Chapter 13

Contours of the Field(s): Multi-sited Ethnography as a Theory-driven Research Strategy for Sociology

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Introduction[1]

Ethnography in the classical anthropological tradition has long aimed at producing relatively holistic representations of more or less clearly bounded, fairly small groups. This programme has been criticised and redirected from different angles, culminating in the so-called 'crisis of representation' (see for instance Clifford and Marcus 1986; Atkinson 1992; Van Maanen 1995). These discussions raised a number of problems ranging from questions of writing, power, the embedding of small scale 'traditional' communities in larger systems, ethical issues, and others. Twenty years ago Marcus (1986, 172) concluded that most anthropological ethnography failed to tackle the question of 'why this group rather than another, why this locale rather than another', because such issues were simply not considered an important problem. While this is still true for textbooks, where one learns about field access, field roles, handling relationships in the field, writing and organizing field notes, and the like, but hardly about what constitutes an adequate field for a given research question, the problem of the field is a major issue of current theoretical debates. Mainly due to the changes associated with the process of globalization, anthropology had to find ways to investigate research objects disembedded from the local and inextricably connected to global forces and systems of symbols and knowledge. These developments threaten to shatter the very foundations of ethnography as a research practice. As Gille and Ó Riain (2002, 271) note, 'The potential and uneven de-linking of the spatial and the social under conditions of globalization upsets ethnography's claim to understand social relations by being there and thus demands that we rethink the character of global ethnography'.

The forces of globalization and the ensuing problems for adequate research have engaged sociology just as much as anthropology. However, the respective literature and calls for a 'mobile sociology' (Urry 2000) are rather theoretical than

1 This chapter is an extended and revised version of a previous paper on multi-sited ethnography in sociological research (Nadai and Maeder 2005).

empirical, and if empirical mostly not concerned with ethnographic methods. But from the outset sociological ethnography has been confronted much more immediately with the problem of selecting a field. Even though the early studies of the Chicago School on subcultures, 'deviants', urban slums, and so on, still focused on some sort of bounded small communities, sociology could never claim to deal with an 'integral spatio-temporal isolate' (Marcus 1986, 178). Whyte's (1943) corner boys, Anderson's (1923) Hobo, Gans's urban villagers (1965) and Levittowners (1967), and other famous 'natives' of sociological ethnography could never be depicted as cultural islands isolated from the surrounding world. Nor could they be mistaken as simply a fragment of the larger society mirroring all its culture. Therefore sociological ethnography has to be more self-conscious regarding its concepts of the field. Unfortunately this has not led to more theoretical and methodological debates. Interestingly, although there is also a trend to multi-sited designs in recent sociological ethnography (see Kusenbach 2005), it is not accompanied by intense methodological reflections (for notable exceptions see Burawoy et al. 1991; Burawoy et al. 2002; Duneier 1999). Even highly sophisticated sociological ethnographies using multi-sited designs as a systematic analytic strategy do not even frame their work in these terms (for example: Klinenberg 2002; Newman 1999; Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002).

In this chapter we would like to contribute to an overdue discussion of the construction of a 'field' in theory-driven sociological ethnography. We argue that sociology inevitably has to deal with 'fuzzy fields' (Nadai and Maeder 2005), that is fields without clear boundaries with respect to many dimensions. Using the example of a research project on the practical relevance of the discourse of the entrepreneurial self for processes of social integration and exclusion, we shall demonstrate how theoretical considerations allow us to link such seemingly incongruous spheres of Swiss society as the Human Resources Management of big companies and programmes for the unemployed operating within the social security system.[2] This will lead us to the question of the fuzziness of such fields in relation to the traditional concept of the field in ethnography. To what extent does ethnographical sociology need a 'field' and what is the function of the field in theory-driven qualitative research?

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Theoretical Framework: The Entrepreneurial Self as a Mode of Governance

35 years ago the liberal American sociologist Daniel Bell heralded in his bestseller *The Coming of Post-industrial Society* (1973) the arrival of a new society. He announced the governance of an expert elite in state, economy, and science, which, based on the superiority of their professional knowledge, would shape and guide the fate of Western societies. What was not foreseeable at that time, however, was who exactly would conduct this symphony of knowledge and expertise. Three decades on, we can solve this puzzle: it is obvious that the regime of *management* (not of managers) has become the leading semantics of and for the social. Managerial rationality invades virtually all the spheres of life from professional careers to private relationships to social problems of all kinds. Managerialism can be seen as the dominant form of governmentality that is as a conglomerate of techniques and rationalities for ruling others and the self (Foucault 2000).

