Crossing Boundaries in Multi-Sited Ethnography

Translocal Communities and Redefining "Field" in Transnational Migration Research

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Abstract

This paper[1] draws upon several transnational theories from Glick Schiller, Wimmer, Faist, and Sassen and analyses the major theoretical and methodological shifts in migration studies. In response to such changes, multi-sited ethnography has been introduced as a main research method; it differs from the traditional way of doing migration research, where spatially-defined ethnic minority communities serve as the primary fieldwork sites; instead, moving between different sites allows researchers to follow individual migrants, whose social networks have become the main focus. Moreover, such a research method also redefines the traditional notion of "field", which is now believed to be with blurred and softening boundaries. Through my research project, I have analysed how translocal communities constitute global diasporic networks; I have also come to the conclusion that transnational migrants themselves are involved in very fluid patterns and complex processes of identification and affiliation; their social networks, which consist of multiple relationships such as familial, economic, social, organisational, and political, are not geographically bounded, but these networks cross over and connect different types of social spaces in a wide variety of cultural, institutional, professional, and other kinds of context.

Key words: transnationalism, multi-sited ethnography, social networks, identity construction, migration

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[1] The paper contains sections, which have been published in the author's book *Gender and Diasporic Identities in Transnational Migration*, 2016, Lit Verlag: Zürich.

1 Introduction

In the contemporary world of globalisation and transnational migration, the traditional notion of cultures has been radically challenged. Rather than confined within separate territory or community, cultures are now believed to go beyond national borders, while having blurred boundaries and overlapping with each other. Moreover, individuals may at one time belong to more than one cultural group, so their identities and ways of life may thus nest inside one another. Re-examining the concepts of culture and identity has led to a series of theoretical and methodological shifts in migration studies, which have presented an ongoing tendency to move away from the traditional mode, in which individual migrants were solely positioned in a particular country or in a spatially-defined ethnic community; instead, research attention has now been shifted onto migrants themselves, their life trajectory and social networks.

2 Theoretical development

From a theoretical point of view, scrutinising migration studies up to the 1990s, one may easily realise that many commonly used research practices were in fact quite problematic. One of them assumed the cultural homogeneity and national integration of the host society as given, while completely ignoring the diversity within the society itself. In more concrete terms, researchers used to perceive that people living in Britain, for example, were all British nationals, who would possess British citizenship and have the same ethnic, cultural, and religious background, such as being "white" and Anglican; socially speaking, people living in Britain would be integrated into one system, so that a strong sense of social solidarity would be fostered among them: this entailed that everyone would adopt British national identities such as speaking English as their native language, following British customs, and so on. With such a theoretical orientation, research projects on immigrants in Britain normally aimed at exploring how individuals employ different strategies to achieve integration into the new ways of living in Britain; in detail, research interests would often be centred on the questions such as how immigrants and their children integrate themselves into British society, how they cope with British identities and their native cultural identities, and to what extent they can keep or get rid of their original identities in the process of adopting the new British ones. In the 1990s, researchers started to gain full awareness of the theoretical problems involved in this approach. By closely examining terms such as "British society" and "British identities", scholars such as Calhoun (1997) and McCrone (1998) raise the question of whether there indeed exists one solidary group in a nation, where all people have a common origin and history and share one single national culture, language and identity. Such discourses are clearly problematic, as they have greatly ignored the diversity within the nation itself; therefore, those research questions mentioned before

need to be abandoned, as there exists no such thing as an integrated and culturally homogenous group in British society; for instance, differences are frequently found among people living in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland in terms of the type of English that they speak and the social customs that they follow. In this case, the cultural homogeneity and national integration of British society are assumed as given, whereas for immigrants, integration is a process that they must undergo.

In the 1990s, such a misconception was fully addressed by the cultural anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller and the sociologist Andreas Wimmer, who refer to it as *"methodological nationalism"*. As explained by Wimmer et al. (2002), this stemmed from a wrong assumption that nation-states are the natural social and political components of the modern world (301). In detail, scholars such as Smith (1998), Guiberneau (1997), and Imhof (1997) point out that researchers in the past failed to address the significance and sources of nationalism in the modern western world; in other words, the assumption that social world was structured according to the principle of nation-states became so banal that it easily made its way into research practices in migration studies. Consequently, as observed by Glick Schiller (1999), Williams (1989), and Wimmer (2002), nations at the time were mistakenly depicted as racially and culturally distinct, with a unified set of national identities emerging to mark the differences between each other.

