more equivocal and their accounts of history less linear or Eurocentrically triumphant. Juxtaposing competition with cooperation, Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1902) proposed that cooperation or mutual aid is the more consequential evolutionary mechanism of the two. He argued that the social Darwinist law of competition was a retrograde form of association by subordination that justified modern European colonialism while ignoring the vast history of self-regulating forms of cooperative association between all forms of life (Kinna 2021). Lewis Henry Morgan ([1877] 2018) came close to making a similar point when he suggested that while the accumulation of private property on a competitive basis drove progress, it could retard or reverse progress if it became an end in itself (Schwartz 2020). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for whom the social Darwinist conception of competition was a projection of liberal bourgeois norms (Engels [1884] 1980; Marx 1972; Schmidt 1971), cautioned that market competition coercively instituted profound systemic contradictions, dysfunctions, and power asymmetries (Palermo 2016). Here, competition is taken to undermine cooperation.

Although not all these reservations about competition's effects were taken up by early British social anthropologists, the idea that competition is partially distinct from cooperation is arguably one of the discipline's quietly foundational assumptions. Consider Radcliffe-Brown (1930, 1940) and his analyses of political systems and kinship structures. His theory of structural functionalism—based on both Durkheim and Kropotkin (Goody 1999)—concerned how order was produced and maintained in 'primitive' or 'pre-modern' societies that lacked state structures and formal legal institutions. Arguably, the problem of order was a problem only because Radcliffe-Brown took for granted—like Hobbes—that humans naturally compete 'all against all' when left to their own devices. Asking how order is maintained is thus another way of asking how society hangs together despite 'natural' competition between humans. Radcliffe-Brown's answer was to displace this question to broader and broader scales of a given social structure. To him, society was more than just the sum of individuals existing at cross-purposes; rather, society is composed of multiple partially opposed and overlapping groupings—families, households, lineages, or moieties—who can relate as rivals and antagonists but also as allies (Kuper

2015: 30–35). People stop short of competing to the knife because they must also cooperate in order to compete with broader, encompassing groupings.

The generative tension and partial overlap between competition and cooperation—with the former at times distinct from and at others implicated in the latter—endured as a submerged analytic in anthropological thought as social anthropologists moved from questions of order to those of conflict and social change. Just as so-called acephalous social structures were analyzed as ordered through countervailing processes of fusion and fission (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), so too was competition for power and authority—within kinship systems and settler-colonial political-economic structures alike—understood as precipitating a fragile or temporary equilibrium not in its own right but through countervailing acts of cooperation and exchange (Gluckman 1940; Marwick 1965; Mitchell 1966; Turner 1957).

A similar understanding of competition can be read into other critiques of the structural-functionalist obsession with well-integrated, rule-governed societies in a state of equilibrium. When recognized as the source of chronic instability in any system of social and political organization, the ultimate outcomes of competition were accounted for through its proximate implications for strategizing individuals: the leeway to bend social norms, reinterpret the rules of the game, and choose how to relate based on limited sets of terms of cooperation, exchange, and association (Barth 1959a, 1959b; Leach [1954] 1977). Here, competition was conceptualized as not just changing society but as triggering a predictable and limited set of changes that recycle pre-existing social and political arrangements in dynamic diachronic cycles. The collection moves beyond this vision of competitive change as essentially repetitive.

Cultural anthropologists Margaret Mead (1937) and Gregory Bateson (1935, [1936] 1958) also conceptualized competition as linked to cooperation. While Mead suggested that each were distinct personality traits, Bateson attempted to integrate the two. In symmetrical schismogenesis, similar patterns of behavior are reinforced among two parties as they compete for a common goal. Here, competition reproduces and heightens pre-existing individual behaviors and values, but also broader patterns of social structure.⁵ Bateson ([1936] 1958: 171–197) tacks between dynamics of competition at a structural level and individuals' commitment to different values, ethics, and aesthetics in order to address ethological and sociological aspects of conflict and competition simultaneously. In doing so, his work bridges the focus on competition as a personality trait (e.g., Mead) and as a structuring force (e.g., British social anthropology).

