Stefan Köngeter/Stephan Wolff

Doing Research on Transnationalism

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The background to our contribution on research into transnational phenomena is provided by experience gathered in conducting research projects, within our Research Training Group, on the subject of “Transnational Social Support”. We will focus here on the challenges faced by ethnographic researching in a transnational space. In so doing, we will refer to the concept of multi-sited ethnography (MSE), which is centrally important to the methodological discussion of research into transnational and global phenomena. After introducing this concept in section 1, we will attempt to pinpoint, using four examples from our Research Training Group, the potential, but also the limitations and difficulties that this concept has in research practice. Lastly (section 3), we will draw a number of conclusions for an ethnography of transnational support processes.

1 Multi-Sited Ethnography

At the latest since the 1990s, ethnography has been in the process of repositioning itself in the push and pull of locality and globality, finding itself on the defensive to some extent. Traditionally, ethnography had been an enterprise which examined local, social processes, with a restriction to a well-defined field (for instance, a tribe), a tendency for long duration (several years, in part) and a focus on as many areas of social life as possible (a culture). The first culmination of the globalization discussion in the 1990s and the growing interest in transnational interrelations (e.g. migration) confronted it with the challenge of
demonstrating whether and how it could unveil the connections between macro and micro processes.

A proposal by George Marcus, formulated in his much-cited essay “Ethnography in/of the World System” (1995) in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, is frequently seized upon in this connection. Marcus starts from the observation that ethnography is witnessing a marked increase in studies which move away from single locales and situations, tracking instead the *circulation* of cultural meanings, objects and identities across space and time. It is no accident, he says, that particularly interdisciplinary research areas such as *media studies*, *studies of science and technology* and *cultural studies* have produced pioneering work here. Marcus contends that the advantage that such interdisciplinary arenas have from a heuristic point of view is that they cannot analyze their object as *a priori* given, but first need to construct it before being able to investigate it. Unlike classic ethnography, the interdisciplinary arenas no longer investigate the local with a view to situating it in a world system context. Rather, cultural phenomena are tracked at multiple sites and across national boundaries. Ethnography is no longer (merely) ethnography *within* the world system, it is *simultaneously* ethnography *of* the world system.

It is, he contends, therefore crucial to lay bare the various interconnections and relations, both methodologically and methodically. Accordingly, MSE no longer starts from a particular site or from a quantity of similar sites, but from the construction of certain social phenomena (such as *transnational social support*) in a network of relations connecting several such sites. This results in a redefinition of the ethnographic field. The field is no longer, as in classic ethnography, something given, uniform, an object of study that can be located at a site, but
must first be constructed and constituted in the course of the field research (Amit 2000).

MSE is oriented to the movements of the people and objects studied in social or transnational space. Marcus proposes different variants of following as corresponding research strategies. *Follow the people, follow the thing, and follow the metaphor* are, in his opinion, the prevailing research strategies, which he supplements by the following of stories, biographies and conflicts. The ‘object’ of study, under these conditions, is mobile and multiply situated. The objective of MSE should be to relate these multiple situations, which are often perceived as separate worlds, to one another.¹

Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether and how the demand for multisitedness can be met in terms of methodology and research practice. The appropriate construction of the object of research seems to provide a key here. Marcus’ position in this regard is, however, ambiguous: on the one hand, objects for him appear to be given. On the other hand, his argumentation is constructivist and demands that these constructions be reflected upon. In line with this position, it would, however, be necessary to assume that people, metaphors and things are constructed and reconstructed permanently, by several actors, at the same time and from different sites. The different sites then depend on these object constructions. To this extent, it would appear to us to be more correct not to

¹ What is striking about the reception of this essay is that, in the course of time, the sub-title “The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography” has turned into the main title. It can be found in the headings of representative anthologies and methodology books, with the result that MSE can now be regarded as a recognized methodological further development of ethnography.
refer, as Marcus does, to a *multi-sited ethnography*, but to an *object-oriented ethnography*.

This leads us to the question how such *objects* can be reconstructed in a transnational research context and what challenges result for the researcher. Rather than discussing this question in the abstract, we intend to pursue it using practical research experience from four projects undertaken at our Research Training Group. Each of the researchers involved has undertaken the search for such *objects* in his/her own way. We intend to relate a small part of their experiences in the next section.

2 Research Projects and Their Difficulties with *Multi-Sitedness*

**Project 1: *Wandering ethnologist* in search of the object**

What makes MSE so attractive is the prospect of systematically linking observations from different fields that are geographically and culturally often extremely distant from one another. A disadvantage of this research strategy, however, is that, if the overall field research duration remains the same, the individual *sites* can only be investigated relatively briefly and superficially, as a result of which one of the main strengths of ethnographic field research is in danger of being lost. This dilemma typically results in ethnologists wandering about in bemused fashion in search of their object.

