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Ethnography between locality and
sociality



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Abstract

This working paper deals with the question of how the method of ethnography relates to the theoretical and methodological tension between locality – referring to the socio-spatially boundedness and embeddedness of embodied interaction – and sociality – referring to the transgressive features of human communication and social relationships. Instead of employing more optimistic and hybrid theoretical constructs, like that of global ethnoscape or transnational social space, which claim to overcome this tension, it is argued that ethnography has to endure competing and conflicting claims of studying embodied practices on the one hand and communicatively integrated social units (e.g. groups, social fields or cultural configurations) on the other hand. Ethnographic practice can only practically manage and reflect the tensions between locality and sociality but not solve them. After discussing these problems from an historical and theoretical perspective some preliminary reflections about complexity, selectivity and methodological pluralism will be presented in the conclusion.

Dieses Arbeitspapier beschäftigt sich mit dem Verhältnis von Lokalität, verstanden als sozial-räumlichem Kontext und Begrenzung verkörperter Interaktion, und Sozialität, die auf die entgrenzenden Eigenschaften von Kommunikation und sozialen Beziehungen verweist, im Rahmen ethnographischer Forschungspraxis. Anstatt den optimistischeren Vorschlägen der Hybridisierungstheoretiker der 90er Jahre zu folgen, wird die Inkompatibilität der verschiedenen methodologischen Ansprüche betont, einerseits verkörperte und lokalisierte Praktiken zu beschreiben und andererseits kommunikativ integrierte soziale Einheiten (z.B. Gruppen, soziale Felder oder kulturelle Konfigurationen) zu beobachten. Es wird argumentiert, dass sich keine theoretischen oder methodologischen sondern nur praktische Lösungen für dieses Forschungsdilemma finden lassen. Die historischen und theoretischen Erörterungen der Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Lokalität und Sozialität im Kontext ethnographischer Forschungspraxis werden abschließend durch einige vorläufige Überlegungen über den Zusammenhang von Komplexität, Selektivität und methodologischen Pluralismus ergänzt.

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Contents

Locality and the History of Anthropology	8
<i>Contesting locality – fieldwork and globalisation</i>	10
Fieldwork between locality and sociality.....	12
Ethnography, locality and global society – complexity-theoretical considerations	19
Bibliography	22

This paper elaborates on a central theoretical and methodological problem that has received particular attention in the debate on an anthropology of globalisation. It is the tension between locality, meaning the socio-spatial boundedness and embeddedness of embodied interaction, and sociality, meaning the unboundedness of human communication and social relationships. The question of how ethnography as a localised and localising method should relate to the transgressive forces of translocal communication became a particular controversial issue in the debate on multi-sited ethnography. The tensions between both principles are rooted in the method of ethnography as such and its competing claims of being naturalistic or constructivist on the one hand and of studying embodied practices or communicatively integrated social units at a higher level of aggregation (like groups, social fields or cultural configurations) on the other. It is argued here that the resulting problems can only be managed practically but cannot be resolved theoretically. The paper is divided into four parts. First, the historical process is described in which the link between ethnography and locality was established. Then the question of how this came to be an issue of critical debate in the 1980s and 1990s will be discussed. This relatively conventional historical account is followed by theoretical reflections in the third part that highlight the inescapability of the tensions between locality and sociality in the context of ethnographic research. Finally, these historical and theoretical thoughts are linked up with some preliminary thoughts about complexity, selectivity and methodological pluralism.

Especially in the 1990s there emerged in anthropology a strong ambivalence towards fieldwork as a scientific method. Its focus on the local seemed strangely anachronistic in the face of a growing discussion about globalisation. At the same time the ideal of stationary fieldwork was and remains today of central importance for the identity of the discipline. This ambivalence developed into two idealised positions. On the one hand it was and continues to be claimed that in a world in which the borders between academic disciplines are becoming increasingly blurry, the method of fieldwork is the only remaining common denominator of anthropology (Clifford 1997: 191–192). In this context it was argued that the socialisation of anthropologists into alien cultural contexts guarantees – much more, is a prerequisite for – the appropriate form of participation in and understanding of social processes (Hahn 2004).¹ On the other hand it was highlighted that the ideal of stationary fieldwork was based on an outdated model of culture and society and needed to be modernised in the face