Structure, Inequality, and Subjectivity

It was only in the 1970s, with the rise of Marxist scholarship in the aftermath of a push for decolonization, that anthropology took to repressing—nay,

exorcising—competition from its analytics. Talal Asad (1972: 93–94), for example, famously wrote against the “tendency in political anthropology to discuss the problem of conflict only in terms of competition, dispute and violent confrontation—i.e. in terms of the conscious purposes of opposed individuals or groups.” As he saw it, such discussions hid the uneven distribution of power among those groups. It makes no sense to think about and with competition if the choice, innovation, or success that competing affords applies only to those who control the means and relations of production. Ultimately, class conflict cannot be said to be ‘competitive’, despite recalling competition-like relations, because only one side ever wins. For example, in educational contexts, competition reproduces hierarchies whereby those with the most material and social capital are most likely to succeed, entrenching their status and resources (Bourdieu 1998; Fordham 2013; Willis 1977).

In a similar vein, contemporary analyses of moral economies conceptualize gifts and exchange as means of (re)producing and regulating socio-economic asymmetries of wealth and power through the entwined dynamics of cooperation and competition (Ledeneva 1998; Rumsby 2021; Valenzuela-García et al. 2014). Again, anthropology’s contribution to interdisciplinary research on cooperation stems mainly from a concern with the structural inequalities that competition (re)generates. Thus, cooperation tempers and rescales competition, such that the hierarchies and inequalities generated by competition are legitimized through a language of reciprocity and cooperation (Molina et al. 2017).

A sense that competition reproduces structural inequalities remains widespread in social anthropology. This orientation productively amplifies efforts to take class conflict seriously and critique neoliberal disciplinary projects. However, it often comes to function as assumed knowledge *about* competition (in place of exploring competition ethnographically). In its weakest iterations, this position effectively forecloses the possibility of asking whether competition might also create other, unexpected changes and outcomes. Such unexpected changes and outcomes might occur alongside, not necessarily instead of, the reproduction of extant inequalities. This possibility animates all of the articles in this issue.

The relationship between competition as subjective experience and structural force (Bateson’s concern) resurfaces in recent analyses of how neoliberal structural reforms that promote competition (re)shape subjectivities. This work has largely been inspired by Foucault (1982, 1991) and his attention to the relationship between subjectivity and structure, rather than Bateson. In everything from state-sponsored and corporate sporting events (Besnier et al. 2018; Walker 2013) to labor regimes (Gershon 2011; Okura Gagné 2020; Urciuoli 2008) and knowledge economies (Chong 2020), competition is increasingly identified as the subjectifying force that shapes collectives of atomized, self-centered individuals.

Such subjectifying projects allocate resources and ascribe moral worth to subjects who demonstrate their commitment to reflexive self-improvement—to

becoming more able and ‘competitive’ in a marketized society (Gershon 2011, 2016; Mirowski 2013; Rose 1996). Those unable to do so are often deemed less morally worthy, legitimizing their marginalization and subjection (Biehl 2005; Koch 2018; Zigon 2011). In such contexts, state provision tends to be withdrawn, forcing people to compete for limited resources, stymieing mutual solidarity, and warping modes of care and support such that they become harmful and violent (Garcia 2010, 2015; Han 2012; Nguyen 2010). Here, competition is understood to reproduce structural inequality and violence.

However, emerging scholarship argues that comparative evaluations of relative ability, which implicitly or explicitly rank people as competitors, can challenge normative visions of neoliberal agency rather than merely reinforcing them (McKearney 2021). Others suggest that the relationship between competitive evaluation and social stratification is less linear than prior accounts of ‘neoliberal subjectification’ have argued. Long and Moore (2013) explore how experiences of achievement are shaped by the relationships within which evaluations of achievement take place, and by divergent imagined futures that collide in the pursuit of achievement. Achievement thus elicits a shifting sense of self and the reappraisal of relational subjectivities, rather than simply reproducing the status quo. While acknowledging that competition may reproduce structural inequality, we are inspired by the belief that competition does more than impose or replicate existing social forms.

Beyond Neoliberalism

In sum, competition has long been an animating concern of anthropological theory, albeit often a tacit dynamic that is not theorized explicitly. Recently, critical attention has focused on neoliberal social and economic policies that deploy competition as a mode of governance. In the process, however, conversations about competition have too often become conversations about neoliberalism, subsuming the former into the latter such that theory about neoliberalism encompasses theory about competition. Yet competition as a human experience and a way of relating is not exclusive to neoliberal contexts. Nor was competition as a mode of governance an innovation of neoliberal ideologues and economists. Rather, competition is *also* tied to the political/economic ideologies of Leninist and Stalinist Russia (Siegelbaum 1982; Viñas 2022), communist and neo-socialist China (Rao, this issue), and post-independence socialist India (Alter, this issue). To theorize competition itself, analysts must address its implication in political projects aligned with neoliberal ideals *and* those that differ dramatically.

