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Exploring Mobility Through Mobility : Some of the Methodological Challenges of Multi-sited Ethnography in the Study of Migration

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CHAPTER. 13

*Exploring Mobility Through Mobility:
Some of the Methodological Challenges of Multi-sited Ethnography in the Study of Migration*

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Introduction

Multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) or multi-site (Hannerz, 2003) ethnographies are fieldwork practices that take place in multiple contexts which are interconnected by both the phenomenon under examination and the ethnographic framing of researchers themselves. Anthropology began to develop an epistemological and methodological discussion about this research strategy in the wake of the discipline's critique of the community-site-field formula that had long dominated ethnographic research, and the discussion was fuelled by various attempts to explore new avenues for broadening the anthropological gaze and focusing on manifold globalization processes (see differently Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Fabietti, 1999; Benadusi 2006; Matera 2017).

In the effort to fully grasp both the 'glocal' links and multiple experiences of people moving in space in contemporary societies (migration, tourism, international cooperation, and the dislocation of work and production), scholars developed mobile approaches such as multi-sited research in which researchers construct their ethnographic fields by following people, including their families and social ties, their investments, work processes, economic and social remittances and political or development projects (Falzon, 2009; Coleman and Von Hellermann, 2011). Marcus' well-supported literature review on the subject published in 1995 unquestionably represents a milestone in the development of this debate as well as a quite precise endeavour of defining and ordering this literature:

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions and juxtapositions of locations in in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography (Marcus, 1995, p.105)

This construction gradually occurs through the act of "following" people, things, metaphors, stories, biographies and conflicts (Marcus, 1995). At the turn of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, multi-sited ethnography became one of the most explored among the experimental strategies anthropologists adopted to broaden their ethnographic gaze and definitively move beyond the idea of a community or culture as an entity delimited by well-defined boundaries (Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Field research in several sites is often pursued as a way to forge an anthropological practice prepared to explore the multiple "contemporary forms of nomadism" (Callari Galli, 2007) such as tourism, international cooperation or diasporas. The imperative to "follow" may focus on different types of phenomena, such as the dislocation of production processes (Redini, 2008) or a development project (Tarabusi, 2008; Marabello, 2012) as well as on different kinds of people: not only migrants, as I will show below, but also members of a ballet company (Wulff, 2002), tourists (Römhild, 2002) or foreign correspondents (Hannerz, 2004). To a more limited extent, this chapter focuses on some of the opportunities and difficulties involved in multi-sited research within the socio-anthropological study of migration processes (Riccio and Boccagni, 2014). When considering this point it is important to keep in mind that the research practice of studying migrants lives on two levels, the departure and arrival contexts, extensively predates the debate mentioned above; for instance, it can be seen in the Manchester School's contributions to the development of urban anthropology, and in particular the study of that single social field in which the

rural and urban are interwoven (Epstein, 1967; Capello, Cingolani and Vietti, 2014; Riccio, 2014; Gardini and Rimoldi in this volume). Indeed, such a dual-level methodological standpoint is typical of anthropological studies on migration. In addition to being employed in the 1950s and '60s, as mentioned above, this standpoint was revived in the '70s thanks to Watson's volume presenting a series of empirical works that today we would define as multi-local studies (Watson, 1977). As I have tried to highlight on multiple occasions (Riccio, 2007; 2008) and in contrast to authors critical of this research strategy (Hage, 2005; Candea, 2007), I still tend to agree with Watson's categorical statement (1977) that it is not possible to acquire a complete image of migration as a process without investigating people and their families on both sides despite certain methodological misgivings that Marcus (1995) and Hannerz (2003) have previously raised and that I will revisit in the course of this discussion.

Indeed, as Sayad (1999) has taught us, an immigrant is always also an emigrant. I therefore believe that a multi-local exploration of the migratory phenomenon is always important regardless of whether or not the migrant in question might be defined as a good example of “transmigrant” (Grillo 2018).¹ In other words, I believe that even the lives of migrants who are perfectly settled and integrated into their arrival context, only occasionally in contact with their contexts of origin (as is the situation with many refugees, for instance) deserves to be researched in a way that seeks to empirically understand both these contexts as well. It is not surprising, in fact, that several anthropological studies on migration conducted in recent decades have also adopted such perspectives in Italy.