¹ These positions often emerge in semi-public discussions, conversations and “disciplinary practices”, such as in hiring strategies and decisions on the acceptance of academic theses.

of the challenges of decolonisation and globalisation (i.e. Appadurai 1999; Marcus 1995; 2006; Clifford 1997: 190). One suggestion was to meet these challenges of the delocalisation of the object of study by means of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), multi-locale ethnography (Marcus and Fisher 1986) or translocal ethnography (Lauser 2005a).

Despite the obvious differences between these two disparate positions, all participants in the debate remained in broad agreement that, one, stationary fieldwork remained a factual normative focus of anthropological research practice and that, second, a methodological pluralisation had in fact taken place. But based on an implicit *hierarchy of purity* (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 11–15) multi-locale fieldwork and other heterodox forms of data generation continue to be subject to stigmatisation as a deviation from the normative model of “real fieldwork” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Clifford 1997: 192; Passaro 1997), which, depending on the positioning of the respective author, is either greeted or lamented. The knowledge of both the standard as well as the fact of deviation nevertheless marks the self-consciousness of many anthropologists applying multi-locale approaches. This is insofar remarkable that it appears questionable whether stationary fieldwork make up the quantitative majority of anthropological field studies at all. Moreover, multi-locale and mobile studies have always been part of the anthropological fieldwork tradition (Schlee 2002 [1985]).

Locality and the History of Anthropology

Historically, the normative status of stationary fieldwork and the methodological significance of locality are related to their roles in the establishment of modern anthropology as an academic discipline (cf. Fuchs and Berg 1993; Clifford 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Most histories of anthropology make reference to Bronislaw Malinowski’s fieldwork on the Trobriand Islands and its central influence on the institutionalisation of the ideal of long periods of fieldwork and participant observation. Malinowski argued that sustained and intensive participation in everyday life combined with a knowledge of the local language alone were appropriate means for revealing the inner workings of a culture, the (in)famous “native’s point of view” (Malinowski 1972 [1922]: 25).

This act of methodological radicalisation initiated by Malinowski was an attack on the one hand on the cultural descriptions of non-anthropologist “lay observers”

such as missionaries, colonial officials or travellers (Clifford 1988) and on the other hand against the evolutionist anthropological model of the 19th century as expressed in the works of Edward Tylor, James Frazer or in Emile Durkheim's "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life" (1994 [1912]).

An important element of this methodological radicalisation as realised by Malinowski and his students was the dissolution of the distinction between those who collected data and those who developed cultural theories (Clifford 1988: 34; Fuchs and Berg 1993: 27). This was in stark contrast to the 19th and early 20th century anthropological tradition, its practitioners seeing their calling not in empirical data collection but in the collation of this data and the development of theory. The "modern anthropologists" followed the naturalistic arguments of biologists and zoologists who themselves practised fieldwork, setting themselves clearly apart from laboratory scholarship and deductive theorisation, maintaining that only when organisms were studied in their natural environment could valid results on authentic behaviour be observed (Kuklick 1997). The idea of a modern anthropology was based, accordingly, on the requirement that young scholars spend a longer period of time in the field before they draw conclusions or make generalisations about a culture or a people. It was expected that these long stays in the field would ensure thorough socialisation and would in turn allow scholarly observers privileged access to the cultural knowledge of the populations being studied. *Going native*, i.e. the gradual adoption of the standards of the "foreign culture", was perceived in this context as a threat if it meant the loss of the ability to explicate on local knowledge, but was, in its domesticised form, the central source of anthropological authority. In the mid-1930s, so James Clifford (1988), it slowly became possible to speak in terms of international consensus, at least for the anglophone world, on the fact that anthropological knowledge should be based on a scholar's stationary field research.