Managerial thinking culminates in the character of the *entrepreneurial self* who rationalizes their whole life according to market imperatives and knows how to seize opportunities. A number of discourse analytic studies have argued that the ideal of the subject as an entrepreneur managing their life has become the predominant mode of (self) regulation in every social sphere (Burchell et al. 1991; Bröckling et al. 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello 2001; Rose 1996). Individuals are called upon to fashion themselves according to the ever-changing demands of the market in order to survive economically and socially. Those who cannot live up to this norm risk social as well as labour market exclusion. Having become dependent on some form of welfare, they are still not relieved of the pressures of autonomy and self-responsibility but are subject to the activation and workfare programmes of the enabling or social investment state (Gilbert 2002; Lødemel and Trickey 2001).

The ideal of the entrepreneurial self simultaneously constitutes an appeal, a threat, and an apology. Shrewd self-management leads to success, but these days success is only temporary. On the one hand, in times of rapid social and economic change neither individual performance nor entitlements on the basis of status secure social positions in a stable way over an extended period of time. On the other hand, as Bröckling (2002) has shown in his analysis of management textbooks, the model is itself characterised by inherent paradoxes leading to excessive demands on the individual. One can never really live up to the standards of the ideal and therefore one is structurally forced to try even harder to survive under the 'unconditional dictate of the comparative' (ibid., 186). Just as success is attributed to the individual, they have to take the blame for failure. Those who for whatever reason do not or cannot conform to the model of the active and entrepreneurial self, are at risk of being excluded as 'redundant' (Bude 1998; Castel 1995). In sociology this reappearance of the category of the 'expendable' is discussed within the theoretical framework of inequality: as a cleavage between 'inside' and 'outside', as instances of 'exclusion' or 'underclass'. We cannot go into this debate here but want to stress the dynamic aspect of exclusion which,

following Castel (1995), we conceptualize as a product of mechanisms starting 'in the centre' of social structures like for instance in the labour market.

The sweeping diagnosis of the omnipresence of the entrepreneurial self certainly captures broad societal trends. However, stemming mainly from discourse analysis of texts, it raises the question of the extent to which the normative model is actually operative in different social contexts. To whom is it applied and in what ways is it transformed in the process of adaptation? Our study addressed the missing link between discourse and practice by analysing how the model of the entrepreneurial self informs practical action and daily routines in observable ways. In other words, we were interested in tracking discourse in action. We examined organizational technologies and processes of integration and exclusion in the labour market and adjacent institutions of the welfare state, namely work programmes for the unemployed. Since we were interested in cultural knowledge that is actually in use, not just in expert knowledge laid out in written form, or in mere accounts, we opted for an ethnographic research design. As we all know there is no ethnography without a 'field' inhabited by some sort of 'natives'. But where is our field when we track a highly theoretical concept with supposedly near-unlimited applicability?

Constructing a Multi-sited Field for a Theoretical Question

Sociological ethnography in and of complex societies cannot deal exclusively with clearly bounded groups in single places. Therefore the field of sociological ethnography cannot just be found 'somewhere out there', but needs to be constructed by the researcher. Although 'street-corner studies that rely heavily on "hanging out" as the primary research strategy are not threatened with distinction' (Kusenbach 2005, 70), more complex strategies, that try to map the inherently fragmented, yet connected, spatial and social spheres of modern societies, such as Duneier's (1999) extended place method or Burawoy's (2000) global ethnography, are on the rise. Once we transcend the 'single tribe' approach and aim at social structures that are constituted across multiple scales and sites, we have to derive the research objects and research fields from theoretical questions. Marcus (1995, 1998) has suggested several 'modes of construction' for spatially dispersed objects of ethnographic study such as following people, things, metaphors, plots, stories, allegories, lives, biographies, and conflicts. The 'chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations' (Marcus 1995, 105) of a multi-sited ethnography must be held together by 'an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography' (ibid.). In other words, construction of the field must be guided by theory. In spite of this call for theoretical considerations, Gille and Ó Riain (2002) criticise the multi-sited approach for privileging the ethnographer's imagination and logic of association over the character of social relations within and between sites and for ignoring dynamic processes and external connections that transform sites. Positing a 'focus on dynamic social relations rather than static sites' (ibid., 288) gives us a general direction, but still no clear algorithm for defining fields. After all there are at least as many social relations to choose from as there are people, things, stories, conflicts, or other objects linking potential fields.