*Multi-sited ethnographies on transnational migrations in Italy*²

This focus on transnational processes has been accompanied by methodological changes as well, and researchers have developed ethnographic studies that connect up several spaces which are important for migrants' life experiences. The adoption of this approach in anthropological studies of migrations in Italy as well seems to have generated more in-depth analyses of the economic, cultural and socio-political transformations that have occurred in the interaction between arrival and origin contexts. More and more research is being carried out by scholars engaged in transnational spaces that brings together the cultures of migration that develop in the contexts of origin with the social practices that migrants enact in the contexts where they settle.

Most of these studies are ethnographic and usually focused on a specific national group of migrants (Salih, 2003; Riccio, 2007; Capello, 2008; Cingolani, 2009; Boccagni, 2009; Vietti, 2010; Notarangelo, 2011; Ferrero, 2018). Of the work on Moroccan migration in Italy carried out in the first decades of Italy's evolution as a true context of immigration (Grillo and Pratt 2002), in addition to Ruba Salih's pioneering research (2003; 2008) one study worth mentioning is *Le prigionie invisibili* by Capello (2008), which focuses on young Moroccans between Turin, on the one hand, and Khourigba and Casablanca, on the other. Another is *Tra il Maghreb e i Caruggi* by Notarangelo (2011), which more specifically addresses Moroccan minors in Genoa. Exploring the flow from Eastern Europe to Turin, two publications that stand out are Cingolani's monograph on the *Romeni d'Italia* (2009) and Vietti's exploring the world of caregivers in *Il paese delle badanti* (2010; 2019) through the lens of migration from Moldova. More recently, Ferrero's ethnographic research on Egyptian femininity between mobility and immobility, *Femminilità egiziane tra mobilità e immobilità* (2018), has offered a valuable example of the careful and conscious construction of a multi-sited ethnographic field, as I will discuss in the concluding remarks.

In spite of their differences, these studies share a number of aspects such as a marked focus on the “cultures of migration” (Degli Uberti, 2014) characterizing the contexts of origin (Riccio and

¹ The term 'transnationalism' refers to a multiplicity of social, economic, political and cultural processes through which migrants maintain social relations linking their societies of origin to those of arrival. For some discussions of the transnational perspective see Vertovec (2009) and within the Italian context, Ceschi and Riccio, 2006; Ambrosini, 2007; Riccio, 2007, 2008; Giuffrè, 2009 and Boccagni, 2009.

² This paragraph references and reviews some thoughts previously included in Giuffrè Riccio, 2012.

Lagomarsino 2010; Bellagamba 2011), an aspect that seems to constitute one of the specific traits of anthropology in studying migration processes (Ricchio, 2014), the examination of gender and intergenerational relations within multiple forms of transnational families (cfr. Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002) and, finally, the ambivalent experiences of exclusion and inclusion in a country of immigration, Italy, that was once a famous anthropological example of Mediterranean hospitality but has now become increasingly inhospitable and less “welcoming” of migrants and their children (Aime, 2015; Fabini et al., 2019). For example, building on the interpretation proposed by Sayad (1999), Capello's monograph (2008) shows that Moroccan migrants live in ‘invisible prisons’, experiencing a sort of dual exclusion comprising both the existential imprisonment caused by being excluded and marginalized in Morocco and transnational migration which leads to class subordination and exclusion on multiple levels (social, territorial, political) in Italy. Over the course of their migration trajectories, however, migrants enact strategies in keeping with complex and ambivalent logics that cannot always be grasped through excessively categorical lenses. What is certain is that this entire experience clashes with the expectations migrants developed based on the culture of migration generated in Morocco; as a result, many young Moroccans experience a marked sense of disillusionment (Capello, 2008; Notarangelo, 2011). These young people try to navigate through daily dilemmas related to their identity and the ongoing pressures arising from the collective representation that frames them as foreigners for life (Ricchio, 2016). The effects of this particularly hostile immigration context in terms of these young people’s transnational aspirations and yearning for change has yet to be explored as a field of research.