The stress on participation in the everyday life of a "foreign community" implied in general a methodological commitment to a more or less clearly defined research locality within which that community was situated. Villages and islands became the prototypical locations of ethnographic research. Moreover, the strong emphasis on synchronous participation in everyday life in another locale led to a shift away from historical perspectives, such as those applied by the diffusionists (i.e. Kroeber 1964) or the mentioned evolutionists, to presentist interpretations, which saw behaviour as rooted mainly in its importance for the present (i.e. Malinowski 1973 [1923]). In all three dimensions – the unification of the roles of data collector and theorist, the strong focus on the present and, what is central for this paper, its methodologi-

cal localism – field-research-based anthropology set itself apart from the modes of authority production of its academic predecessors and non-academic competitors (Clifford 1988). But the methodological localism of stationary fieldwork is also tied very closely to classical anthropology’s holistic understanding of the term culture as reflected in the literary genre of the ethnographic monograph, which implies that the most important aspects of *the* culture of *a* people living in *a* clearly delimited locale can be described in *a* book (Thornton 1988). Discrepancies between sociality in the sense of the structures of social relations and communication exchanges, and locality in the sense of the dominant local limits of the field, were often ignored. In doing so, the method of stationary fieldwork contributed significantly to the development of an idealised vision of a world of localised, socio-culturally relatively homogeneous and, in relation to other groups, distinct population units.

Contesting locality – fieldwork and globalisation

Since the 1960s, dissenters in the consensus about the central importance of stationary field emerged. The differentiation of the various subdisciplines in anthropology, urban anthropology of the 1960s, Marxism and world system theory in the 1970s and the writing-culture-debate about the legitimacy of ethnographic authority of the 1980s contributed each in their own way to put stationary field and its associated cultural understanding in question, but not going so far as to demand that it should be substituted completely.

In the 1990s it was pointed out that “traditional society” as the classical object of anthropology had dissolved or at least been integrated into larger social contexts to such a degree that the assumption of unified local and social boundaries had become unrealistic (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Tsing 1994).

If one were to look at sociality principally as a spatial limitations transcending phenomenon as globalisation theorists do, the question arises as to how the localised method of ethnography and with it anthropology is to position itself. George Marcus introduced the concept of multi-sited ethnography in this context, giving a name to an approach to empirical research that had gained significance in the late 1980s and early 1990s.² Even if Marcus is just one scholar among others to have looked

2 The prominence of Marcus’ article is not to be misconstrued as the introduction of multi-sited ethnography itself. Marcus, as a prominent author, published this paper at a time when a growing ethnographic research tradition indebted to the globalisation debate was looking for a label and a legitimisation of their activities.

at the issue of ethnography under conditions of globalisation (cf. Burawoy 2000a; Dorsch and Scholz 2005; Gille and O’Riain 2002; Lauser 2005a; Molyneux 2001; Weißköppel 2005), I would like to take his essay as exemplarily for the discourse, because I believe he elaborates most succinctly several aspects of importance for the argumentation of this paper.

Marcus’ point of departure is the relevance of ethnographic approaches to the analysis and description of the world system (Marcus 1995: 96). He identified two possible solutions, firstly, to bed the results of stationary fieldwork into macro-sociological analyses, as practised since the 1970s within Marxist-influenced world system theory (cf. Burawoy 2000b) or secondly, to develop a multi-sited ethnography that, ideally, has as its object of study the complexity of the world system itself:

“The other, much less common mode of ethnographic research self-consciously embedded in a world system (...) moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space (Marcus 1995: 96).”

Thus, multi-sited ethnography reflects the effort to track the globalisation of the social by anthropological means and to select field sites based on the socio-spatial structure of empirical objects in the world system. This implies shifting from an analytical link between ethnographic data and a theoretically defined macro level to an ethnography of the world system itself that undermines the distinctions between micro/macro and local/global. In so doing, the world system or, alternatively, world society must not be understood as a uniform, homogenous and via economic, cultural or government structures fully integrated whole but as a fragmented, complex and internally diverse system in which social contexts and individuals may be integrated in many ways (cf. Nieswand 2008b). The analysis and description of world society in this sense requires exploratory approaches – such as ethnography – because it is often impossible to predict what is connected with whom or in what way they are connected. This is particularly true of the very complex relationships between social phenomena and localities that became, for instance, the focus of the ethnographic study of transnational migration (Lauser 2005b: 38–42). Anthropological migration studies has shown that classical icons of the local such as families, villages, ethnic groups and “traditional” states are reproduced under non-local and/or multi-local conditions.