Instances of competition as a mode of governance (neoliberal or otherwise) share the assumption that competition produces predictable and predetermined

social changes. Neoliberal ideologues expect that market competition leads to progressive technological and social change, and the just (if not even) distribution of wealth. Likewise, Siegelbaum (1982) shows that ‘shock work’ competitions (in which workers competed to be most productive) were envisaged to generate a sense of collective unity and transformations in dispositions toward work in twentieth-century Russia, albeit within a communist framing of ideal subjectivity. Buitron, Alter, McCarthy, Rao, and Long (all this issue) also show how competition is encouraged with the hope of precipitating anticipated changes.

Social scientists have often shown that the assumptions held by neoliberal ideologues and economists about competition’s outcomes are incorrect. Rather than fueling progressive social change, competition as a technique of neoliberal governance produces inequality, legitimizes violence, and shapes subjectivities in very predictable ways. The critique is thus that neoliberal economists are wrong, both about what competition’s outcomes are and that its actual outcomes are generally deleterious.

Both anthropological critique and invocations of competition as governance assume that competition leads to changes that can be defined in advance. Despite this, an emerging literature shows that highly individualized, calculating, and reflexive subjectivities are not an inevitable consequence of neoliberal governance. Rather, relational moralities and subjectivities also appear to be central to life in highly neoliberalized contexts (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002; Cristian Rangel and Adam 2014; Trnka and Trundle 2017). Building on this work, we question the assumption that competition has predictable outcomes, and that those predictable outcomes (whatever they might be) define competition. To do so, we invite readers to think with us about the relationship between rules, participation, arbitration, and competition’s outcomes. Here, we find inspiration in the anthropology of games.

Rules, Restrictions, Stability, and Change

The instances and dynamics of competition considered in this issue all entail rules, conventions, and shared parameters. These may be tacit or explicit, but they always involve a shared sense of what one is competing for, how one competes, and the ways that performance is likely to be evaluated. This is equally true of competition as a quality of a relationship and as a formalized framework for interaction, although rules and conventions may be more explicitly articulated in the latter than the former. Two contrasting approaches to games help illuminate the relationship between competition, rules, and social reproduction.

Drawing on Johan Huizinga’s (1949) understanding of games as distinct from ordinary life, David Graeber (2015: 109) suggests that bureaucracies—like

games—create ordered spaces in which the relationship between action, meaning, consequence, and reward is clearly delineated. This is not to deny that there are rules and conventions outside bureaucracies or games; rather, tacit rules and conventions exist in all social interactions. Yet such tacit rules induce anxiety because their implicit nature means that there is always the possibility of getting them wrong.⁶ Graeber contrasts the rule-bound space of games with play, the “free expression of creative energies” unbounded by rules (*ibid.*: 192). Play, he suggests, creates rules (and thus games and order) but is, by definition, not constrained by the rules it creates. When one plays, one has the capacity to reimagine action, meaning, and the world in new and creative ways. At the same time, creative expressions (or actions that do not heed behavioral conventions) might just as easily be violent rather than affirmative or pleasurable. The unpredictability of play-as-freedom makes it unnerving.

Games (and bureaucracy) thus offer a ‘utopia of rules’ (Graeber 2015)—a safe haven from the indeterminacy of free creativity. For Graeber, rules generate a sense that the world is ordered even if it is not. We might argue that people find convention-bound competitive spaces appealing because they claim to authoritatively determine relative value within given parameters—that is, to generate *order*. Neoliberal imaginaries of competition as the ‘invisible hand’ of the market make precisely this claim—that competition will authoritatively reveal relative value in a given moment. Read this way, it is the claim that competition *can* and *will* determine value that makes it appealing, even if this promise of predictability is rarely fulfilled. What competition does from this perspective is to act as ideology, in the Marxist sense, maintaining social structure in the face of evident contradictions.

Graeber’s approach, like Huizinga’s (1949: 10–12), assumes that the rules of a game or competition are clearly delineated, understood in the same way, and equally applied by and to those involved. This generates a reassuring sense of order. Yet as this collection shows, the rules and conventions of competitive spaces are neither stably imagined nor applied. Rather, they are always underdeterminate because the complexity of social life always exceeds abstract structural prescriptions.