To sum up, borrowing the notion of container society[2] from Taylor (1996), Glick Schiller et al. (2003) usefully remind people that in migration research at the time, countries were wrongly assumed as separate entities, where isomorphisms between citizenry, sovereign, solidary group, and nation were set up accordingly; these four neatly fitted into the boundaries which exactly defined what pertained to the realm and what fell outside it:

> The translation is almost one to one: the citizenry is mirrored in the concept of a national legal system, the sovereign in the political system, the nation in the cultural system, and the solidary group in the social system, all boundaries being congruent and together defining the skin holding together the body of society (Wimmer et al. 2002, 309)

However, such a theoretical approach cannot describe either societies in the past or the ones in the contemporary age of globalisation and transnational migration, when the isomorphisms between citizenry, sovereign, solidary group, and nation have been most evidently falling apart; for example, the emergence of e-mails, Facebook, and Skype telephone has made it easy for migrants to communicate and remain connected with their family, friends, or contacts at different geographic locations; thanks to the cheap jet liners, migrants are able to physically travel between different countries on a regular basis. As a result, migrants cannot be regarded as being "uprooted" from their home country

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[2] Taylor's container society indicates the notion that a society encompasses only one culture, one polity, one economy, and one bounded group.

and "transplanted" into the host country; on the contrary, transnational activities have become an integral part of their social life. As Taylor (2000) and Beck (1999) mention, in order to cope with the realities of contemporary world where trans-boundary dynamics and formations have prominently featured, it is inadequate to use nations as the container category to do analysis in migration studies; or to be more precise, researchers should not narrow their horizons by leaving out the whole area that goes beyond the national borders; thus, there should be an increasing call for transnationalism. Bearing in mind Faist's (1998 and 2000) model of transnational social space, researchers should shift their attention onto individual migrants, as well as their family or social networks, which constitute intricate social relation webs and transnational spaces involving more than two nation-states.

With more and more trans-border connections and processes being recently included into the research scope, scholars such as Kivisto (2001) usefully remind people that the nation-state and its territory are nevertheless important and should still count in today's transnational migration research. Vertovec (2009), for example, explains that despite the increasing degree of transnationalism, migrants' lives are nonetheless bounded "by the policies and practices of territorially-based sending and receiving national states or local communities" (53). In other words, this implies that today's migrants may have various transnational connections to their homeland, but they are still physically living in one place and they are nonetheless bounded by the policies of the receiving country, where the vast majority of their everyday life takes place. Therefore, as what Lal (1990) refers to as the "ethnicity paradox", transnational communities thus not only facilitate connections between migrants and their homeland, but these communities also aim at helping their members adjust and fit into the host society. According to their needs, migrants may give preference to one thing over the other, and they are most likely to focus their energy on the issues which can safeguard their own interests.

Moreover, Kivisto (2001) also suggests that transnationalism should not lead to the end of nation-states; instead, the concept directs people, as argued by Sassen (2003), to re-examine and reconceptualise what has been historically constructed as the local, the national, and the global, as well as to recognise and understand that the latter takes place on multiple scales. In detail, through transnational networks, as Sassen usefully points out, the traditional hierarchical scales of institutional size or territorial scope, which run "from the international, down to the national, the regional, the urban, to the local" (11), have been greatly challenged. Indeed, global business networks, diasporic communities, new cosmopolitan initiatives, and NGOs have created transnational spaces which enable seemingly global transactions to operate at both local and national levels; as a result, the global is now widely believed to be found in any other territorial domains. By contrast, local initiatives, as scholars such as Cleaver (1998) and Mele (1999) point out, can be facilitated by global activist networks in the cyberspace, without losing the focus on specific local struggles. Similarly, worldwide digital networks not only can be "used by political activists for global transactions, but these can also be used for strengthen-

ing local communications inside a city or neighbouring regions" (Sassen 2003, 12). In addition, one of the most developed examples which demonstrate the partial embeddedness of the global in the local or the national is included in the studies of global cities. With the extensive research in cities such as New York, Mexico City, and Sao Paulo, Parnreiter (2002) and Schiffer (2002) investigate the question of how translocal ethnic communities comprise a global diasporic network. If one looks at their works from a different angle, one may realise that their findings also provide useful insights into the question of how the global functions in sub-national places; therefore, this viewpoint offers a valuable theoretical supplement to the popular beliefs that globalisation only works on a global scale, and thus is merely associated with supra-national institutions such as WTO and IMF.