As noted above, the call to give up the traditional single-sitedness of fieldwork in favour of a shift to the analysis of global society issues and a methodological multi-sitedness generated significant resistance. Some anthropologists feared the dilution

of the sense of identity inherent in the hard disciplinary standards of classical (Hahn 2004) or neo-classical field research methods (Meyer and Schareika forthcoming). It was also argued that the globalisation and transnationalisation rhetoric was exaggerated and could even hinder the process of understanding the lives of communities on the peripheries, the traditional object of anthropological observation (Friedman 2004, Hahn 2008).

In summary, two key issues can be extracted from the debates on stationary vs. multi-sited ethnography for the question of how the method of ethnography can position itself in the tense relationship between locality and sociality. The first, theoretical, question, is how the relationship between social and spatial orders has to be understood. The second, methodological question, is how the relationship between local and social orders can be investigated empirically by means of a method that stresses local co-presence. Marcus suggested that social phenomena could best be examined ethnographically by breaking the traditional spatially limiting chains of fieldwork. The problem of the transgression of local boundaries seems, however, theoretically more complicated than Marcus's nominally positivist call to "follow the object" of study seems to imply.³ Firstly, the field site, as Marcus himself points out is always a construction that cannot simply be 'followed'; it must first be created (see also Burawoy 2001: 156; Nadai and Maeder 2005). On the other hand, from the perspective and in the practice of the ethnographic fieldworker, the delimiting markers for the determination of orders and borders that could be followed or crossed are all too easily lost.

Fieldwork between locality and sociality

If we assume that the contemporary world is characterised by a complex entanglement of intersecting and interfering social and local orders, the endeavour to trace social phenomena, as multi-sited ethnography suggests, soon becomes overly com-

3 Marcus distinguishes five criteria that were to be followed: 1 follow the people, 2 follow the thing, 3 follow the metaphor, 4 follow the plot, story, or allegory, 4 follow the life or biography and 5 follow the conflict. Despite his explicitly constructivist argument, Marcus' relationship towards the naturalism of fieldwork remains, like most anthropologists', ambivalent. While he describes his "follow-strategies" as a method for the construction of fields, they only makes sense in a world in which phenomena can *in fact* be followed. An ethnographer who only traces his own footsteps is a tragic figure.

plex. Situations have simultaneously local as well as translocal aspects and a slight modification of the context might lead to changes in the whole configuration. As mentioned above, locality in this context is not to be understood as a physical space outside of the social world but as a socially structured habitat that enables physical co-presence and complex sensory perception. Sociality refers in the context of this paper to these aspects of everyday life, in particular communication, exchange and social relationships that might dwell for some time at certain locations but principally transgress spatial limitations.

In any given empirical situation these two principles merge into a complex whole and, of course, the social is also local and the local is also social. However, the point is that both refer to different categories of social analysis. The way they are used here, the local refers in to the nexus of body and space, the social refers to wider structures of communication and exchange. Practically speaking, the aggregate of locality and sociality usually proves too bulky to be researchable at one time in a linear form. Therefore, ethnographers are repeatedly forced to decide anew, which of these analytical threads they see as relevant and want to follow at any given point in time.⁴

The central importance of the synchronous co-presence of human bodies in ethnography – including the body of the field researcher – is not arbitrary but is rooted in a set of specific phenomenological qualities of encounters. It is argued that co-presence structures social interaction and information collection in a specific way. While other forms of communication, such as books, letters, telephone or the internet may relativise the importance of encounters in contemporary societies, they at the same time underline their specificity.

