

Following the interactions: taking into account translocal dimensions and cross-level/multi-dimensional links in ethnographic fieldwork

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Is Ethnographic Fieldwork only Local?

Ethnographic methodology is frequently confronted with the idea that it is restricted to just one locality. Ethnographic fieldwork often has been and is sometimes still seen as the study of territorially bounded relatively small social entities. Constantly this idea relates to confused perceptions of ethnography as it was mainly associated with practices in classical ethnographic studies. This perspective has been changed by many researchers who use ethnographic methodology during the so called crisis of anthropology or the anthropological turn, however in some areas the narrow perspective on the local prevailed for instance in studies of indigenous groups. This limited micro-perspective on one particular place even evokes in allusion to methodological nationalism the idea of "methodological localism" that ignores everything beyond the strictly delimited concept of a local container space.

However this idea of "methodological localism" might reflect a misunderstood ethnographic methodology. Ethnographic fieldwork requires ongoing engagement with the contextual part of the field in order to be able to analyze recollected material properly. This includes constant reflection and reorientation of the process of data collection. Therefore this sensible procedure is an appropriate way of first detecting translocal or transnational phenomena and then incorporating the relevant upcoming dimensions into further fieldwork and data analysis. As in every ethnographic study the most important "instrument" of data acquisition is the researcher him/herself and his/her ability of positioning within the field and collecting data. So one important premise is the ability and openness of the researcher to detect and to seriously take into account the diverse transnational links in his/her field of research by not restricting oneself through artificial boundaries. Thus the often supposed restraint of ethnographic work to one locality is not per se one-sided as the ethnographic premise to comprehend larger parts of the fields context calls for taking into account the links that go beyond the original site of research.

This application of methodological localism is not even reflected in classical anthropological works which concentrate on a concrete locality but at the same time also identify other dynamics and dimensions in their analysis, as for instance Malinowski's Kula Exchange or Barth's work on nomads in Persia imply extended travels with the informants, or do at least contextualize the research sites broadly as did Evans-Pritchard. All of them were criticized

for the way of doing fieldwork but at least they were not fully immobile, though for sure they defined their cases as relatively clear cut entities.

However even classical studies demonstrate that a central point of ethnographic fieldwork is the position of the researcher in the field. He or she is the main instrument of data-collection thus his decisions, orientation, sensitiveness etc. in the field are the fundament on which the research outcome is build upon. This is an aspect that has been critically debated during the crisis of anthropology because of the fact that the researchers position grants him the power for interpreting the data material of the field sites. Nonetheless this controversial debate on the relationship between the researcher and the field bears in my opinion a great advantage in regard to the positioning of the researcher. Although the aspect of power remains to be seen critical the researcher gains through his position (and building up longstanding relationships with local actors) deep insights into the field sites.

Often the exclusive boundedness to one specific locality is a result of a narrowed perspective on the field, sometimes combined with a certain convenience or the technical overload of the researcher, but also a of lack of time or resources. I'll come back to this later. However the ethnographic premise of integrating the context in the analysis has to be applied in and beyond the concrete locality. Taking Geertz famous initial question, Gofman's modified basic question in research, "What the heck is going on here?" has to be applied on the whole relevant context. Thus "here" should not be understood as one place but should encompass as much context as necessary to embed the case of research properly. In times of awareness of glocal processes this can and probably must go far beyond one single territoriality bounded space.

For sure a large number of ethnographers are aware of this situation and are more open to take into account the global in their fields. This is prominently demonstrated by methodological reflections on the matter that led to well-known propositions like Marcus' Multi-Sited Ethnography (Marcus 1995; 1998) and Burawoy's Global Ethnography (Burawoy et al. 2000). These intend to theorize on the relation between the global and the local and on ethnographic procedures to cope with their interwovenness in empirical research. However even using this methodological suggestions it is not assured to fully go beyond container thinking and to overcome different kinds of methodological territorial boundedness or methodological groupism. So it could be feasible to assume that some "global ethnographies" remain too restricted to a single place or that a "multi-sited ethnography" collects material in several sites, but "gets stuck" in these, thus performing something that could be called methodological multi-localism, a problem that, to give an example, can easily rise if the research interest is centered on a concrete ethnic group. This would be studied on several sites but without

taking into account a broader context, links to other groups and actors etc. Both cases do for sure not comply with the corresponding methodologies but can surge during research as they could mislead the ethnographer to assume having overcome boundedness though it is not the case. Based on this thoughts I am going to put into discussion a procedure that takes into account the before mentioned methodologies, stresses on premises of ethnographic and generally qualitative fieldwork and brings in the Interface-analysis and Grounded Theory as guides as much for the sampling of material as for its analysis. Thus based on my own experience I am going to discuss a combination of several techniques and methodological approaches, mainly interface analysis and grounded theory, in ethnographic fieldwork. The keypoint in this could be in allusion to Marcus the premise of "Follow the interactions!"

