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Multi-Sited Ethnography

Other Entries

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The notion of multi-sited ethnography (MSE) has mostly been used, after George Marcus (1995), as a shorthand for all ways of doing ethnographic fieldwork in more than one site. While the underlying claim for a radical departure from classical research objects and fields has been problematized by other anthropologists (e.g., Ferguson, 2011), MSE has soon taken an academic life of its own. Importantly, Marcus's seminal formulation placed greater emphasis on the processual connections between sites than the plurality of them. Yet, the predominant connotation of the term since has been for the coexistence of more (physical) sites within the same research design. More intriguingly, however, MSE can also be appreciated as an original approach to ethnography—one marked by the attempt to reconstruct the system of relations and translocal interdependencies that coproduce any particular social setting or phenomenon (Marcus, 2011).

Whether as a distinctive perspective or in a simply "additional" sense, MSE has been pervasively evoked, applied, and to a lesser extent theorized over the last two decades. This warrants a conceptual overview, first, of the theoretical aims of MSE, its typical "targets," and the views of field and site that inform it; second, of the main objections and rejoinders it has generated over time; and last, of its prospects for further development be, with particular regard to collective, collaborative, and comparative research.

A Theoretical Background: "Following" What, How, and Why

Multi-sited ethnography has been much more in use as an evocative label than as a substantive topic upon which to reflect. There is a remarkable gap in the literature between countless pleas for MSE as a backdrop for qualitative research and relatively isolated attempts to elaborate on its meanings, reach, and implications (Coleman & Hellerman, 2011; Falzon, 2009; Hage, 2005). As a way of doing fieldwork, in Marcus's (1995) manifesto, MSE investigates globalization-related social issues and cultural formations by following people, connections, associations, objects, and relationships across sites that are mutually interrelated, that is, "substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous" (Falzon, 2007, p. 2). In principle, any "mobile and multiply situated" object of study (Marcus, 1995, p. 102) falls in the remit of MSE. In a famous quote from the same anthropologist,

> Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations 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)

Along these lines, ethnographers are invited to focus on all kinds of spatially dispersed or mobile "fields," as well as on the interactions, exchanges, or circulation of resources between them. International migration, commodity chains, tourism, mass media, and art are just some of the most obvious among these research fields. Potentially, at least, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media can also be

approached through MSE. However, not all of those who conduct MSE are equally open and sensitive to the prospects of online or digital ethnography. In a similar way, MSE as a field of practice does not simply overlap with "mobile methods" (Buscher et al., 2010), despite some significant commonalities.

Ethnography by way of "following" may take place in a literal sense, whenever ethnographers and/or research subjects, practices, objects, and sites are mobile themselves. However, it can also amount to theory-driven exploration of meaningful connections between sites, through conceptual and even imaginative work. Besides following the literal or metaphorical circulation of their research objects, researchers can originally conduct, in a multi-sited optic, "strategically situated (single-site) ethnographies" (Marcus, 1995, p. 110). Even a single place—for instance, a house—can be appreciated as a hub of much broader networks, or as an embodiment, or at least an elicitor, of social practices and memories that connect it with different contexts in time and space.

In a basic sense, MSE involves "only" doing fieldwork, primarily participant observation, in a number of spatially separated sites. This additional view has successfully emerged as an explicit articulation of "what many ethnographers were already doing" (Lapegna, 2009, p. 17), particularly in anthropology (Candea, 2009). Even in such a descriptive optic, defining and delimiting a site may not be straightforward. While the material and infrastructural bases of any ethnographic research are by no means incidental, the boundaries and reach of a field are not necessarily marked in tangible and visible ways, nor set in advance. To a variable extent, they stem out of the ongoing negotiation between ethnographers and informants, in the light of their mutual aims, interests, and expectations. More radically, as Matei Candea (2007) maintains, the boundaries of any field have to do with the theoretical purpose and aim of ethnography, whatever the location. In fact, MSE can also be conceived and enacted with a more ambitious and original purpose than an additional one.

In a constructive optic, the site is understood less as a container of social relationships than as an outcome of social processes of "space production" that are as or more important for analytic purposes (Falzon, 2009). Through their fieldwork, ethnographers are invited to address the ways in which distinctive social settings, sharing some substantive research commonality, are coproduced and interdependent with each other. The "field" of MSE is deeply relational, no less than multi-sited. It follows that MSE contributes to the shift beyond the traditional commonsense view of "societies" and "cultures" as bounded and autonomous entities—what Marcus (2011) calls, in a statement that has not gone without criticisms, the "still regnant Malinowskian complex" in anthropology. Importantly, the forms of space coproduction traced by ethnographers are paralleled with, and not fully distinguishable from, the critical "work of comparative translation and tracing among sites" (Marcus, 1995, p. 111) in which ethnographers themselves are engaged. In such a perspective, MSE may contribute to unpack the systemic (or even global) reach of a particular research object into microcomponents, amenable to be observed and traced in their mutual interactions and coproduction across multiple local scales (hence, eventually, compared).