A characteristic of physical interaction is associated with the intensity of sensory perception. The visible nature of the bodies involved and their hard to discipline and almost inevitable communicability (Luhmann 1987 [1984]: 562), their odour (Beer 2000: 8) and the acoustic nuances of direct voice-to-ear communication distinguish encounters as sources of information about persons, objects and situations. Only in the interplay of an often verbally communicated intention and a partly unintended, embodied subtext do interactions become “visualisations of elementary cultural knowledge” (Hirschauer 2008: 982), which add a layer of practical meaning production to the that of the contents of what is explicitly communicated and the dominant

4 E-mail communication and satellite television also have their own form of spatiality, but this is not the focus of the narrative of the territorial expansion and acceleration of communication. For most users this fact is irrelevant and only to a very limited extent even comprehensible.

cultural representations of how “things should normally be”. Direct participation in social practice means that implicit or incorporated knowledge may be gained, independent of that which the participants may or may not (be able) to articulate explicitly (Bloch 1998a). For example, in an ethnography of craft production, much of the knowledge of how something is made (in Western Europe as much as in Western Africa) can be demonstrated in the context of object-related practice but is often difficult to articulate verbally (Bloch 1998b). For the ethnographer, physical presence is often the only means by which to understand counter-intuitive and/or self-evident ordering principles, particularly when these run counter to the dominant verbal representations in the field (Hirschauer 2001).

For instance, co-presence enables ethnographers to gather information on the relation of communicative representations and underlying strategies and intentions. Like ethnographers, business people in sales negotiations or poker players know that physical co-presence allows for the better interpretation of how verbal representations and intentions are connected to one another. A sales manager in a medium-sized transnationally active company, whom I interviewed on the question of what distinguishes personal encounters from other forms of communication (e.g. email, telephone, video-conferencing), stressed that they facilitate “commitment” and enable “a better assessment of the other”.⁵ In his view, it was only possible to negotiate in earnest when both parties were personally present. Such negotiations allowed for non-verbal communication to play a role and allowed for making judgements about what was meant beside what was said (e.g. whether someone was indicating that their will to compromise was at an end or whether they were only looking for developing a good initial position in discussions about prices or services). The direct feedback from the participants that can often enough be read in their body language and facial expressions, makes face-to-face interaction as a medium for negotiating and/or solving complex problems indispensable.

These properties of simultaneous co-presence are the reason why power holders such as politicians or managers spend so much time and resources in creating “secular rituals” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977) the main objective of which is to enable physical co-presence, even if the complex and costly transportation of the bodies involved and the co-ordination of schedules appears anachronistic in today’s age of electronic communications. Clearly, the slow evolution of the human body and the

5 Interview protocol, 16.07.2008, Paderborn.

information collection and processing bound to it counter-weigh the (increasingly) rapid technological innovations in communication media.

Moreover, the physical presence of bodies in localities is a resource for ethnographers because it can always result in the unexpected – in chance encounters, derailments, novel insights, revelations and obscurity – as well as the possibility of accidents and faux pas (cf. Goffman 1972; Goffman 1990 [1959]). These complexities and contingencies that are called forth by co-presence are a source of permanent challenge to social order, attempts at strict differentiation, discipline or regimentation. Locally induced variations can be “tamed” through astute anticipation, made meaningful and/or interactive through improvisation or regulated by means of rules and norms (“Remain seated throughout the journey and do not speak to the driver!”) but they can also give rise to the revision or adaptation of existing orders or stimulate the creation of new orders. In this sense, following interactions “on the spot” provides direct access to the insightful processes of questioning, (re)affirming, normalising and (re)configuring social orders of which actors can often only recall the results of these representations that have gone through the normative cognitive filters of how the world should be. A further morally ambiguous methodological advantage of co-presence is that it becomes increasingly difficult over time to conceal certain semi-public aspects of everyday life if a fieldworker’s physical presence is continuous. People sometime only speak about certain aspects of their lives because they know that the ethnographers have observed them anyway. In this respect it seems to be a strategic omission that many ethnography textbooks emphasise trust and “rapport” as a resource for ethnographic fieldwork but do not emphasise the ethnographic “exploitation” of the visibility of social phenomena. On the other hand, the textbook strategy to leave these aspects out seems plausible in the light that it appears morally preferable to see relationships of trust as the reason for disclosure instead of describing the random or even pitying nature in which bits of information are tossed at the observer.