Grasping the Field through Interface-Analysis

Parting from my experience, it is very useful to combine ethnographic procedures with Long's interface-analysis in order to achieve a broader view of the field of study. Interface-analysis focuses on interactions between the diverse actors in the field and in order to analyze these it considers the actors' background including their links to other actors and institutions, and available resources. Thereby the actors different rationalities, logics of agency and their relation to systems of knowledge are of special importance as well. This necessarily implies to get aware of translocal interaction going beyond the actual locality and to include them in a thorough analysis of the field. Thus by applying an ethnographic methodology in combination with interface-analysis the transnational dimension of the field will be uncovered and made available for an comprehensive analysis. Therefore it is useful to put the analysis of interactions and of corresponding interfaces between different social actors in the center of studies.

According to Long, interface

"conveys the idea of some kind of face to face encounter between individuals with differing interests, resources and power. Studies of interface aim to bring out the types of discontinuities that exist and the dynamic and emergent character of the struggles and interactions that take place, showing how actors' goals, perceptions, values, interests and relationships are reinforced or reshaped by this process" (Arce/Long 1992: 214).

"Such an analysis stresses the reproduction and transformation of social discontinuities inherent in interface encounters [...]" (Long 1992: 6).

and he states that

“studies of interface should not therefore be restricted to observing what goes on during face-to-face encounters, since these interactions are in part affected by actors, institutional and cultural frameworks, and resources that may not actually be physically or directly present. Hence [...] the analysis should situate these within broader institutional and power fields” (Arce/Long 1992: 214).

Therefore the positions of social actors are never stable but always transformed through interactions. This means that social processes are very dynamic because they are based on interactions forming the foundation for social change. At the same time the interface is just the point where the diverse logics, perspectives and resources of actors based in their specific life worlds, become visible. As in the case of transnational formations interfaces have to be analyzed within broader fields.

The study of interactions and interfaces gives several advantages in ethnographic research. First it offers a definite point where to start from in the acquisition of material but at the same time opens the sight as the interfaces can point to social relations that have not been assumed beforehand. In addition this broad perspective by including the analysis of the actors' logics, resources and further links can integrate the field's logics of transnationality and transnational life world and social realities. Hence instead of just observing the transnational phenomena interface-analysis takes allows focusing on the processes in which they are constructed and maintained.

This approach underlines to what I have just mentioned before, namely the necessity of the researchers sensitivity to "follow the interactions". But a further advantage of interface analysis is the fact that, it also is not restricted to solely one level of social organization but rather request to get aware of all kind of interactional links existing in and beyond the field of study. This again forces the researcher to go beyond the boundaries of a limited field by assuming a broader perspective. Hence in every locality forming part of the field of research the diverse actor constellations have to be analyzed as part of a wider social formation for grasping the diverse logics and resources that are located beyond the mere interactions constructing social reality.

Concrete Fieldwork: Openness and Flexibility

This methodological procedure suggests to take first local cases as point of departure which can be well combined with premises of the grounded theory. The field can be thoroughly analyzed with the appropriate openness and flexibility to engage with the social reality and the embedded structures of relevance making it feasible to "discover" something new. This means that the researcher has to be prepared to let him/herself get irritated and to drop previous assumptions when making visible the construction of social reality in the field.

A central aspect that should be taken from grounded theory is the way of being guided through the field itself in the acquisition of material by theoretical sampling. This should be a central aspect of fieldwork as it enables the researcher to grasp and follow the structures of relevance of the actors in our field. Parting from the ongoing analysis of material he/she can uncover these relevancies and reach relevant arenas, actors and also sites for the research. Combining this way of sampling with the focus on interactions should take the researcher to most relevant parts of the field of research ensuring also a proper contextualization and the embeddedness of the gathered material in the field. In addition the research is forcefully taken to other levels and localities if they are relevant. Thus an exaggerated local boundedness is unfeasible in the sense that the actors and informants lead the researcher to other levels and sites relevant for their daily lives and activities. It is important to note that this approach allows to focus equally on translocal and transnational links as well as , local or national links which are treated as the relevant dimensions structuring the field sites. In other words a strict barrier between the observation of transnational and national phenomena is avoided as the field shows us in which situation each of them is of importance. This helps to avoid blinders in both directions. Hence the often seen juxtaposition of national and transnational is in a certain manner avoided. Thus, we as researchers will less likely loose of sight the implications of the national for the lives of our informants, which refers to a frequent critique of transnational studies. To give a short example, when researching migration between Mexico and the USA despite of all transnational formations and phenomena that definitely exist the national institutions and national borders are of a material relevance for the migrants. The border partly structures their life worlds and they have to physically cross it to migrate, confronting all the risks, costs, violence and sometimes death. If we are guided by their own relevancies we will hardly forget about the national border's implications.