For example, a young colleague, who had undertaken to investigate the relationships between domestic workers who had emigrated to a foreign metropolis and their families of origin at home, expressed the following complaint, after a two-month field stay, in a letter to her supervisors:

*I have now stayed in two villages… I received a friendly welcome from both villages, have got to know many neighbours and relatives and feel*
that the people are also pleased to let me participate in their activities. … One problem I am deeply wrestling with, however, is that I have had hardly any conversations about my topic, the exchange processes and the family member in Metropolis. If I approach the people concerned, they are usually rather monosyllabic ... Asked about whether and how they keep contact, they usually reply that they telephone, talk about health matters and exchange news items.... I think these interviews are extremely valuable even if they are usually short and peppered with counter questions (I enquire about Metropolis, they know next to nothing about it and ask me to tell them what I can report about Metropolis or the family member there, ...). It sometimes feels as if I am the exchange process. However, it is difficult to watch for a suitable moment for a conversation in the village, particularly for those using a recorder, as relatives or neighbours are usually close by, disturbing the conversation, on the one hand, and contributing to the interview partner speaking less freely, on the other.

Such experiences have led Ghassan Hage (2005) to doubt whether MSE can, in fact, provide the hoped-for insights in practice. It is not just that, on account of the constant travelling around, MSE is, in Hage’s view, unhealthy and inimical to the family: the mad dash that inevitably ensues also tends to result in ‘shallow’ field contacts and correspondingly ‘thin’ insights or descriptions. If, according to Hage, social relations with subjects became more intensive over time, a strange kind of gravitational pull was exerted in social terms: the deeper the researcher’s immersion in relations, the more ‘immobile’ he became:

“But after a while the issue of landing and leaving became a far more difficult affair. It was not so easy to just land and leave as if I were floating above the cultures I was researching: people’s problems, my own relation to them, people’s expectations of me, my expectations of them, the questions I was asking, the social relations I was becoming aware of, all of these things changed and complexified the site.” (Hage 2005: 465)
The colleague interviewed the domestic workers in the metropolis, accompanied them in their leisure time and participated in their group activities. These relations enabled her to come into contact with the families in the home country, which she visited alone or together with the domestic workers if they were on holiday. She wanted to hold interviews with the family members there in order to elicit type and extent of support relationships. Owing to the shortness of time available, there was, as always with MSE, hardly any opportunity for extended observation phases. Multi-sited ethnographers therefore have a ‘natural’ predilection for interviews (conducted, as far as possible, in English) and for ‘hard’, i.e. situation-dependent data. However, interviews with interlocutors that have not grown up in an interview society (Atkinson/Silverman 1997) may proceed surprisingly differently from what was planned. This was also the case here.

Family members used the interview to find out about Metropolis and their relatives. The ethnographer becomes a transnational medium here. She thus connects the sites whose connection she wants to investigate. Questions of transnational relationship, of resulting support and its impact on the family can only be answered if the ethnographer becomes involved in these entanglements and if she succeeds in using her own entanglement as a source of information. The danger here is that the ethnographer is deterred by experiences of this kind and desperately strives to conduct ‘correct interviews’. A vicious circle of interview attempt, misunderstandings, new interview attempts etc., of travelling from site to site without actually ‘arriving’, threatens to take hold. On the other hand, this may also give rise to an immobility, as described by Hage, which must be recognized as productive.
Project 2: Hybrid sites of transnational experience

The next project that we discuss focuses on young volunteers from Germany, assigned as trainees in social projects abroad. The volunteers deliberately leave one site known to them in order to have new experiences in a foreign site. The ethnographer performed participant observations during the preparation and debriefing of the volunteers, but particularly during their stay abroad in an African country. *Experience*, to learn from John Dewey, has something to do with individuals *doing* something with the things they experience. Even extremely stressful events may remain without consequence for the individual without corresponding processing, while minor, apparently insignificant occurrences become etched in a person’s memory as a lifelong distinctive experience, remaining highly emotionally charged. The aim of the investigation was to elicit whether, on what occasions and under what conditions the young people have such formative experiences. One interesting finding was that the cognitive and emotional processing of important events does not take place at sites there or here, but at *hybrid in-between sites*. That is to say, it takes place at sites at which the processor is neither here nor there: eating with colleagues, during a common leisure activity or much later, back at home, at meetings of ‘ex-volunteers’.