Local co-presence also permits simple shifts of context. If one is present anyway, it is possible to do other things beyond those that are actually intended. Fieldwork interviews especially show that often important bits of information or what were until that time marginal issues are addressed after the conclusion of the actual interview, when one is sitting together to eat or drink something and passing the time with conversation. The transition from a more goal-oriented discourse directed by the

interviewer to that of an open dialogue creates space and often the need to address questions that were never asked.

One further reason that distinguishes bodily encounters is that a moral edict of minimal respect and appreciation is implied in the co-presence of persons that may be undermined or manipulated but is very difficult to ignore (cf. Honneth 1994). This moral implication of encounters can easily be seen in how talk about others changes when these others join the conversation. Participation in rituals of everyday interaction, such as greeting rituals or small talk constitute and cultivate a minimal form of moral obligation that under normal conditions form a building block for field-work activities. In the medium-term these minimal moral obligations might provide a foundation upon which trust can emerge and mutual interests can be negotiated.

Altogether the (a) intensity of sensory perception, (b) the tacit dimensions of social practice, (c) the opportunity structure for easy context changes and (d) the moral economy of encounters were identified as aspects that distinguish embodied face-to-face interaction as a source of knowledge from other forms. Together they account for why “the locality of ethnography” should not be expanded to an arbitrarily large part of the physical world. There are good reasons why it remains tied to the nexus of the human body and its immediate environment. In this sense the ethnographic locality enfolds itself from a core of “body-based localised communication” (Hirschauer 2008: 982) to bleed gradually into other forms of sociality. Therefore, the locality of ethnographic observation is deeply rooted in the nexus between human bodies and social their environment as measured by the senses, the size and speed of the said bodies. This nevertheless does not mean that being in the same place at the same time is in and of itself the most meaningful form of sociality. Quite the contrary: most societies are characterised by the existence of laws, objects, traditions and formalised procedures by means of which at least central aspects of everyday lives of individuals are withdrawn from the interactive logic of personal encounters (Luhmann 1987 [1984]: 551–592). This all being considered, it is more a question of, as Hirschauer has argued (2008: 978), identifying and assessing the specificity of local and embodied communication and its methodological potential for knowledge generation than in essentialising it as the foundation of sociality, as, for instance, was suggested by the social phenomenologists (Schütz and Luckmann 1979: 93–98). Encounters are only one among several co-existing forms in which societies produce and reproduce themselves.

At the same time it is important to emphasise that the analyses of the globalisation theorists sketched above have not lost their relevance. Under current social conditions, it would be absurd to cling to a localised, small-scale and holistic “container model” of society or culture, a fact that even globalisation discourse sceptics admit (i.e. Hahn 2008). This is not only for the above-mentioned theoretical reason that complex societies rely on other forms of communication than face-to-face interaction but also becomes evident within ethnographic encounters themselves. During my own field study on Ghanaian trans-continental migrants I met only few who did not have a cellphone by means of which they were constantly trans-locally connected. Moreover, an individual’s physical location had lost relevance for the creation of states of belonging, ranging from an individual’s lineage status (Nieswand 2005a) to their status in the Ghanaian nation-state (Nieswand 2008). The transnationalisation of Ghanaian society has affected many aspects of social life and makes the trans-local co-ordination and/or multiple localisation of events absolutely necessary for all actors, for example when building a house, organising transnational fund-raising events (Nieswand forthcoming) or funerals (Mazzucato, Kabki and Smith 2006). To ignore these connections in favour of local interactions would in many cases produce a distorted picture of the said social event.

These examples of the relativisation of space are by no means a recent phenomenon. The overcoming of local boundaries was always a principle of sociality. Audibility, visibility, *smellability* and in particular the mobility of the contents of communication and goods have always led beyond the limits of the body-space nexus-based concept of locality. These tensions and incongruencies between communicative sociality and body-based locality have only been increased in the most recent wave of globalisation, but they are of a general nature. Societies in which geographical boundaries are the same as their social world or societies that are so socially delocalised that they would have no physical locality are merely hypothetical constructions.