As Mark-Anthony Falzon (2009) suggests, the success story of MSE reflects an increasing awareness of the processes of social construction of space but also a need to move beyond the "perceived inadequacy" of single and local spaces as settings and units of analysis. Whenever social and cultural phenomena are not

reducible to one-site observation, due to their emergence in multiple locations or to their inherent mobility, MSE has come to the fore as an almost self-evident option. At the same time, adds Falzon, the diffusion of MSE has to do with more pragmatic reasons. These include coping with the increasingly scant time for in-depth ethnography in today's academic life and over the career of most academics. Whatever its drivers, the discursive and substantive diffusion of MSE has raised a number of critical debates, to be summarized in the next section.

Objections, Rejoinders, and Beyond

The most recurring objection to MSE, method wise, has to do with the viability of doing "good" participant observation in more sites. This multiplies the complexities that are already associated with each site in several respects: building trust with informants, negotiating access to the field, developing the necessary skills and contextual competences, making sense of the "localized and everyday experienced hierarchies" in the target population (Gallo, 2009, p. 97), and so forth. In light of this, it is no wonder that doing MSE may result in a trade-off between depth and breadth.

This critical point is oftentimes articulated along the lines of Ghassan Hage (2005). Based on his study of transnational family life in the global Lebanese diaspora, Hage (2005) "simply find[s] the idea not practically feasible" (p. 465) in the light of the relational and emotional complexity of any sustained ethnographic engagement. As interpersonal relationships become "thicker and stickier" and the field itself exerts its "gravitational forces" (p. 465), there is a limit to the number and variety of sites with which an ethnographer can reasonably engage. This is particularly the case in large-scale studies conducted by single ethnographers, as long as their ambition is to reach the same depth in each research site.

In practice, a pragmatic answer to this objection is that any ethnographic endeavor results in variable levels of involvement with different sites and informants anyway. The very "choice" of informants and locations may be context-driven and even "arbitrary" in the first place (Candea, 2007). Moreover, if the members of the population to be studied have themselves a partial and fragmented experience of each site—due to mobility, migration, or displacement—there is no reason why an ethnographer should not share the same experience. In this sense, "understanding the shallow may itself be a form of depth" (Falzon, 2009, p. 9). The issue is rather how embracing more sites, based on their asserted interdependence, makes for better light on the social or cultural phenomenon under study. This has more to do with the quality of fieldwork engagement, and the analytic purchase of the findings, than with the research location, as such.

Another frequent criticism points to a risk of unjustified holism, or the elusive—ultimately unjustified—temptation of inferring the "whole" of social reality out of necessarily limited and partial sites. This way of essentializing social reality, besides being problematic in itself, would go against ethnography's definitional commitment to the everyday, the micro, and the intimate. In practice, however, multi-sited ethnographers focus on any "cultural formation produced in several different locales" (Marcus, 1995, p. 99) with a rather constructivist tone. They gain "ethnographic depth" out of the "thick description of a network

rather than its individual nodes" (Falzon, 2009, p. 16). At the same time, they tend to be cautious in articulating all-too-general arguments or in portraying a global picture—as long as there is one—out of their case studies. In this sense, MSE advances a more pragmatic, perhaps less ambitious stance than the so-called global ethnography. It is the latter that emphasizes the political economy of production of any "site" and the need for many scales of analysis at the same time, while also problematizing a neat division of the world between "local" and "global" (Gille & O Riain, 2002; Lapegna, 2009).

Yet another contentious point has to do with the need to investigate not just a plurality of sites but also the ways and means through which they are interconnected—a matter of in-betweenness, rather than only of multi-sitedness. Ethnographers are expected to unpack, through protracted personal engagement—not just presume theoretically—the reach, intensity, and persistence of translocal connections; in a nutshell, ethnographers reveal what makes them a distinctive field, however multi-sited. While multi-sited imaginaries may be widespread and persistent, the real circulation of resources between sites, and the mutual influence between people, groups, or institutions within them, is often more fragmented and selective. Migrants' transnational family life provides many cases in point (Boccagni, 2016; Hage, 2005). In this sense, problematizing rigid and essentialist notions of place should not lead one to neglect the major influence of physical or geopolitical sites, borders, and distances on all sorts of cross-border connections. Particularly in the case of more vulnerable migrants, specific locations matter. It follows that MSE should be sensitive to their stratifying, even immobilizing social effects (Gallo, 2009; Riccio, 2011).