Ethnographers studying processes and actors across multiple sites have conceptualized their fields in various terms. However, these efforts are generally situated on a highly abstract level and cannot help us with the very practical problem of 'dirty' fieldwork: given a specific research question, what do we observe? Even though the value and epistemological status of 'being there' has been questioned with regard to the more fragmented and fleeting fields of global, transnational, or multi-sited ethnography, we contend that establishing some form of physical presence and participation – some form of 'prolonged co-presence of observer and events' (Amman and Hirschauer 1997, 21) – is still the hallmark of ethnography.[3] And, as Spradley (1980, 39) reminds us, 'Wherever the ethnographer may go and whatever the size of the social unit ..., all participant observation takes place in *social situations*'. We cannot directly observe social systems, capitalism, globalization, the entrepreneurial self, or other abstract concepts, but only 'a place, actors, and activities' (ibid.). Or to quote another authoritative voice: 'All social systems, no matter how grand or far-flung, both express and are expressed in the routines of daily social life'. (Giddens 1984, 36) But the question remains: which social situations, places, actors, and activities do we choose? The answer can only be found in a specific social theory.

We argue that symbolic interactionism with its emphasis on actors, situations, and processes, and its capacity to link agency and structure, micro and macro levels of analysis (Nadai and Maeder 2007; Fine 1992), offers some useful conceptual tools with regard to constructing fields for multi-sited sociological ethnography. In our study, we conceived of our fields as 'social worlds' (Strauss 1978, 1984). Social worlds are formed by 'sets of common or joint activities or concerns bound together by a network of communications' (Kling and Gerson, as cited in Strauss 1984, 123). They comprise a set of actors focused on a common 'going concern' (Hughes 1971) and acting on the basis of a minimal working consensus (Clarke 1991). Social worlds are not inherently existent, but become visible to the researcher in their practical consequences (Strübing 2007, 84).

Our research topic consisted of the discourse in action of the entrepreneurial self, and its implications regarding social exclusion – in particular of institutionalized practices and ideas pertaining to this discourse. This suggested that we seek this elusive object out in its quasi 'natural habitat', that is in the economy and specifically in the labour market, where according to pertinent analyses it actually originated (Boltanski and Chiapello 2001; Bröckling 2000). In modern societies the labour market is also one of the main sites for the production of inequality and exclusion. Obviously the labour market is not a field constituted by a geographically located space with more or less clearly delineated

3 Nowadays this includes forms of virtual presence in cyberspace (see Wittel 2000).

boundaries. Rather it is a concept about the negotiation of labour demand and supply. This concept is put into practice by people in organizations deploying labour such as public or private enterprises as well as organizations steering people into and out of the labour market such as headhunters, outplacement agencies, welfare programmes for the unemployed, and the like – each of them constituting a social world of its own. We opted for businesses as an entry point for fieldwork. Concretely, our research sites in the economic field were a multi-national company, a bank, and a large nationally-operating retail company. These organizations provided the 'locus of study' without being themselves the objects of study (see Geertz 1973, 22). Nor are organizations necessarily co-extensive with social worlds (Clarke 1991, 131), which means that we cannot simply equate organizations with fields. Organizations may participate in a number of social worlds, and social worlds may be composed of more than one organization. To identify a social world we have to start with its going concern(s). In the context of our research topic one of the core activities is 'evaluating and ranking people as to their work capacities and abilities', that is, determining their 'performance' or 'employability'. Boltanski and Chiapello (2001) call this kind of evaluation 'paradigmatic test', that is, institutionalized competitions based on agreed-upon resources for determining the social worth of the involved actors.

In business organizations important paradigmatic tests are job interviews and performance appraisals. The latter provided the observable social situations for our ethnographic work, including the actors and actions pertinent to the process of evaluation (primarily supervisors and employees). Starting with performance appraisals we soon discovered connected situations and internal and external actors involved in the process such as managerial meetings and training, round tables regarding a particular case, human resources managers, social workers, doctors, personnel of the social insurance systems, representatives of labour unions, and so on. Thus it was the trajectories of cases observed in social situations and the organizational processes related to the technologies of evaluation that guided us as to which situations and actors we followed within the field of business organizations.