In contemporary states, particular components of the national, as argued above, have been greatly deconstructed as the result of transnationalism and globalisation. However, Stolcke (1997) usefully reminds people that "the power of ideological logic of the nation-state in reality appears to be far from fading away" (77). As a backlash, states have promulgated tighter laws and regulations to secure their territorial authority and protect their borders by controlling the free movement of people, in spite of the more intensely globalised economic transactions. Moreover, the role of states is crucial in determining the existence and the thriving of transnational communities: for example, this has been demonstrated in some specific aspects of immigration laws, particularly with reference to the issues of how freely migrants are able to move and reside, as well as how easily they are able to remain in the country and access full citizenship. In addition, the tolerance of dual citizenship by the states may also play an important role in determining the degree of transnationalism to which migrants are able to reach. On the one hand, the states still tightly control the immigration process and individual's degree of transnationalism from top-down. On the other hand, translocal communities and their networks are nevertheless able to support individual members and facilitate their migration process from bottom-up. Moreover, research conducted by Sassen (1996) demonstrates that the national government may have the power to subvert the legal claims of its people, who now increasingly have the chance to seek direct help in international forums, which serve as a way to bypass and challenge the nation-states.

3 Methodological shift

Ethnic minority communities made their way into mainstream migration studies in the late 1970s and became the main unit of analysis up to the 1990s. With regard to where data were collected in early studies, ethnic minority communities had been the only place for researchers to do this for a long time. Scholars such as Meinhof and Kiwan (2011) remind researchers to be extremely cautious about using such spatially-defined

communities as the entry point for research, as the potential problem is that these communities are clearly defined by boundaries, which sharply distinguish insiders from outsiders. Consequently, it is very likely to mislead people into thinking that immigrants of the same ethnic origin are perceived as a self-defining collective group, and thus a culturally homogenous entity. Furthermore, Glick Schiller and Wimmer point out that such an approach is heavily coloured by methodological nationalism, as it greatly narrows down the research focus by leaving out everything that goes beyond the boundaries of the community. Therefore, it reinforces the dichotomy between immigrants, who live in seemingly isolated and ghettoised communities and native people, who live in mainstream society. Finally, it also mistakenly constructs the notion that immigrants are a group of "displaced, spatially defined, neo-communitarian people whose identities are formed by retention of ethnic ties to their homeland and ethnic concentration at a new place of residence" (Meinhof and Kiwan 2011, 3).

There has been a methodological shift from ethnic minority communities to specific individuals and their social networks in migration studies. As usefully pointed out by Meinhof and Kiwan (2011), this approach employs a "bottom-up" view, which puts an emphasis on the voices and life paths of individual immigrants, and shifts the research focus from "'bi-focal', ethnically and spatially defined communities in receiving countries to the more complex and fluid flows and networking of individuals" (1). Moreover, the other reason why social networks should be the basic units of analysis is given by Portes (1995), who emphasises that "networks are important in economic life because these are the sources for acquiring scarce means, such as capital and information" (8). In more concrete terms, these networks are crucial for individual migrants to find jobs and accommodation, to circulate goods and services, to psychologically support each other, as well as to obtain continuous social and economic information. These scarce means can be extremely valuable to migrants, who normally experience a certain degree of deskilling in the receiving labour market and have a poor command of the language of the host country. Therefore, it is widely believed that social networks play a vital role in directing the flow of migration by channelling migrants into or through specific places and occupations. Moreover, not only is the process of migration shaped by existing social networks, but it also in turn creates new networks and connections which initiate or reinforce social relationships across large geographical distances.