One is involuntarily reminded of Bronislaw Malinowski’s diary (1967), of his tent, of his visits to the veranda of the mission station and of his lonely communion with European fiction, in other words, of those non-Trobriand or extraterritorial sites which he apparently found particularly important for really finding a way to himself. Questions of one’s own positioning relative to the foreign country, to its inhabitants and the behavioural expectations there, in particular, constitute the object of (self-) talks at such *sites of the in-between*. 
These are sites at which the burden of permanently uncertain action is removed from the volunteers and at which they can transform this uncertainty into experiences. Here, too, the ethnographer as a medium is crucially important. As a researcher, she partly interrupts the everyday flow of events, thereby ensuring that such hybrid interspaces are created. A contributory factor here is that she has already had such transnational experiences as a volunteer. Transnational experiences are not had there and not here, but at a peculiar in-between level.

**Project 3: Multi-sitedness as an analytical reconstruction**

The topic of the third doctoral dissertation was the question of how development cooperation projects function in organizational terms. The researcher himself had been employed as a consultant and project manager for many years. His data consisted mainly of documents, diaries and field notes from this period, collected or written at the time without the objective of turning them into a Ph.D. This, then, was not the study of a ‘professional stranger’, as Michael Agar refers to the typical ethnographer, but that of an ‘observing participant’. Although the study is based on self-produced data, it is not auto-ethnography in the sense of Ellis/Bochner (2000). In other words, it is not a study that is strongly geared to the person of the researcher and his emotional experiences and that seeks to uncover the special feature of the object by reflecting on these experiences. Rather, somewhat paradoxical though it may sound for a study on development cooperation, the designation ‘at-home ethnography’ applies here. Alvesson (2009) coined this term for organizational ethnology studies based on a researcher’s own activities in the field. The problem facing the researcher here is not how to find a way into the field (and subsequently to avoid going native; cf. Wolff 2004), but how to create sufficient distance from the field and his own original view of things.
The researcher in this study achieved this by gradually deconstructing his own case histories and by reconstructing them analytically from an organizational science perspective. This made development aid projects identifiable as *multi-sited phenomena*. However, these *de facto* locations of events were being irrelevant to their comprehension. The analysis showed that, in development aid projects, the organizations involved, that is, donor, implementation and recipient organizations, largely function according to their own action logics, which each takes into consideration (for instance, in evaluations or reports). The functioning of the development cooperation appears to be based precisely on the fact that the project cannot be uniquely located and linking between the activities of the participants is *not* excessively close. Only on rare occasions do representatives from all three sectors meet at one *site* – for instance, when a minister from the donor country, accompanied by a representative of the international implementation organization, wishes, on the occasion of a state visit, to examine a project personally, meet, and be photographed with, the recipients of the aid. These are then somewhat difficult situations, which have little to do with the normal project routine and require a great deal of preparation to prevent misunderstandings and other social ‘short-circuits’ from occurring.

This study therefore revealed that producing and handling *sites* is a sensitive task for the projects. Constructing different *sites* and preventing the unexpected from happening during a meeting at one *site* may be interpreted as an attempt at *distance control*. This distance control, however, for which *multi-sitedness* is an important strategy, only becomes visible *as an outcome* of the analysis.
Project 4: Common reference points in a network

The final research project on which we wish to report had set out to determine how transnationally operating networks are managed. The object of the study is a network of social institutions that are committed to combating drug consumption in a large number of countries in Central and South America and are largely financed and advised by a European organization.

In accordance with MSE, the researcher first asked herself which of the many nodes she should select for a study and visit. As is well known, one problem with networks is that they are defined not by the sum of the participants, the nodes, but by the totality of ties that exist between the individual nodes. Network ties, for their part, must be continually updated and kept in motion by means of exchange processes. Networks are social phenomena that typically change their aggregate state over time: for example, they intensify when a joint meeting, a report deadline or negotiations over subsidies are pending, but they scale back reciprocal communication in the interim period to such an extent that they are scarcely experienced as existing.

The investigator, who had already prepared for a round trip through various states in Meso-America and South America, ultimately focused on an extended non-participant observation of the headquarters of the European association, the coordination office in South America and a network conference, at which she conducted many interviews (including the use of network questionnaires). It transpires that selection of sites is not so crucial to an analysis of network relations. Rather, what proves to be important is to identify, in a network’s multi-layered activities, common reference points on which the actions of the network partners focus. An example of this is the evaluation of the work of the network.
This evaluation is the occasion for different activities in the network and hence an occasion that makes the *ties* between the network nodes visible.