Taking into account that the tension between sociality and locality is a characteristic of human societies as such, the debate between multi-sited ethnography and stationary fieldwork loses much of its theoretical footing. The question may then no longer be whether one or the other is principally better equipped for describing the world; instead it can only be about gradual differences and pragmatic strategies based on disparate assessments of that world, namely *the extent* to which social and local orders vary base on specific points of departure and *the extent* this fact demands the mobility of the ethnographic observer over greater distances.

Ethnography, which is more subject to the possibilities and limitations of localised processes than other social science approaches, can do no more than endure the tensions between social and local orders and develop practical strategies of dealing with them; it is not in a position to resolve them methodologically.⁶ Thus, in a study of West African Christian charismatic church parishes in Germany (Nieswand 2005b, 2008), the question arose again and again whether the observation of local interactions between participants should be intensified or whether the trans-local structures of religious discourses, personal networks and institutions should be focused upon. Several aspects affecting both issues could be observed – simultaneously or chronologically – but the number of possible connections to other phenomena – locally or elsewhere – resulted all too quickly in a methodological overload (see also Weißköppel 2005: 63).

The crucial point is not to try to grasp the complexity of a simultaneously local and non-local world as such but to develop strategies of well-reasoned selectivity that make the observation of something as something possible. Selectivity in this sense means to choose which aspects are considered more relevant than others. Therefore, relationships of local and social orders and the proper approach for investigating this relationship can only be elucidated on the basis of an empirical case *and* an intellectual problem. Ultimately, the issue of the meaning of the ethnographer's mobility can only be described when it is clear what is actually being studied under which respect and what conditions must be met before a reasonable interpretation of a phenomenon can be attempted.

The problem is complicated by the fact that a study's methods and methodological framework are by no means identical. The same empirical case can be approached differently within the same framework. Migrants' transnational relationships, for example, could be examined from one place exclusively in the host country without necessarily reproducing the "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) either of sociological integration studies or the "methodological localism" of classical ethnography. Different descriptions and conclusions would probably result, depending on whether transnational migrants were studied exclusively from the host country or the country of origin or if a multi-sited approach was used, but none of

6 Meyer and Schareika's (2008) methodological proposal to see the "diagnostic speech events" documented by participant observers and listeners as elementary particles of the social, implies a presentist and localist world view that always then becomes problematic when aspects of social order become relevant that are produced neither *here* nor *now*.

these descriptions would be a priori more “true” or “false” than the others. The relationship between the local distribution of a phenomenon, measured for example on the basis of local-global distinctions, and the appropriate method for approaching it is also more complex than it at first sight might appear. Ethnomethodological conversation analysis, for example, with its extremely microscopic method has been able to identify very general and widespread conversation structures (i.e. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) while other forms of global similarities and differences, such as those between various forms of charismatic Christianity, have only emerged with the comparison of religious practices in different places and the investigation of connections between different localities and practices.

Ethnography, locality and global society – complexity-theoretical considerations

Altogether three problem areas have been identified in which the relation between locality and sociality matters:

1. The central relationship between the locally delimited features of embodied interaction and the transgressive features of communication.
2. The relationship between scholarly observations and descriptions, on the one hand, and the practices and discourses of the actors that are the subject of these observations and descriptions, on the other hand.
3. The relationship between the methodology, research methods and the geographical mobility of the ethnographer.

The three problem areas are each based on reference points that each in turn base on different configurations of locality and sociality that can at best be brought into congruence to one another but most probably never become identical. Since the patterns of selection and interest also differ in the case of each of these configurations, the need for distinguishing between more relevant aspects, less relevant and non-relevant aspects creates systematic incongruencies between and among actors', institutions' and observers' perspectives. Boiling these complexities down to a (much simplified) practical dilemma, it means that lingering in one place is only possible because links to other places are, at least temporarily, ignored, and travelling between the places leaves opportunities for local intensification unused.