Castel's (1995) suggestion to study processes of exclusion by looking at mechanisms 'in the centre' helped us identify strategic locales for exploring issues of exclusion regarding labour market participation. This perspective led us first into the management ranks of private enterprises, where decisions regarding layoffs are taken, thus triggering careers of exclusion. At the same time discourse-analytic studies have described this social context as a stronghold of managerial ideology and the belief in the entrepreneurial self. Probing the alleged omnipresence of the model of the entrepreneurial self on the one hand, while taking the idea of exclusion as a process seriously on the other, we then proceeded to organizations which deal with those who have been excluded from the labour market, namely work programmes for the unemployed. The official mandate of these programmes, which operate within the legal and institutional framework of the unemployment insurance, is to enhance their clients' 'employability', so these people will find a job as quickly as possible. This task necessitates an assessment of the clients' ability and willingness to work. Just as in the business organizations of the economic field, the going concern of unemployment programmes involves evaluating and ranking people with respect to their position in the labour market. Pertinent social situations to be observed were for instance one-to-one coaching sessions, role-plays (for example rehearsing a job interview), meetings, courses, and the like. The most important external actors anchoring the social worlds of the programmes in a wider arena were the regional placement offices of the unemployment insurance, welfare offices, and the invalidity insurance.[4] Our research sites in the field of welfare were three work programmes catering to different groups of unemployed people: a virtual trading company for skilled clerical workers, a workshop for unskilled workers, and a programme for young people without formal occupational credentials.

As a further heuristic to connect the fields of economy and welfare, which at first glance appear to be worlds apart, we used Goffman's concept of 'cooling the mark out' (1952). In a society where 'many ... are called but few chosen' (Goffman 1952, 456) there is a need for institutionalized practices to reconcile people who have been deprived of their position with their fate and provide them with a new identity framework. From a perspective of cooling the mark out, four aspects of exclusion come to the fore:

- Institutional procedures and trajectories;
- Cooling agents;
- Those who are being cooled out;
- Legitimation of processes and outcomes (which in our case may or may not be based on the ideal of the entrepreneurial self).

Thus, using a precise instrument for observation derived from sociological theory, we can counterbalance the fuzziness of our highly complex fields.

A Multi-sited Search for the Entrepreneurial Self: Selected Findings

Since this is a methodological treatise we cannot present all our findings or give detailed descriptions (see Nadai and Maeder 2006). But we think our results support the argument that the complexities of our multi-sited research design are worth the effort. We present only three conclusions here to demonstrate the usefulness of a multi-sited approach: first, the social differentiation of the norm of the entrepreneurial self; second, similarities between economy and welfare system regarding their technologies; third, the import of human resources management concepts by welfare programmes.

4 Contrary to what we might expect there were very little institutionalized contacts to employers.

Governance studies and Boltanski and Chiapello's (2001) analysis of the new spirit of capitalism both posit the rule of the entrepreneurial self as a justificatory regime pervading all societal spheres. Both lines of research rest on discourse analysis, a considerable body of respective data consisting of management guidebooks. In the literature this entrepreneurial self is usually characterised by terms like flexibility, disposability, mobility, polyvalence, relentless self-improvement, orientation to market opportunities, and the like. Our ethnographic study of economic and welfare organizations corroborates the omnipresence of this normative model to some extent. The entrepreneurial self is not only found in its natural habitat, the world of business, but also roams the institutions of the welfare state, in the case at hand, in work programmes for the unemployed. However, we also found important contextual variations of the model and a social differentiation in the application of the norm.

In the field of economy we observed differences across businesses and within each of them according to employee category. The three businesses studied adhere to different cultural models of performance, which approximate the ideal of the entrepreneurial self to different degrees: from an almost paradigmatic adoption and respective implementation in human resources tools in the multinational company to a superficial lip service to the model in addition to a slightly modernized form of disciplinary labour control in the retail company and the bank respectively. Generally, the enforcement of the norm correlates with the position of actors in the social field: those with higher status and more social and cultural capital are expected to conform more closely to the model of the entrepreneurial self, while at the same time profiting most from it. This social differentiation is also reflected in the differences between the three work programmes for the unemployed. The programme for skilled office workers adopts and applies the norm to a fuller degree than the workshop for unskilled, mostly immigrant workers or the youth programme for adolescents with very poor educational and social resources.