Minding grounded theory enables the researcher to engage into empirically grounded theory building which in combination with the analysis of interfaces pays attention to cross-level and multi-dimensional links, hence facilitating the building of theories of a middle range and to a

certain degree comparisons with other cases. In this procedure the ethnographic premises ensure the closeness to the field, openness and flexibility of the researcher in his/her field and a broader contextualization reaching from the local to the global. At the same time this facilitates a double contextualization of a case. On the one hand we gather material to embed it in the context of relations with diverse levels, like the ties between local and global. On the other hand we get aware of the embeddedness of transnational phenomena in more local processes. This means it is less likely to fall into a perspective that focuses solely on transnational processes and omits to put them in relation with non-transnational ones, a trap transnational studies sometimes seem to fall in.

Therefore ethnography, grounded theory and interface analysis are ideal partners in overcoming research visions of boundedness to container like spaces and all kinds of "methodological containerism", be it national or something else. The need for irritation through social reality in the field and the closeness to the informants can be exemplified in the case of indigenous migration between Mexico and the USA. This processes have frequently been ignored, the reasons for this is two-folded. For a long time the migration flows from Mexico were seen as homogeneous and migrants thus conceptualized as Mexican mestizos. In Mexico indigenous communities are perceived as isolated and thus immobile, a dominant perception which hindered researchers to get aware of the long tradition and broad participation in migratory processes. This vision is slowly changing because a decade ago several researchers, both in Mexico as in the USA have started to analyze indigenous migration under a distinct perspective, pointing at its particularities. This is only possible through methodologically detaching perception of the correspondent groups from bounded "container spaces".

As generally in ethnographic fieldwork a mix of methods (Lachenmann 1995; 2007) should be used in the field. This proves indispensable as much in the process of requisition of material as in its analysis. During the data-collection it ensures being able to apply a technique that is appropriate to the specific situation while in the analysis the material gathered through different techniques but also in diverse situations and sites can be contrasted among each other for deepening the analysis. Furthermore a mix of methods is in my opinion essential to grasp the context. Therefore especially more open and flexible techniques like (participant) observation and informal interviews respectively conversations are helpful. Furthermore as we need to capture the structures of relevance of our informants narrative interviews or interviews that aim at provoking narrative sequences are a good choice. This offers a broad range of concrete techniques that can be combined and finally grant a variety of types of material that facilitate a proper analysis of the field of research through triangulation and an empirically grounded theory formation. As stated before in all of this the researcher

him/herself has got a key position as he/she needs the agility and sensibility to cope with such a complex research situation and its challenges and demands.

Mobile vs. "Stationary" Research

It is important to stress that such methodology can be used in several manners and situations. Coming back to the before mentioned problems like lack of time or resources some researchers are confronted with, it has to be stated that it does not necessarily mean to practice mobile fieldwork. Marcus states that part of multisited ethnography can be the observation of translocal links from a strategically located place forming part of a plurilocal network. In the same vein Burawoy proves well with his global ethnography indicating that global interconnections can be analyzed parting from one locality. Moreover as discussed already before researchers doing fieldwork in one single place do have to take into account the links that go beyond. Thus a broader transnational field can be comprised by doing fieldwork in just one place. In this sense the interaction focus of interface-analysis ensures to perceive the fields transnational dimension and its relevance for the local social formation. However relatively stationary fieldwork has not to serve as an excuse for overseeing existing translocal connections and to fall back into methodological boundedness. In other words, the relative restriction to one locality can be acceptable concerning the researcher as physical person, but it should never result in a restriction of the field of research, as it is mandatory to include dimensions and levels that lie beyond the concrete site into the process of research. Hence it is to some degree feasible to be pragmatic in the research design and in carrying it out as a well reflected situation of relatively immobile research. This pragmatic consideration neither corrodes the methodology nor vanishes validity from the study's results. On the contrary it can be a way of dealing with plurilocality being based in just one locality or a smaller number of sites located geographically close to each other.

On the other hand following this thoughts it can be useful to take into account several localities in the relevant transnational spaces including those places that are for example part of the migratory route, be it in the country of arrival or the one of departure. Thus localities that are part of transnational space but are not located "across a border" become relevant for research, as does a more historical perspective for understanding actual migrations and transnational phenomena.