From a more specifically methodological point of view, there is no doubt that considering migrants and their families in both the place of origin and contexts of arrival considerably facilitates the understanding of a complex and multidimensional process such as migration. All of the above-mentioned research shares this same arena by virtue of its attempt to capture the experiences of adults (Vietti, 2019; Cingolani, 2009; Ferrero, 2018), young people (Capello, 2008) and adolescents or pre-adolescent migrants (Notarangelo, 2011) with respect to their multiple contexts of reference, highlighting the more or less transnational lives that they stage in their migratory contexts. What such studies convey is a powerful sense of ambivalence: on the one hand, no longer feeling at home either here or there (Sayad, 1999) while on the other hand feeling rooted in both places, albeit in a contradictory way (Grillo, 2018).

These texts share not only a research methodology but also an experimental form of ethnographic writing by displaying a certain attention to narrative strategies and the way texts are constructed (see Matera, 2017). In fact, all of the authors of these monographs chose to present themselves as an integral part of the text, especially by interspersing the text with pages from their fieldwork notebooks and making explicit their role in the ethnographic context and the power relations and relationships they established with their research participants. In particular, by using multivocality in constructing these texts and presenting different narrative registers, these authors are able to express the complexity of the migratory process by revealing the subjective and cultural nature of the migratory choices, and to effectively convey a kaleidoscopic and multi-faceted panorama (Giuffrè and Ricchio, 2012).

Several of these texts are specifically structured around the journey itself, as a node. Almost as if conveying the dislocated character of the research, the journey simultaneously operates as a research methodology (Capello, Cingolani and Vietti 2014), a narrative strategy and an actual object of ethnographic interest. Through this object, the authors are able to unpack the multiple trajectories of mobility (Heil et al, 2017) and the various circuits related to migration (the circulation of objects, money, and people) in all their complexity. The move to focus ethnographically on the journey in its two-fold form of "journey of the researcher/anthropologist" and "journey of the migrants" thus allows the authors to avoid relegating their research sites to some fictitious ethnographic space and instead position them in a real space and contemporary time, on the one hand, and to provide a privileged view onto the circuits activated by migrants, on the other hand. This approach invites us to trace migrants' tracks, to "follow people", as Marcus (1995) suggests, in their movements and to study

mobility through mobility. For example, the return minibus journey in Morocco as well as Romania and Moldova plays an important role as a metaphor for the “routes” (Clifford, 1997) of the globalized world.

Minibus parking lots are reinterpreted as transnational places par excellence, hubs in which the different worlds of migrants and intermediaries intersect and the people who travel continuously from one side to the other (e.g. minibus drivers, but also people who return home more frequently) become the emblem of living between two worlds (Vietti, 2019). For these authors, however, a focus on the journey goes hand in hand with the observation that local contexts continue to play a significant role in mediating transnational practices (Riccio 2011), almost to emphasise the fact that migrants are anchored to concrete and specific places. Indeed, the sense of place holds an important position in the ethnographies cited here. This awareness is especially marked in Cingolani’s monograph (2009), which stands out by virtue of adopting a diachronic perspective characteristic of post-socialist studies that he uses to explore the life stories of migrants and non-migrants with the aim of tracing the networks that have historically connected up specific local contexts of departure and arrival.

Multi-sited ethnography as a “virtuous spiral”