However, in spite of informing practices in economy and welfare alike, the discourse of the entrepreneurial self is not automatically absorbed by those exposed to it. Neither the so called 'low performers' in business companies, nor the unemployed we met during our fieldwork fully accepted the attributions or explanations derived from this framework. They did not unequivocally hold themselves accountable to live up to the norm. We assumed that those profiting from this ideology (the 'high performers' and 'winners' of the labour market) are more likely to accept it, while the 'losers' ('low performers' and people with low chances in the labour market) are more sceptical. Yet, both the sceptics and the true believers cannot help but adopt the primary virtue demanded of actors in the labour market as well as those excluded from it: the art of self-marketing. The techniques used to assess employees and unemployed alike (see below) amount to selling oneself as a product. Those having a job must present their (most often routine) work as special and personally attributable 'performance' to keep or better their positions. Those who have lost their job are primarily taught to package their occupational career and their person according to the supposed expectations of prospective employers. In the end, self marketing is actually the core of employability rather than any substantial skills.

Thus, our multi-sited approach allows us simultaneously to capture variability and uniformity. While discourse analysis postulates a single model of the entrepreneurial actor dominating all social spheres, multi-sited ethnography reveals important contextual variations that are based on local organizational cultures on the one hand, and social structural factors on the other hand. At the same time, the findings of the (multi-sited) research caution against overrating the uniqueness of local cultures. There may be organizational adaptations of and individual resistance against the entrepreneurial self, but in the end businesses as well as social services, managers as well as workers, employees as well as the unemployed are affected by the radicalization of the market principle in the labour market.

Similar Technologies of the Self in Economy and Welfare

The manager's prime task is to mobilize commitment to the job and good performance. Social workers dealing with the unemployed aim at 'repairing' their supposed deficits regarding 'employability' and at coaching them back into the labour market.[5] Both groups hold the same basic belief, namely that success or failure in the labour market (if not in life generally) is a result of an individual's own effort and ultimately their own responsibility. Although they act in different social worlds there is another striking parallel in their activities: at the core of their work we can identify similar 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1988) which are used to transform their employees' and clients' behaviour according to the ideal of the entrepreneurial self. Basically both managers and social workers follow a three-step sequence consisting of exploring, improving, and marketing the self.

In the economy the formal interactional context for bringing up the subject of performance are yearly reviews of employees by their supervisors, during which goals, deficits, measures, and possible sanctions are discussed. The employee is supposed to propose individual goals, judge their own performance, stress their success or confess failures to reach goals and to agree with the supervisor on measures to improve. In the programmes for the unemployed more or less sophisticated forms of 'assessments' are used to lead the programme participants to recognize their own weaknesses, strengths, and goals and to devise strategies to enhance their employability.

Interactional scripts like the employee appraisal interview and the coaching session are structurally homologous to the institution of the religious confession.

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5 Here we use the term 'social worker' only as a shorthand designation for the employees of the three work programmes. In fact, few of the employees were professional social workers.

The topics and questions of these institutionalized quasi-confessions provide individuals with 'maps for the landscape of his soul' (Hahn 2000, 207), that is, they show them which aspects of their selves they ought to analyse and to mould according to the norms dominant in a given context. Thus, the macro-social discourse of the entrepreneurial self is imposed on individuals and becomes effective in everyday life. Discourse analytic research provides convincing evidence for the prevalence of the entrepreneurial self on an interpretive level and there are also studies showing how the norm translates into concrete (social) politics. Nonetheless, especially works focusing management textbooks do not answer the question as to how the discourse reaches an audience beyond managers and other elite groups. As our study demonstrates, ethnography has the capacity for discovering how such a discourse may be implemented in everyday life. Moreover, a multi-sited research strategy encompassing the social worlds of managers and social workers, that is occupational groups with very different, if not incompatible professional belief systems (Strauss et al. 1963), discovers shared points of reference beyond apparent disparities. Finding similar professional technologies, based on the same ideological foundation, thus provides another avenue for assessing the impact of a normative ideal in everyday practices.