Thomas Malaby suggests an alternative way to imagine the relationship between competition, rules, and meaning. Inspired by practice theory (Ortner 1999), Malaby (2007: 104) considers games as constructs grounded in action and thus as “dynamic and recursive, largely reproducing their form through time,” but necessarily “always in the process of becoming” (*ibid.*: 103) as they are re-enacted, rather than deeming them beyond the ordinary (cf. Bateson 1972; Caillois 1962). As they are remade, reinterpreted, and reproduced, games are subject to the possibility of emergent change.

However, indeterminacy (beyond the self-evident contingencies of practice) is central to games. Like Graeber, Malaby suggests that bureaucratic rules are

designed to make life predictable, even if they often fail to do so. By contrast, games are contrived to deliberately produce a degree of indeterminacy, which can then be evaluated by players, audiences, and arbiters (Malaby 2007; 2009: 213–215). Such indeterminacy might be semiotic—dependent on the changing interpretation of outcomes; performative—contingent on the capacity of actors to perform under the rules of a game; social—contingent on whether others evaluate actions in the same way as ego; or stochastic—dependent on factors beyond the control of actors, like the weather (Malaby 2007: 107). Whereas Graeber suggests that rules create stability, Malaby stresses the contingency that they generate as they are put into practice. For him, games “are about contriving and calibrating multiple contingencies to produce a mix of predictable and unpredictable outcomes (which are then interpreted)” (ibid.: 105–106)—producing a degree of *disorder*. That these dynamics of predictability and contingency mirror the uncertainty of life makes games compelling (Malaby 2003, 2007). Games do not provide refuge from life’s unpredictability but embrace it.

Crucially, Malaby draws the diverse opinions of audiences and arbiters into his account of games’ contingencies. Such an approach creates space to theorize competition’s outcomes as constituted through the shifting evaluations of actors positioned differently within a given instance of competition. Similarly, his account lends itself to thinking about the dialectic between predictability and indeterminacy in competitive encounters and practices, which we argue is central to what competition *does*. Although clearly at odds, both Graeber’s and Malaby’s accounts shape our approach to competition.

Affordance and Mediation

Resonating with Graeber’s understanding of rules as calming, this collection explores how competition is imagined to be capable of authoritatively determining relative value, and how this imaginary is sought after, both as a mode of governance (by institutions promoting competition) and as a technology of self-making (by subjects engaging in competition). For instance, young Indonesians participating in national graphic design competitions have some faith in such competition’s capacity to determine who is best (Long, this issue). Likewise, the Chinese government and its citizens trust to a degree that competitive educational systems determine which students are brightest (Rao, this issue). The concept of competition implies an authoritative judgment about the relative value of participants’ actions—whether based on ‘expert’ preference or announced through a structured engagement, such as a 100m race, or a combination of both—rather than a decision about relative value being entirely arbitrary. A claim to authoritatively reveal relative value, however contrived the circumstance, is central to what competition *does*.

Following Malaby, the collection shows how competitive spaces are fraught with contingency because they involve diverse and simultaneous interpretations by audiences, arbiters, and competitors about what constitutes competing, what is worth competing for, and how to do so. This ambiguity creates lived dilemmas—when competitors and audiences balance contradictory expectations or undertake counterposed actions—and affords the reinterpretation and reappropriation of rules and conventions. These dilemmas and affordances initiate opportunities to navigate competitive orders in new ways and generate outcomes other than winning or losing. Such opportunities may be interpretive, shaped by alternative appreciations of value, and/or affective, reflecting experiences that diverge from a competition’s desired effects.

For instance, Delhi NGOs organize countless competitions in hopes of teaching children to act on discourses that link hygiene, health, and development, but remain constantly anxious that children are participating for the ‘wrong’ reasons. For their part, Delhi children taking part in these competitions do indeed creatively refigure what it means to win and the value they find in performing competition, in ways that frustrate the development aims of NGOs (McCarthy, this issue). Although often intended or understood to authoritatively determine value, generate order, or precipitate predefined change, competition inherently affords alternative possibilities for sociality. While “institutions and their projects” (Malaby 2020: 15) often shape the initial forms that competition takes, institutions—whether development NGOs (McCarthy, this issue), yoga schools (Alter, this issue), state actors (Buitron, Long, Rao, this issue), or religious organizations (Almudéver Chanzà, this issue)—are not the sole determinants of competitive forms and outcomes, as McCarthy’s child competitors clearly demonstrate. Hence, the collection focuses on the interplay between institutional desires and the possibilities for alternative meaning and practice that competitive structures afford.