With social networks gradually replacing ethnic minority communities as the main unit of analysis, researchers have begun to develop new models and approaches. In 1995, George E. Marcus introduced "multi-sited ethnography", which has a great resemblance to Clifford's (1992) travelling or route-based way of studying cultures. Similar to Clifford, Marcus greatly challenges the conventional ethnographic notion of "field", i.e. a geographically specific location where ethnographers dwell for a long period of time to collect data. According to Clifford (1992), locking ethnographers in the field tends to marginalise or erase its blurred boundary areas (99); consequently, the field would likely turn into "a container of a particular set of social relations, which could be studied and

possibly compared with the contents of other containers elsewhere" (Falzon 2009, 1). In practice, as Falzon points out, the situation is much more complex, while the traditional ethnographic idea of studying the local through a field site is indeed problematic. To this point, Falzon's (2009) arguments come in line with Sassen's theories, which indicate that the local, as an integral part of the global, should not be kept separated from each other. As a result, Marcus' model, which encourages researchers to study the local by exploring its intricate relationship with the global, places its importance on travelling and following people, connections, associations, and relations across space. Such an approach is thought to be especially geared towards transnational migration research: by means of travelling to various spatially dispersed field sites across large geographical distances and following migrants and their family networks from place to place, ethnographers are able to explore the transnational networks in which individuals are involved.

4 Multi-sited ethnography as a research method

Multi-sited ethnography is now widely applied in migration studies. The cultural anthropologist Karen Fog Olwig, for example, conducted a piece of longitudinal research on three family networks originating in the Caribbean islands; through different migratory moves the family members scattered in various parts of North America, Europe, and the Caribbean. During her five-year research, she spent time with 150 members in Jamaica, Dominica and Nevis, Barbados, the British and the United States Virgin Islands, California, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, New York, Nova Scotia, and England. Fog Olwig visited individual members in their homes or at work, went out with them to restaurants, parties, church, talking with them informally, and interviewed them. She revisited certain members over and over again so as to see how they had changed when time passed. Such worldwide family networks became the actual fieldwork site for her research, which precisely manifests the transnational social networks of today's migrants. To her mind, "interviews and participant observation in quite disparate places shed light on an extensive field of social relations and cultural values of significance to persons living far from one another and under different social and economic circumstances", yet are nonetheless bound up with each other (2003, 796). The model of multi-sited ethnography goes beyond the boundaries of nation and community, and captures the multi-facets of the immigrants' life, which is represented by their worldwide transnational social networks and their close connections with people living in very distant geographic locations.

Another well-known research project was conducted by Meinhof and her colleague Kiwan, who followed a group of Malagasy musicians and explored their transnational networks within African, European, and wider global spaces. In the study, Meinhof and Kiwan show that this group of artists was constantly involved in a cyclic migratory

movement between their country of origin and the countries of settlement; through various contacts and connections in their home country, these migrants were able to acquire valuable musical resources so as to develop their art and performances; more importantly, these new musical elements that they got at home inspired them to come up with the latest trend, so as to support their commercial appeal to different audiences in the countries of settlement (2011, 8-9). Such a kind of valuable cultural and social resource obtained in the home countries, and then utilised by immigrants to achieve success in the receiving countries, is defined by Meinhof and her colleague as transnational capital. On closer inspection, one may realise that transnational capital benefits not only transnational musicians, but also other groups of migrants, for whom going back to homelands is no longer a simple return, but rather it is some spiritual reloading or an economic opportunity, which leads to their success and achievements in their residing countries.

Furthermore, as shown in my research project on a group of mainland Chinese female expatriates in Britain, multi-sited ethnography does not necessarily take the form of those suggested and practised by Fog Olwig and Meinhof; to put it differently, travelling across great geographic distances is not indispensable for doing multi-sited ethnography. Instead, based in one of the major cities in the south of England, I moved between different fieldwork sites and followed individual migrants in various activity groups, so as to explore a wide range of networks in which these individuals are actively involved. The first round of fieldwork and observations made me firmly believe that a unified community which was bonded solely by the ethnicity as Chinese was actually not in existence; in more concrete terms, local Chinese residents tended to distinguish themselves from each other in a more fluid and diversified way, whereas boundary-making was involved in an ongoing and dynamic process. Common genealogies, language, and places of origin, which were believed to be used in the olden days, still remained well-seated in people's mind; these might still play a decisive role when it came to decide whether or not a stranger was an insider. However, there was an ongoing tendency for factors such as class, gender, religion, occupation, and common interests to be actively involved in the boundary-making process. In other words, these factors, which may sometimes replace one's place of origin and language, led to alternative ways of group formation among Chinese migrants in the area: for example, the Chinese Women and Elderly Group, the Chinese Christian Group, the Chinese Arts Club, the Chinese Language School, and so on. Furthermore, not all the groups required physical locations, some translocal communities were virtually constructed in the cyberspace; the Chinese Student and Scholar Association, for example, used social websites such as Renren and mobile communication service like WeChat[3] not only to circulate information, but also

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[3] Renren is a China-based social website whose functions are more or less the same as those of Facebook. WeChat, an instant messaging application, can be compared to WhatsApp. Once registered at these sites, people are able to find each other and connect online.

to socialise and establish connection and close ties with others at distinct geographical locations. In addition, cross-boundary activities could be seen on a regular basis. For example, there were cases where middle-class women from different ethnic backgrounds came together for charitable work; in other occasions, immigrants from mainland China or Hong Kong joined forces, in order to fight against racism and claim equal rights.