Human Resources Management

In a similar vein, multi-sited research which crosses the borders of social worlds uncovers how technologies travel between social spheres. Our study shows how people-processing techniques developed in the economic realm, based on the model of 'homo oeconomicus', colonize social work practices. The secular forms of confession are but one technology used by economy and welfare alike. While our study cannot answer the question of historical precedence – where this interactional format was first used – other technologies and concepts clearly have their origins in the economy from where they infiltrated the welfare system. On the macro-social level of social politics and the administering of welfare programmes this development is debated under the heading of 'managerialism' (for example Clarke et al. 2000). Again ethnography is especially well suited to spell out what this means on the ground.

Conclusions: Risks and Gains of Theory-based Multi-sited Ethnography

Multi-sited ethnography is a complex research strategy confronting the ethnographer with methodological and practical problems. The question remains: is there a reasonable balance between the extra effort and the returns? In conclusion we want to discuss the advantages and the specific problems of multi-sited sociological ethnography, in six arguments.

First, ethnography spanning multiple fields is confronted with the need to give good reasons for selecting more than one field and exactly those fields rather than others. We have argued that fields have to be constructed, and that this construction process must be guided by theory on the one hand and by the imperatives of fieldwork on the other. At the same time field construction is an ongoing process throughout the whole research project. We first have to define our research object theoretically, then to find locations and social situations where according to theoretical assumptions this object may be found, and finally to be prepared to follow the leads of the field and extend our research as far as we can.[6] We have suggested that symbolic interactionism offers valuable tools for a non-arbitrary construction of ethnographic fields. The concepts of 'going concern' and 'social worlds', that formed the basis for our research, ensure that field construction does not just follow the whims and interests of the researcher but is actually in line with the constructions of the 'natives' of the field(s). Furthermore, we have resorted to another theoretical concept to ground our observational strategy, namely the concept of 'cooling the mark out'. The focus of ethnographic fieldwork must correspond to important going concerns of the field members. Evaluating people was a central concern of the social worlds we studied, and the significance of this activity was apparent in the considerable effort and resources, which were dedicated to this task and the ensuing cooling out procedures. While the going concern assembles a set of actors in observable social situations, social worlds still have centrifugal tendencies: they have porous boundaries, intersect with other social worlds and split into segments. This gives the ethnographer the opportunity to follow links between social worlds that arise out the preoccupations of the field(s). For instance, in the field of economy the going concern of handling 'low performers' quite often transcended the boundaries of the respective organization and involved organizations and actors of the medical or welfare system. This was the case whenever the responsible actors had come to the conclusion that the problem was not merely insufficient performance but illness, disability, addiction, or the like. However, simply following hints from the field cannot be a sufficient substitute for the ethnographer's own discretion. For research objects such as structures, systems, and discourses, are often invisible to those affected by them. There was no tangible link between managers of private businesses and social workers of unemployment programmes on the level of the discourse we were interested. They were not aware that they acted on the same premises and used similar technologies. Thus it takes 'sociological imagination' (Mills 1959) to sniff out such a link and then investigate it.

Second, multi-sited ethnography is comparative by nature, but it is more than that. As Marcus (1995, 102) notes, conventional comparisons in traditional ethnography 'are generated for homogeneously conceived conceptual units': one compares communities, locales and people and looks for contrasts and similarities. In multi-sited ethnographic research the object of study is inherently fragmented

6 Unfortunately even the most theoretically advanced and empirically sophisticated ethnographic research is soon confronted with the very practical barriers of funding and time restrictions.

and multiply situated. Therefore comparison is an integral dimension of such a research design, but these comparisons take on, to quote Marcus (ibid., 102) 'the form of juxtapositions of phenomena that conventionally have appeared to be (or conceptually have been kept) "worlds apart"'. To demonstrate the difference between comparative and multi-sited research with an example from our own research we refer to a previous project. In this project we analysed the functioning of public welfare in Switzerland conducting five ethnographic case studies in five different welfare administrations in five different cantons (Maeder and Nadai 2004a,b). In Switzerland there is little legal regulation on a national level concerning entitlement to welfare benefits. Welfare laws are the responsibility of the 26 cantons individually, while the political communes are in charge of the social services handling welfare. However, cantonal laws are based on a few common principles. Thus we had one research object, namely the administering of welfare, and we used five different sites to study local variations thereof. The comparison served to obtain a finer-grained picture of similar processes in different political contexts. In contrast, in the research used as an example here the findings from the different fields provided us with answers to different questions like elements of a puzzle that are put together to form a complete picture. Since the object of the study spans more than one social world, it cannot be reconstructed by exploring only one field. Thus, a multi-sited approach becomes indispensable.