Our understanding of what competition does chimes with Jack Halberstam’s (2011: 7) attention to “failure, loss, and unbecoming” as generative experiences that develop counter-intuitive and counter-hegemonic ways of being. For Halberstam, failure is not a *refusal* to take part in a world obsessed with sorting ‘winners’ from ‘losers’ (i.e., one in which competition is imagined to be the ultimate organizing force); rather, failure allows for the emergence of new perspectives in the wake of being identified as a ‘loser’. For Halberstam, only by failing or losing can one reject normative values and reshape normative relations. Dwelling in failure’s creative potentials thus offers an alternative to the eternal hopes of success that pervade contemporary capitalism and mask structural inequalities (cf. Hage 2003).

Like Halberstam, we dwell on the unexpected outcomes of competition that defy and subvert normative visions of success. However, we do not find competition’s affordances to be predicated on outcomes being identified as

either success or failure, as Halberstam's (2011) 'queer art of failure' demands. Instead, alternative possibilities emerge because what it means to succeed, fail, participate, refuse, compete, or abstain is always contingent and never clear-cut. These alternative possibilities are not simplistically subversive. They can facilitate insubordination by subverting competition's intended effects (McCarthy, Rao, this issue), but also allow people to mediate change in ways that defy absolute moral assessment (Alter, Buitron, this issue). They may also bolster stable collective identities even when they appear to divide communities and foster individualism (Long, Almudéver Chanzà, this issue).

Competition's affordances beyond simply winning and losing often sit alongside a continued faith among participants in competition's value-defining capability. Competition's effects emerge from the discordance between expectations and lived experiences of competition. For instance, Chinese students are deeply disillusioned with the promise of meritocracy in an ultra-competitive education system, but rather than rejecting competition, they become passionate about engaging in the 'better competitions' that computer games offer (Rao, this issue). Elsewhere, young Indonesians find that competition wins are often not accompanied by the promised rewards, creating a disjuncture between the present and what it could (or should) have been. Although often deeply disappointing, this disjuncture leads them to embrace, rather than reject, an individualistic, competitive attitude toward life (Long, this issue).

Competition suggests the possibility of authoritatively determining value and instituting a predetermined social order. Yet in practice, competition generates relationships, spheres of value, objects of interest, and practices that exceed the prescribed and structured modes of relating that it involves. Hence, we theorize competition as inherently generating ambiguity and instability precisely because it involves the under-determinate application of rules and conventions (not despite these rules). Where competition is invoked as a technique of governance and subjectification (whether in capitalist or non-capitalist contexts), we contend that it is inherently unwieldy, always producing meanings and relations that exceed its prescriptions. Future anthropologies of competition should thus consider dynamics of order and disorder as central features of competition's effects in and on the world, rather than focusing solely on its ordering and stratifying effects.

Competition's affordances are shaped by and located among the swirl of different appreciations and evaluations in any given instance of competition. Hence, they involve a mediation of social orders and values rather than the imposition of one order or another. The collection shows that competition allows people to place divergent frames of value into conversation, mediate between them, and experiment with new ways of combining and integrating divergent values, practices, and forms of relationship. Competition is thus a practice and process of mediating the divergent rhythms (Bear et al. 2015),

socialities (Tsing 2005), and ‘porous social orders’ (Gershon 2019) of a globally connected world. Formulated this way, future anthropologies of competition are poised to address the relationship between structure and change, a dynamic that has long been at the heart of socio-cultural anthropological inquiry.

The Articles

Buitron’s and Alter’s articles explore instances when competition’s mediative capacity is deployed knowingly to manage change and bridge distinct social orders. Buitron shows how indigenous Ecuadorian Shuar people use competition to creatively engage with mestizo (colonist/foreign) models of corporate sociality and marketized modes of exchange. Shuar organize competitions that take place during festivals including beauty pageants, beer-making contests, and mestizo games like football. The festival creates a space of alterity outside everyday life, which Buitron calls a ‘play-frame’, drawing on Handelman. Competing in the ‘play-frame’ of the festival allows Shuar to appropriate and experiment with mestizo models of hierarchical integration and corporate sociality. Through these competitive encounters, Shuar explore how they might adopt, repurpose, and reject elements of mestizo sociality that are increasingly being pressed upon them. Competition thus facilitates Shuar agency in the face of social change, but also surreptitiously reinforces new forms of internal stratification and commodification in Shuar society.