In my own multi-sited field research I have sought to observe and investigate the experiences and representations of Senegalese people in contexts of both origin and immigration. In particular, I have sought to explore how transnational networks influenced migrants' lives in various ways and how they related to the limits and opportunities characterising immigration contexts (Riccio, 2007). In selecting the locations comprising the field of that ethnography, an operation that is far from “arbitrary” (Candea, 2007) as I will have the opportunity to assert in my concluding remarks as well, I followed the people, but also their families and social ties, based on the contacts they established in Italy, Senegal and vice versa. It is important, I believe, to note that the field connecting these locations is not an assortment of separate units but rather a set of contexts bound together by the relationships and practices of social actors. By following these relationships and practices, I connected up the different locations and methodological experiences (participant observation, interviews, archive research and life stories) by continuously comparing their life and professional stories (similarities and differences) while also engaging spatially with the continuous references and comparisons between actions and thoughts that surfaced in the different field research sites. As Marcus (1989, p. 25) suggested as early as the end of the 1980s, activities and identities are

constructed by multiple agents in varying contexts, or places, and ethnography must be strategically conceived to represent this sort of multiplicity, and to specify both intended and unintended consequences in the network of complex connections within a system of places.

As shown in other studies (Riccio 2007; 2008), emigration from Senegal to Italy has become an increasingly varied phenomenon that involves different and changing migratory paths. Multi-sited research allowed me to write an ethnography that highlights this multiplicity of trajectories and forges a multi-vocal representation of the transnational social space and the 'Senegalese community', thereby offering a representation that is more disaggregated than would be possible using excessively categorical typologies.

Not only did my multi-sited trajectory prove effective in documenting the variety of points of view in relation to the migration process, it also facilitated my theoretical discussion of transnationality not only as a system of social networks crossing the political borders of nation-states, but also as a set of relational practices. I was able to illustrate not so much a rigid and self-contained system of networks, but a process of multiple networking. In fact, I found that family and friendship networks in the transnational community intertwined with informal and formal networks created in the multiple local contexts of immigration. Fellow country people abroad tended to overcome their ethnic or religious differences and some of them not only affirmed community ties but also tried to build other networks in the arrival context (see Gardini and Rimoldi on the situational approach to identification and

affiliation processes in this volume). Moreover, by intermittently returning to their homelands, migrants expand their networks in various directions, for instance to enlarge the potential market for import-export activities (Riccio, 2007).

In other words, carrying out research in a "translocal" space (Grillo and Riccio, 2004) allowed me to clearly make explicit the processual and constructive nature of both ethnography (Coleman and Collins, 2006) and the lives of migrant and non-migrant informants themselves (Riccio, 2019). Paul Stoller (2002) points out that his previous work in Niger and good grasp of Songhai made it easier for him to access West African migrants living in New York. From this methodological point of view, multi-sited ethnography is constructed as a "virtuous spiral" (Riccio, 2011; Ferrero, 2018) with each subsequent stage of the research process benefitting from the previous stage. For example, I returned from my first stay in Senegal deeply enriched by the experience and my direct knowledge of the contexts of origin contributed greatly to facilitating my access to other interlocutors and strengthening my relationships with those I had already met. Moreover, even the task of selecting sites in which to carry out part of my fieldwork was the product of a gradual process of accumulating experiences and contacts as new insights developed and new relationships were established. This element appears to characterize the multi-local study of other forms of mobility as well; for example, in recalling his research on foreign correspondents, Hannerz (2012, p. 112) writes that:

Meeting with foreign correspondents, I have sensed that it is often appreciated when it turns out that I have also talked to friends and colleagues of theirs in some other part of the world (...). As I have tried to include informants from the same news organization in different postings, to develop my understanding of its operations as a kind of triangulation, such connections can be discovered fairly often and easily.

On the other hand, these considerations prevent us from underestimating the psychological challenges underlying multi-sited research: when following biographies as well as practices and networks, a researcher never stops negotiating access to new fields (Gallo, 2019; 2011). This kind of fieldwork may prove to be very physically tiring as well. Scholars do not stress enough the fact that multi-sited ethnographic research demands human skills such as friendliness and patience as well as the ability to adapt to frequent relocation. When scholars present the choice of multi-sited ethnography as stemming from practical and instrumental reasons, they seem to overlook these other features (Hage, 2005).