Third, in anthropology multi-sited research strategies for ethnography have raised a number of logistical and/or methodological questions regarding the duration of stays in the field, the transformation of field relations and roles, the degree of immersion in the field, the distinction between home and field, and so on (Amit 2000). We want briefly to address only two problems, namely length of stay and field roles. Traditional ethnography has always stressed the importance of a prolonged stay in a chosen field. Classically cultural anthropologists used to spend one, two or more years in the field before they dared claim having reached some understanding of the culture they studied. If you used this approach in multi-sited research one project would probably take up a decade, not to speak of the problems of funding such a long-term venture. There are a number of arguments why sociological ethnography in general and especially multi-sited ethnography cannot and need not follow the classical model. In a multi-sited research the depth of focus will vary from site to site due to problems of differing accessibility and the nature of the field itself. For example, while we conducted a classical form of participant observation in the three programmes for the unemployed by hanging around for a chosen period of time, participating in various self chosen events, informal talk and interviews, formal interviews, and such, we faced quite different conditions in the private businesses. In these organizations we were summoned up to attend certain clearly defined situations and events such as managers' meetings, performance appraisal interviews, team meetings, and the like. In order to understand what was going on we had to rely more extensively on formal interviews than in the unemployment programmes or other fields of our previous ethnographic projects. We argue that this merely reflects the terms on which also the members of this field meet and interact: the problem we were interested in (issues of evaluating employees and taking action in cases of 'low performance') was tackled in narrowly-defined social situations, which happened regularly once a year (appraisal interviews) or sporadically at unpredictable intervals. At any rate, our research topic constituted the going concern for a changing set of actors who otherwise did not permanently work together as a team, let alone live together. They normally just met for the occasions we observed and in narrowly circumscribed functional roles. Hence we argue that the ethnographer has to accept the social forms and practices of his or her field. This acknowledgement of course influences the form of the fieldwork to be carried out. If in the economic organizations the relevant practices consisted of occasions and situations that were not connected to stable social groups, we would not have gained much by hanging around with other actors and for a longer period of time. In a similar vein the field limits the choices of the ethnographer regarding field roles. In complex organizations where field members interact mainly in specialized professional roles requiring expert knowledge and respective credentials the ethnographer's role is limited to that of an observer. This applies to single site research as well, but the problem is multiplied if we would have to craft a field role involving active participation in several fields.

Fourth, one consequence of shorter stays in the field is a loss of descriptive detail in different contexts, which are part of the whole study. However, this must not be considered as the result of a rushed ethnography and therefore as bad research. Rather, it follows from the theoretical decision to restrict the description to central concepts and omit descriptive details, which in a sense would add colour to an already understandable black and white picture. The question then arises: How problematic is this loss of context description? If we think of famous sociological ethnographies conducted with the use of multiple sites, for instance Becker's studies on marijuana smoking and jazz music (1973), the work of Strauss and his associates on nursing practices (Strauss et al. 1963), John Irwin's research (1985) on adaptation to the jail or Eviatar Zerubavel's (1979) analysis of patterns of time in hospital life and others, the reader has to concede that they all gave us poor descriptions of everyday life in their fields, but rich insight into important social phenomena. Sociology works with a different concept of culture from classical cultural anthropology. A concept of culture as a theory of society cannot in our view be a goal of sociological ethnography. Therefore sociological studies based on participant observation have always been restricted in this sense. The argument for this abandonment is theoretical. On a theoretical level functional differentiation, pluralistic lifestyles and individualization take their toll. Our 'natives' live in many places, perform many roles and cannot easily be put into one single category or group. In other words: Sociological ethnography does not equate culture with society. Culture in this view consists of shared webs of meanings in language and interaction. But the concept of society adheres to the emerging social forms thereof, like social roles, class, institutions, or, in our example, exclusion. Once again the object of the study is not a particular field and all its culture, but some theoretical concept, which supposedly can be best studied in a certain context or field.