Alter shows how different strands of competitive yoga developed over the twentieth century have sought to reconcile yoga’s soteriological aim of transcendence with the diverse politico-ideological projects of post-independence India. Some competitive yogic forms aligned transcendence with a Nehruvian socialist nationalism. However, in a contemporary India dominated by neoliberal modes of governance, performances of competition allow yogic ‘Godmen’ to reconcile their vast material wealth with claims of embodying the transcendental that, in turn, fuel their further accumulation of wealth. Here, performatively embodying the ‘spirit of competition’ allows Godmen to inhabit the seemingly contradictory positions of wealthy entrepreneur *and* transcendental guru.

The unwieldy nature of competition as a mode of governance and the way this allows people to mediate divergent values and social orders are the subjects of Rao’s and McCarthy’s articles. Chinese high-school students and Delhi children are both subjected to intense regimes of competitive subjectification, by the Chinese state and by development NGOs, respectively. Rao analyzes how Chinese students reject the rigors of a highly competitive educational system not because they dislike competing, but because they find the forms of competition the state and their parents impose restrictive and boring. Their desire for ‘better competitions’ leads them to play online combat games incessantly. In virtual

battlefields, student gamers find pleasure and satisfaction in competing for its own sake. Some become professional gamers, drawn by the allure of status and prestige that can be achieved in the gaming industry. Over time, however, they become jaded due to the inequalities that the gaming industry sustains, and see this alternative competition arena as similarly flawed compared to state-sponsored educational competitions. There is a clear slippage between competition as a 'ludo capitalist' and socialist mode of subjectification when student gamers move between different arenas. The state finds this slippage profoundly problematic, implementing strict rules to limit students' gaming and tolerating private 'treatment' camps that label gamers 'Internet addicts'. Yet rather than being passive puppets of a rapacious gaming market or docile subjects of an overbearing state, student gamers strive to create forms of value beyond the parameters of these competitive fields by moving between them. Here, competition is an unpredictable mode of subjectification that affords possibilities surpassing both the state's and gaming companies' intentions.

McCarthy's article questions the extent to which competition is an effective disciplinary practice, and reveals that anxieties about competition's potentially subversive effects have a long-standing history in (post-)Enlightenment thinking. She draws on ethnography of how development NGOs use competition to encourage children's participation in their programs, and explores how competition became a popular strategy for involving children in development practice through an analysis of postal competitions run by British and Australian development periodicals in the 1960s to 1980s. McCarthy shows ethnographically how children contest the meanings of 'development', key development paradigms, and the modes of 'developed' subjectivity that competitions seek to inculcate as they compete in (and win) both contemporary development competitions in Delhi and postal competitions in the past. Children's perspectives on development, often ignored by anthropologists and philosophers, highlight the ways that competition opens space to mediate between different values and paradigms, even when its intended purpose is clearly disciplinary. Stepping back, McCarthy demonstrates the continuities between development practitioners' and Enlightenment philosophers' concerns about competition's potentially subversive outcomes when used as a mode of subjectification. Hence, she argues for a closer attention to anxieties about competition's unpredictable effects when it is deployed to discipline and subjectify.

Long also questions *how* competition shapes subjectivity. He begins by exploring the Indonesian state's reliance on competition as a mode of subjectification aligned with national development. The state believes that by constantly encouraging citizens to perform well in various state-organized competitions, Indonesians will come to deeply value competitive achievement. In this way, they will become reflexive, self-maximizing neoliberal subjects whose efforts will best serve the nation's socio-economic development. Long shows that the

relationship between competitive success and reflexive neoliberal subjectivity is not so simple. Indonesians' expectations of competitions' outcomes rarely match up to the realities of life after winning or losing. Competitors thus experience a disconnect between what actually happens in the aftermath of competitions (which Long terms the 'afterlife' of competitions) and what competitors believe could or should have happened (the 'alter-life' of competitions). The affective and emotional effects of this disjuncture, rather than the rewards of winning, precipitate forms of reflexive individualism among Indonesians.