At the same time, researchers should curb their ambitions of achieving a holistic overview. It is quite difficult to develop an overall ethnographic grasp of the various spheres of life. Through multi-sited research, researchers tend to focus on certain aspect (in my case, transnational families, work, and specifically trade, co-development projects, the deterritorialization of religion, the representation of migrants etc.) rather than others. As Hannerz rightly points out:

most multi-site studies really also have built-in assumptions about segmented lives, where some aspect (work, ethnicity or something else) is most central to the line of inquiry, and other aspects are less so. The ethnographer may be interested in the embeddedness of a particular line of belief or activity in a wider set of circumstances, but this hardly amounts to some holistic ambition (Hannerz, 2003, p. 209).

*Places and relationships, relationships and places*³

While multi-sited fieldwork has helped me to understand that the lives of certain people span different contexts and thus comprehend the nodal points in the diffuse networks of global and local relations comprising the everyday context of so many people today, we should bear in mind that "such nodal points are grounded in cultural constructions associated with particular localities" (Hastrup and Olwig, 1997, p. 12). In fact, an aspect that proved fundamental in the analysis of not only the specific

³ Some of the following considerations were presented recently (13 February 2020) at the conference *International migration data: Advances and challenges*, "Paolo Fortunati" Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Bologna; I would like to thank the organizers and participants who provided useful insights.

transnational community I studied but also several of the communities I discussed in the first part of the chapter (Boccagni, 2009; Cingolani, 2009) is that the different local sites of departure and arrival (concrete, not only imagined) are important in shaping migrants' experiences. In relation to this point, Karen Fog Olwig (1997) argues that migrants frequently develop an attachment to specific places which, although not their places of residence, play a decisive role in providing a sense of identity in their lives within the spaces generated by networks of global relationships. For many Senegalese, as for the Nevisians that Olwig researched, the fact that they have a territorially defined place towards which to aspire both organizationally and spiritually represents an important organizational solution for them. In other words, different local contexts of origin as much of immigration influence the frequency, depth and breadth of transnational links.

The risk of complex multi-sited ethnography, as already highlighted by Hannerz (2003) and Marcus (1995), is that it might undermine the kind of in-depth and intense analysis of a specific locality ensured by localized, traditional fieldwork (Falzon, 2009). Although in the past this type of research strategy relied on a vision of culture as a natural whole with immutable boundaries (Fabietti 1999; Matera, 2017) and sometimes risked becoming "fetishized" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Ferguson, 2011; Matera, 2013), it also provided detailed and in-depth knowledge of social relations and historical context. The point I would like to make is that "the effort to present both the place and the system in multiple perspectives" (Marcus 1989, p. 19) is a difficult and complex task.

The methodological challenge at hand is to broaden the ethnographic gaze in order to grasp transnational connections without losing sight of the local context, and remembering that this context is itself not a given but rather the changing and contested product of performance (Coleman and Collins, 2006), practices, narratives and power relations which become stratified over time. In fact, it is migrants and non-migrants themselves (Ricchio, 2019) who have highlighted the localized form of many transnational practices through their conversations and daily activities. Although it would be a mistake to downplay the effects of the transnational on the local, my research on Senegalese migrants revealed how crucial it is to contextualize transnational flows and led to revitalizing the local context in the research process as a whole. Although culture is borderless and constantly changing, it is still useful to recognize the heuristic value of constructs that help us understand the different ways in which the spheres of human life are connected (Ricchio, 2014). It is worth retaining at least this specific characteristic of the aspiration to a holistic view, and combining it with the awareness that historical contexts survive in that they are involved in processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation (Appadurai, 1996).

I therefore support a rather ambitious project, namely that of considering the multiplicity of trajectories, the interconnections among places, without neglecting the relevance of local context and history. Co-development projects provide a methodological opportunity for moving in this direction. In some circumstances, the exploitation of transnational potentialities allows migrants to play an unprecedented role as "development actors" who rebuild their country of origin socially, if not economically. The process linking arrival and origin contexts may take on a "translocal" profile (Grillo and Ricchio, 2004; Boccagni, 2009) by involving migrants in micro-projects of cooperation designed in Europe to be implemented in their countries of origin. These projects engage local authorities, associations, and NGOs in both contexts and constitute an interesting research field because they encourage researchers to focus on both migrants' experiences and the organizations and institutions based in the various local contexts that come together in transnational migration. The study of cooperation decentralised through migration may provide a methodological solution for focusing our attention on interactions between host-society institutions and associations, and transnational practices and economic and socio-cultural transformations in contexts of origin (Marabello, 2012). It may additionally offer a way to anchor multi-sited research to local contexts and their institutions, working side by side with informants and negotiating the meanings attributed to both the local and the transnational (Ricchio, 2011).