Fifth, the argument against the need for contextual detail seems to diminish the relevance of a given field. From this evolves a difficult question. If sociological ethnography does not aim at analysing a field in its entirety, that is as a unique web of meaning and an ensemble of equally unique structural features, what exactly remains the *function* of the field(s)? If the ethnographer decides beforehand to limit his or her observation and analysis to questions derived analytically from sociological theory, is there not the risk to single out arbitrarily certain aspects of the field compatible with this interest at the expense of other dimensions which may be much more important to field members? The cornerstone of ethnography has always been to understand a culture from an 'emic' perspective and to translate from one 'cultural idiom' into another (Werner and Schoepfle 1987). In our view the yardstick for an ethnography which, despite a certain detachment from concrete fields still asserts the claim to understand a given field in its singularity, has to be whether the sociologist's research questions make sense at all in the eyes of the 'natives'. While quantitative survey sociology assumes that asking questions is just a matter of adequate wording and structure, the starting point of ethnography is to learn which questions are actually understandable in a given culture. Does a research question strike relevant issues of the field? Does the research tackle a problem with some significance for the members' everyday lives? And, of course, in the end field members should also recognize themselves at least partially in the findings of such a study. This attitude includes the readiness to adapt one's research to new questions and issues emerging from the field. From this perspective, analysing, understanding, and describing the specifics of a given field is necessary as far as it contributes to an adequate comprehension of the phenomenon under scrutiny (see also Lauser 2005). And of course the argument raised by Clifford (1986) applies even more to this kind of ethnography than to more traditional ones. We are producing 'partial truths' in the strict sense of the term.

Finally, we would like to conclude this chapter by pointing out one major gain of such a research strategy. In our view the main advantages lies in the *potential for generalization*. By using multi-sited ethnography we can enlarge the traditional 'single tribe, single scribe' way of doing ethnographic research and contribute to sociological questions that cut across the boundary of a single traditional field. We are searching categories of social practice that can be generalized to a higher level and reach beyond a single social group. In the case of our research on the entrepreneurial self and exclusion, switching between seemingly disparate fields allowed us to contrast the elegant findings of discourse analysis to the 'dirty' practice of everyday life in organizations. It also enabled us to examine the correspondence of discourse and everyday life and trace the limits of the discursive concept. Thus multi-sited ethnography is a powerful tool for building truly empirical grounded theory.

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Chapter 14

Traversing Cultural Sites: Doing Ethnography among Sudanese Migrants in Germany

Cordula Weißköppel

Introduction

When I designed my project on Sudanese migrants in Germany[1] I was very much inspired by the publication of George Marcus's landmark paper (1995) and motivated to experiment with a multi-sited style of research. After my PhD in a multicultural school-class in which I consistently adopted the stationary (single-sited) style of participant observation for a year (Weißköppel 2001), I was curious how a different approach would work. In diaspora studies it had already become common to combine research localities in order to look at ethnic and/or religious transnational networks. It seemed plausible that a mobile research style would be appropriate for a project which was interested in different 'diasporic'[2] formations (our aim was to compare the Egyptian diaspora with the Sudanese in Germany). As we were mainly interested in the question of how migrants from different African countries could sustain aspects of their original cultural identities, we were also prepared to conduct parts of our research in the home countries.

It was obvious, of course, that the mobile and flexible mode of fieldwork among Sudanese migrants in Germany (mainly political or religious refugees, academics and labour migrants) would confront me with a number of unpredictable problems. Besides the struggle to find appropriate solutions I felt the need critically to reflect

1 This project was funded by the German Research Foundation from July 2000 to June 2003. It was situated in the Department of Geography at Bayreuth University, within the framework of the collaborative research centre 'Local Action in Africa in the Context of Global Influences' (which ran from 2000 until 2006). Many thanks to Prof. Dr. Fouad Ibrahim who initiated our comparative project on the Egyptian and Sudanese diasporas in Germany, and who became my trusted supervisor and colleague during the whole process of fieldwork.

2 There has been much theorizing and disagreement about the term 'diaspora' (Brubaker 2005); I use the term throughout this chapter in its descriptive sense, in order to maintain awareness of the way in which Sudanese men and women are scattered all over the world. Diaspora as the formation of a specific identity or community needs to be analysed and discussed in each individual case, see Weißköppel (2004).

Multi-sited Ethnography

Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research

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