Bearing in mind the criticism[4] of multi-sited ethnography, I finally chose a group of first generation mainland Chinese female expatriates as my research partners. I first met these individuals at the local Chinese Arts Club; during their weekly training sessions, I first regarded it as an isolated close-knit community group; these female Chinese immigrants came together to practise traditional music instruments and dances every Saturday, when they also exchanged the latest news and gossip in China, talked about Chinese film or TV series that they had recently watched, and discussed issues related to the local Chinese community. However, as research went further, my ethnographic observations started to take place in multiple sites: I had chances to go out with them after the training sessions and to accompany them to various social events where they gave performances, for example, the opening ceremony of the local Confucius Institute, the Chinese New Year's Celebration, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Celebration, and the local Mela Festival[5]; in addition, I also followed individual members to some fundraising functions, where they collected money for local charity, as well as several protest meetings, where they demonstrated against racial violence and public spending cuts on minority community funds. Moreover, after establishing good personal relationships with some members, I was also allowed to visit them in their homes, in their neighbourhood, and at their workplace.

After looking at these individuals in different sites and from multiple angles, I started to form the view that their social networks did not spin within the container of a displaced, spatially-defined ethnic community. As their lives outside the community gradually became known to me, I started to realise that my field was in fact with blurred and softening boundaries, where identities were unfixed and destabilised, while exchanges, crossings, and mutual entanglements were allowed. As Falzon (2009) usefully points out, in multi-sited ethnography, "site" does not necessarily mean "location" or "place", but also "perspectives" (2). When identifying this group, ethnicity should not be the only important aspect, whereas other factors should also be taken into consideration,

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[4] The major criticism of multi-sited ethnography comes from scholars such as Hage (2005) and Candea (2007), who argue that multi-sited research may imply a tacit holism, which results in lack of depth. According to them, "no matter how fluid and contiguous a research "object", it is best studied by focusing on a limited slice of the action" (Falzon 2009, 13)

[5] "Mela" is a Sanskrit word which originally means "gathering" and is used to describe any sort of gatherings or fairs in the Indian subcontinent. As a popular public event in the UK, the festival comprises a series of cultural events, which are held between July and September every year in different towns. Attended not only by ethnic minorities from the Indian subcontinent, but also by members of Chinese, Polish, Romanian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian communities, the festival is celebrated with minorities' music, dance, food, fashion, and traditional arts and crafts. It is an occasion for promoting cultural diversity, and enhancing exchange and mutual understanding.

such as members' shared passion towards arts and performances, their similar migration experiences, and their common background as affluent middle-class mothers. Therefore, these members were indeed not confined in an isolated close-knit community group, but they were involved in, as Basch et al. (1994) claim, the processes of forging and sustaining multi-stranded social relations in some wider transnational spaces which simultaneously linked them to the host and home societies.

5 Conclusion

This paper draws upon several transnational theories from Glick Schiller, Wimmer, Faist, and Sassen and analyses the major theoretical and methodological shifts in migration studies. Moving away from the traditional way of doing migration research, where spatially-defined ethnic minority communities were the main unit of analysis, researchers nowadays move between different fieldwork sites and follow individual migrants, whose social networks have become the main focus. In addition, such a research method also redefines the traditional notion of "field", which is now believed to be with blurred and softening boundaries. After analysing research conducted by Fog Olwig and Meinhof, I have also presented my research project, in which I have analysed how translocal communities constitute global diasporic networks; applying multi-sited ethnography as a research method, I have also come to the conclusion that transnational migrants themselves are involved in very fluid patterns and complex processes of identification and affiliation; their social networks, which consist of multiple relationships such as familial, economic, social, organisational, and political, are not geographically bounded, but these networks cross over and connect different types of social spaces in a wide variety of cultural, institutional, professional, and other kinds of context.

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