By highlighting the formative effects of this disjuncture, Long complicates two common assumptions in (neoliberal) public policy and anthropological theory about how competition shapes subjectivity. The first is that the rewards of winning (whether potential or realized) shape achievement-oriented subjects who are driven and committed to self-improvement. The second, following closely from the first, is that competition encourages people to become self-interested and acutely aware that one's gain is another's loss. Anthropologies of competition must thus take seriously the power of competitions to generate decisive turning points in competitors' lives. However, such turning points work in unexpected and counter-intuitive ways, rather than competition mechanically reproducing particular subjectivities.

Almudéver Chanzà asks what forms competition takes, and what effects it has, when arbitration is deferred, denied, and unseen. In rural eastern Spain, members of *The Way*, a new reformist Catholic movement, compete for material resources, spaces of worship, the priest's time, and the legitimacy of their theology with the village's traditional Catholic congregation. As a result of the entangled history of Catholicism and fascism, and subsequent efforts to separate religion from the state, the two parties compete in a muted way, through gossip, anti-clericalism, and the deferral of authoritative evaluation. Intra-religious competition using these non-confrontational competitive tactics enables new alliances between secular local state authorities and orthodox Catholics—alliances that run counter to contemporary processes of secularization in post-war Spain. Moreover, rather than leading to schism and purification, as scholars have previously suggested, religious competition in the village promotes a cohesive intra-denominational pluralism, affording the reinvention and revitalization of past devotional practices.

Conclusion

Social scientists who place competition at the center of their analysis are few and far between. Fewer still are those who acknowledge that competition is not inherently capitalist (although capitalism might be competitive), or that the consequences of competition are more indeterminate than predictable. This

special issue investigates the diverse affordances and outcomes of competition in social life that are in dialogue with, but always go beyond, expectations of competition's consequences and effects. Rather than simply subjecting people to a disciplinary process of commensuration, competition also creates scope for the unexpected. Authoritative evaluations are questioned or deferred. Promised rewards and anticipated outcomes fail to materialize. Participants disrupt, confront, misrecognize, and redefine the terms of competing and what is worth competing for. Hence, we suggest that competition does more than merely replicate pre-existing social orders, without denying that it is implicated in power relations and the reproduction of structural inequalities. At another level, such contingencies cumulatively create space to mediate divergent social orders and values. We might thus conceive competition, when used as a disciplinary tool, as an unwieldy technique of subjectification—promising order but always producing outcomes that surpass this promise.

As we look to integrate debates on play, games, power, and neoliberalism, which often address competition *passim*, we argue that anthropologists would do well to theorize competition explicitly and specifically by asking what competition *does*. We offer two reasons: first, because individuals, communities, governments, and institutions alike peg their hopes and policies on certain assumptions about the consequences of organizing or participating in competitive practices; and, second, because assumptions about what competition achieves have tacitly shaped long-running anthropological debates about order, conflict, structure, and social change. Hence, asking what competition *does* provides an opportunity to think across disparate literatures and reconsider established debates, while generating theory that responds to pressing concerns and widespread practices in the wider world.

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Notes

The authorship of this article is presented alphabetically. Each author made an equal contribution to the article and to editing the collection as a whole.

1. This thematic slot has roots in Enlightenment and nineteenth-century debates over the role of competition in natural and social evolutionary frameworks. It encompasses discourses where competition between individuals or collectives is said *either* to differentiate, empower, and liberate them, *or* to impede self-actualization while reducing associational life to hierarchical dynamics of domination and subordination (Kinna 2021). Recently, this ambivalence about competition's effects has been eclipsed by, or folded into, questions about capitalist socio-economic organization.
2. Of course, anthropologists' understanding of what these outcomes are is substantively different from that of economists.
3. Such a generalizing account of competition has endured among anthropologists even as neoliberalization and financialization have been shown to be piecemeal rather than totalizing (cf. Bear et al. 2015; Empson and Bonilla 2019; Peck and Tickell 2002). Theorizing competition ethnographically, as we do, thus presents a strategy for understanding these processes in the richness of their context and diversity.
4. Pickles (2014) provides a notable exception, but he does not explore theoretically what it means to compete.

5. Bateson's concept has had a lasting legacy and routinely features—often implicitly—in analyses of conflict, ethnogenesis, and the construction of identity (Brox 2000; Harrison 1993; Scott 2012).
6. Interestingly, Graeber (2015) assumes that competition is an inherent dynamic of games—in other words, a game is a space in which it is always possible to win or lose.

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