One of the main aims of multilocal research is to demonstrate the relevance of relationships which are continuous even if they are not contiguous (Falzon, 2009). Whatever the unit of analysis – material

objects, interpersonal links, emotions or other immaterial resources – a multi-sited approach revolves around forms of at-a-distance relational interdependence among the chosen sub-fields and the chances of studying these ethnographically (Boccagni, 2016; Riccio and Boccagni, 2014). If it is true, as Hannerz also reminds us (2012), that social anthropology focuses primarily on social relations and only indirectly on places, it is precisely by making explicit the way we actually construct a multi-sited field, with a certain “theoretical candour” (Fabietti, 1999), that we can successfully also convey the sense of *places* for the people we work with when conducting ethnography. It was this point that concerned me when reading and discussing an otherwise brilliant and well-fashioned doctoral dissertation on Senegalese migration to Spain (Hernandez-Carretero, 2016): in this dissertation, the contexts were entirely anonymous (see Piasere, 2020) and it was thus unclear how the multi-sited field had been constructed by weaving and following social networks; furthermore, it was not even clear if the people the researcher had worked with in the immigration context had any kind of relationship with the people she had met in Senegal.

Perhaps it is not necessary to ensure a “simultaneously matched” sample such as the one Mazzucato (2010) presented in her study on Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands that was conducted in different places with members of the same families or social networks. However, it does seem vital that we hold a problematizing discussion about how transnational networks were actually followed, and which ones, in that performance that is the act of constructing the field. If only because it is not a matter of investigating a multiplicity of sites by chance, but of exploring and showing how they interconnect – that is, uncovering the network of trans-local relations. On the contrary, in the case of Ferrero's research (2018), the author herself defines the process of selecting people and contexts as a “funnel-matched sample”.

Moving through space led to a decrease in the number of informants. In Turin I met people in different places in various ways, while in Egypt my presence was mediated by families, thus limiting my ability to meet people who did not belong to the social networks of those who hosted me. For this reason ... my decision to stay with different families during the months of my field-research addressed the need to extend my networks, which at any rate remained narrower than the ones I had in Turin. (Ferrero, 2018, p.49)

Here, the interconnection among sites is ensured and differences in the scale of the sample from one context to the next is openly addressed if not actually problematized. This allows readers to envisage for themselves an actual translocal social space in which the experiences of the Egyptian women Ferrero studied in both contexts unfolded.

Conclusion

Ferrero's discussion therefore offers an example of good practice in scientific communication because, as Marcus himself (1995; 2011) suggests in the definition quoted at the beginning of this chapter, researchers must have an explicit and openly-stated logic for connecting sites in order to define the object and field of ethnographic research. Moreover, it is interesting to note, in agreement with Harney (2014) among others, that the multi-sited character of migration ethnography may be appreciated not only in terms of space, but also from a temporal perspective. Delving into a familiar theme of anthropological debate (Fabietti, 1999; Matera, 2017), Harney refers to the different “temporalities” that are manifest in the life experience of an ethnographer and his or her interlocutors, as well as to the hiatus that typically occurs between the period of field observation and the moment the ethnography is published. However, he also references another aspect that I believe to be central to the discussion outlined in this chapter, namely the idea of ethnography that is not only multi-sited but also multi-temporal, thus addressing the need to adopt a longitudinal perspective and periodically revisit the field as the years pass and take advantage of the spiral effect mentioned above (Riccio, 2007; Ferrero, 2018). Due in part to the complexities I have identified above, it is precisely multi-sited ethnography that calls on us to avoid shrugging off the need for methodological accountability with a careless ‘I do things, I see people’.

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