Mastering this balancing act between competing and sometimes mutually exclusive alternatives is a central part of the practical work of ethnographers and their supporters, both in the field and in the world of academia – and it appears as if there is no other solution than to accept the imperfections arising from these excessive demands deriving from the complexity of the social world itself.

Against the background of what was argued in this paper, the debate about multi-sited ethnography appears above all a call for developing context-sensitive methodological approaches to concrete empirical cases. This includes, however, the negotiation of the question of where the limits of what can still be called ethnographic research practice are to be seen. If the periods of local co-presence become too brief, another name for the methodology must be found, if ethnography as a method does not want to jeopardise its own identity (Clifford 1997: 195).

In this sense it must (again) be emphasised that ethnography as a method is probably only in part in a position to free itself from a concept of phenomenological space at the interface of human bodies and their physical environment. Therefore, ethnographers should be careful about following the suggestion of some globalisation theoreticians, who have tried to solve the tension between the locality and the sociality by creating hybrid socio-spatial constructs that go far beyond the scope of face-to-face interaction. For instance, in the context of migration studies, migrants' and their relevant others' translocal involvement was described as “transnational social space” (e.g. Pries 2001) or “trans-state space” (e.g. Faist 2000). Presumably most prominent in the debate on the globalisation of culture was Arjun Appadurai's (1996) suggestion to replace the idea of locally bounded cultures and ethnic groups by the open and fluid concept of “global ethnoscape”. (Appadurai 1996). It is no question that neither “cultures”, “ethnic groups” nor migrant social networks should be described as locally bounded containers, but the hybridisation of locality and sociality expressed in these terminologies becomes problematic in the case of anthropological fieldwork because not transnational or global communicative connectedness but the eye-level nature of face-to-face interaction functions as a benchmark for its locality. Fieldwork is rooted in this locality-based potential for gathering information about cultural contexts and persons. If locality becomes too broadly defined, the specificity of ethnography itself becomes contested. At the same time the narrowly-defined concept of locality that has been suggested here only makes sense in combination with and opposition to a concept of sociality that transgresses these spatial limits. Therefore, this paper argues that it appears more appropriate to imagine and accept the relationship of sociality and locality in anthropological fieldwork as a

constant state of tension that often results in contradictory demands and opportunities instead of trying by all means to reconcile it on a conceptual meta-level.

One final conclusion that may be drawn for an “ethnography in/of the world system”, to use Marcus’ terminology, is perhaps the banal but important fact that the complexity of the world, which was exemplified by the relation of sociality and locality, does not only factually produce a plurality of approaches and perspectives but that it also requires such a methodological and epistemological plurality.⁷ Having accepted the parallelism of different ethnographic strategies for dealing with the tension of sociality and locality, the question is raised of how one type of selective ethnographic knowledge production relates to another, where congruencies and inconsistencies emerge between different types and how this reflexive knowledge can be integrated in the research process. A possible consequence is to make the explication and reflection of the decision-making criteria that determine the relationship between “dwelling” and “travelling” as Clifford used the terms (1997: 190) and their actual or assumed influence on the acquired knowledge a standard of methodological reflection in cases of extended field studies. This would require dealing not only with the question of how data was collected, which already is part of most ethnographic studies, but also how this relates to the links and intensifications which could not or were not followed. This would reflect what this paper argued for: the complexities of locality and sociality cannot be resolved theoretically or generally in the case of ethnography; they can only be managed practically, reflected and made transparent in relation to concrete cases.

Translated by Andreas Hemming

7 Coming from a sociology of sciences perspective, Sandra Mitchell (2008: 19–31) argued that the normative ideal of an epistemological monism needs to be replaced by an “integrative pluralism”, within which the complexities and contingencies of knowledge can be organised, reflected, disciplined and integrated. According to her, the switch to an epistemological pluralism eliminates the need to seek answers to the practical complexity of the world in terms of “one truth” or “one method”. Analogously the co-existence of different ethnographic strategies – stationary, multi-local and forms of combining them – could be organised with the framework of an epistemological and methodological “integrative pluralism”.

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