In addition to such functionally specific occasions, joint meetings at a *site*, in the form of a conference, for example, provide an opportunity for making networks tangible. The fact that the network partners are on site as whole persons at such meetings creates a space in which diverse and unforeseen relations are created and updated. Such meetings can act as important symbolic reference points for the tangibility of the network.\(^2\)

At this point, a digression can be made to the study undertaken by Mazzucato et al. (2006). This group researched into funerals, which evidently act as extraordinary focal points of transnational relationships between Ghanaians in the home country and in foreign parts. Funerals, too, can be seen as occasions for which there is no provision within customary *multi-sitedness*, but on which there is a short-term focus of contacts and financial flows. In this process, commonalities can be made intensively tangible, even across continents. Funerals are meaning-laden events at which, just as with the Balinese cockfights (cf. Geertz 1972), much more happens than is officially intended: not only are marriages arranged and the circulation of money stimulated, but there is also a tangible consumption of the “family” as a social unit. Such meetings, of course, at which a transnational network comes together, have an ambivalent character, as we have already seen in the depiction of the ministerial visit. Short-term *single-siteness* allows for intensive experiences of belonging, but also contains the danger that people come *too close* and latent conflicts (re-) open.

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\(^2\) This is reminiscent of the demonstrated importance of at least occasional meetings for *communities of practice*, which otherwise communicate entirely over the Internet.
3 Summary

As can be seen, it is often difficult in research on transnational phenomena to implement the ideas of MSE, because it is scarcely possible to fix the site. Either there are too many sites and too few opportunities for as much intensive study as is required (development cooperation networks); or the special feature of the sites is that all sorts of things happen, without the researcher knowing whether and how they are relevant to his own project (families of domestic workers). Then again, there are sites which represent specific functions and which become something quite different (interview situation in Indonesia). Or there are sites which only become visible during analytical reconstruction (development cooperation as a project). Lastly, there are cursory, hybrid sites, which are located beyond the usual coordinates in the in-between (volunteers in Africa).

This points to the fact that the sites investigated are produced by the participating people, groups and organizations themselves – with different consequences. Sometimes, sites are (re-) designed in such a way that nothing essential or only something atypical happens (ministerial visit). On other occasions, they are constructed in such a way that a largely virtual cooperation becomes tangible (network conferences; communities of practice). Then again, sites are so sealed off that they have as little as possible to do with one another (organizations of development cooperation). Lastly, our projects also show that the ethnographers themselves are involved in site-making and that, in an interview, for example, different sites are suddenly linked to one another (interview with Indonesian family members).

The danger at this juncture is that a researcher who only focuses on sites may miss the essential. What is important, rather, is to understand which sites are
produced in which manner, what happens there, and how sites are linked together or separated from one another. It is therefore important to develop a feeling for the dynamic in the relationships between the actors. In so doing, it is useful to use as reference points striking events and situations at which these relationships become visible. As the example of the funeral demonstrates, such extraordinary events (these also include pilgrimages like those to Mecca) may become boundary objects, to which social relationships, fantasies and meanings of completely different participants attach and at which paths and wishes meet. Corresponding examples from our research projects are provided by the evaluation of the development cooperation network or even the commonality of having performed voluntary service abroad. Identification of such boundary objects (Star/Griesemer 1989) is crucially important because it ties the further ethnographic research to the site and object constructions of the field participants.

Summarizing these reflections, it becomes clear that neither the sites to be studied nor the object of study can be viewed as given. Sites are constructed in the same way as objects. They are the result of activities performed by the actors involved. Inherent in the strategy of multi-sitedness is the danger of believing that one could know or define in advance which sites play what role. Generally, however, the researcher only has an extremely imprecise idea of this, and the unpleasantly pressing feeling arises of having to cover all the sites imagined in advance of the investigation. However, this is precisely what can give rise to the superficiality already mentioned.³ There is therefore much to be said for not los-

³ We follow Garfinkel’s ethno-methodological heuristic here: “In doing sociology, lay and professional, every reference to the ‘real world’, even where the reference is to physical or biological events, is a reference to the organized activities of everyday life. Thereby, in contrast to certain versions of Durkheim that teach that the objective reality of social facts is sociology’s fundamental principle, the lesson is taken instead, and used as study policy, that the objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life, with the ordinary, artful ways of that accomplishment being by members known,
ing sight of the ethnological importance of single-sitedness in all the emphasis on multi-sitedness. Furthermore, familiarity with a single site has the crucial advantage of allowing researchers to obtain a feeling for the relationships and practices of sites and also their production.
Literature