Both modes of research, and any kind in between both of them, can benefit of focusing on interfaces. However it should not be omitted that a certain degree of ethnographic perma-

nence in one or several sites of the field is essential. The premise of getting deeper access to the field, of creating bounds of trust with informants and of co-living and experiencing the social reality and daily life of the researched, through the above mentioned techniques stays intact and requires a lot of time. Mobile and multi-sited research should not consist of "quickly jumping through" several sites of the field. It is inevitable to stay an extended time at the relevant localities for collecting material in a proper way.

However this is in no way a contradiction to the discussion above. Anyhow it is imperative that fieldwork should focus on the complex constellations reflected by a single locality. This allows for a deeper inside in the local social formations thus making it more feasible to explore possible transnational dimensions and translocal links to other localities or sites in a territorial sense and in the sense of other levels of social organization reaching from the local to the global.

A Brief Example

These thoughts will be now briefly illustrated using my own experience of doing fieldwork in Mexico. I started my dissertation project with the aim of studying transformations in local and regional politics in a rural area of central Mexico, the Valle del Mezquital. Though I knew that there were larger migratory processes I did not expect to encounter well established transnational formations in the field. Nonetheless I quickly got aware that there is a transnational dimension and that the social processes related to it are relevant for my field of interest and permeate nearly every aspect of social and political life in the region. This being a region that is often supposed to be in a way congealed in antiquated structures. The indigenous rural communities I researched are well connected to Mexican society (and always have been) and to the global, as is seen in a specific kind of transnationality and the corresponding processes of glocalization and localization. An important element of the actual developments is a growing participation in political issues and altered position towards external actors, especially public and political ones. In an overall picture, it can be stated that diverse ongoing processes of transformation and social change are interwoven, and as such, interlock in a broader transformation of the Valle del Mezquital.

My case demonstrates that social formations depend upon a common ground which is constantly reaffirmed and renegotiated through personal interactions, this means by processes which depend upon face to face encounters. Communication technologies are employed in the transnational processes described but they are in no way making personal interactions

obsolete. They are just an additional feature of the transnational social space that rather stimulates and assists the physical mobility of persons. In the communities studied, migration and the related symbolic flows are fundamental for the existence of a transnational social formation. In the transformations of the community an important interface exists between those “staying home”, the supposedly less mobile villagers, usually considered equivalent to the community as an institution, and those citizens who have migrated. The main arenas in which the encounters take place are the communities institutions for its self-organisation like the village assembly. I could observe in the assemblies how the logics of the main actors collided. Depending upon the concrete situation, the actors involved were the leaders of the community and its elected authorities, on the one hand, and the migrants or their representatives on the other. There were constant quarrels about the way in which repercussions of the physical absence of migrants could be remedied, exposing the distinct logics of the actors. Just one example is the migrants’ goal of having more influence over the communitarian processes of decision making. This concern arises basically from the fear of not being taken into account in an appropriate manner and, due to the migrants’ absence, not being able to argue in favour of their families needs. In this their increased self-confidence, owed to experiences, ideas and resources gained in the USA, forms a prominent part of the basis for the resulting interactions. The leaders and authorities, in contrast, are aiming at a smooth governing of the community. They often see themselves as owning the knowledge necessary for guiding village affairs and perceive the migrants’ interventions as perturbing or even as threat to the “ways in which the community should work.” Furthermore they are worried about maintaining their position in the internal power arrangements. In the end, this kind of negotiation at interfaces has led to the emergence of a transnational dimension of community organisation.

It is important to stress that the process of transnationalisation has reached impressive dimensions. The case of one community is especially striking. In a relatively short period this community and its migrants developed nearly the full “set” of features of transnationality, despite its being based mainly on undocumented migration. It can be stated that almost immediately, this community in Mexico has seen migrants as continuously participating in the community. There have never been tendencies towards separation or exclusion. Thus, the transnationalisation of this community took place faster than described for other Mexican cases. But more importantly it took a form of everyday practices of transnationality particular to these communities. Furthermore it has to be stressed that it is basically women’s commitment and dedication to the community organisation that has facilitated the rise of and sustained the transnational dimension. At the core are changes to the ways and customs or better said, everyday practices of construction of local citizenship and of the concept of citizen-

ship itself. Thus, it can be affirmed that these rules, like community organisation as a whole, are constantly being renegotiated, which explains their flexible character. In this way transformation is achieved through interaction in a dynamic social field. The communities have developed their own specific transnationality through a dynamic process of interaction with diverse actors and groups. Furthermore change in gender relations is a prominent part of this process of transformation.

These are some of the social phenomena and transformations I got aware of in the field using the described methodological procedure that I have been discussing here. If I would have just focused on previous assumption or only on the local or the transnational side of the cases I would not have been able to grasp the diverse dimensions of the field and the interwovenness of different but in the end closely related social processes.

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