Of course, an ethnographer can be interested in connections of a metaphorical kind, more than—or alternatively to—connections mediated by substantive and distinctive sets of practices. Whether the analytical focus should be on any sort of (reported) perception and imaginaries flowing between sites, or rather on social interactions, is a question that boils down to one's theoretical view of ethnography, along the realist-constructivist continuum. This also connects with the function of translation and communication between different sites, as necessary to appreciate their mutual interaction (Marcus, 1995).

Overall, it is somewhat common that MSE is criticized on questions that are by no means specific to it, such as the rationale for case selection or the need for strong theoretical bases upon which to build a case. Still other objections have to do with the typically higher constraints and costs of doing MSE, rather than with its substantive merit. A reasonable case can then be made—as often occurs in practice—for integrated and multimethod research options (see Fitzgerald, 2006 and several contributions in Falzon, 2009). Methodological integration is reasonable and desirable in many respects, although it is not exempt from its own pitfalls. For this entry, however, it is more important to explore the space for further improvement and elaboration within a proper ethnographic framework.

Making the Most Out of the Multi-Sited: Collective, Collaborative, Comparative

Appealing to MSE, as the previous sections show, is relatively easy. Much of the recent qualitative research in migration studies, for instance, could make a claim for being multi-sited at some level. Far less easy is to conduct MSE in a "constructive" sense and contribute to theory-building out of it. This obviously has to do with the merit of each ethnography (and ethnographer) but also with broader methodological developments. Three methodological options seem particularly important, despite their potential drawbacks, if the epistemological potential of MSE is to be expanded further: collective fieldwork, collaborative efforts, and comparative studies.

The first option involves the development of *collective*, rather than single-authored, fieldwork. Although the latter is likely to remain the predominant way of doing ethnography, there are obvious limitations to what a person can achieve alone. Stretching the spatial and relational scope of fieldwork will make them further visible. A collective strategy to ethnography, instead, could be credible, viable, and fruitful in several respects (Fitzgerald, 2006), all the more so when it is explicitly required, such as in large-scale competitively funded projects.

This is certainly easier said than done. Ethnographic fieldwork holds a remarkable degree of unpredictability and dependency on the personal circumstances of those who engage in it. All fieldwork relations tend to take a life of their own. This makes them site dependent, no less than person dependent. There is little obvious, as a result, in how interpersonal relationships evolve in and across sites even for one and the same ethnographer, let alone two or more of them. And even more than single-site ethnography, MSE is unlikely to result in a linear and well-predictable stepwise process. Rather, it evolves from one site to the next, in light of the interactions and mutual feedbacks between sites (and the people being there). In all of these respects, a collective work arrangement makes MSE as fascinating as irremediably complex.

In practice, a collective ethnographic project may well be informed by one shared theoretical framework, one and the same target, and common methodological guidelines. Underlying these aspects is often a requirement for strong *collaboration* between ethnographers. Nevertheless, what each of them will find out bears the mark of their own ethnographic personality and positionality, and of the specific relationships with informants, with all of the underlying meanings and expectations. Collaboration between ethnographers, on the same site or between different ones, is critically shaped by some factors that call for more reflexive discussion: the moral cogency of trust with informants, a personal commitment to their privacy, a desire to prevent their overvisibility (the more vulnerable or liminal their condition), fears of data misuse or misappropriation, and so forth. Unless these aspects are properly managed, ethnographic collaboration may turn into a formulaic exercise, rather than a mutually empowering process. All this being said, reflexivity itself can be enhanced by team research, exactly because it fosters the translation of field experience into understandable data and experiences.

In a similar vein, collaboration with field members as "paraethnographers," as advanced by Marcus (2011) among others, is as desirable as ridden with relational, practical, and ethical intricacies. Once again, none of them is specific to MSE. Their ongoing negotiation, mediation, and translation across "sites," however, make for an extra layer of complexity, in a "qualitative" sense—not just as the mechanic result of the incremental addition of any new site. This is not to deny the promise of a collective and collaborative approach to MSE. It illustrates, however, how and why this makes MSE still more complex and resource consuming.

The same holds for the last question to be addressed here: the *comparative* value of MSE. This is yet another label that sits uneasily with a conventional understanding of ethnography (although a comparative orientation has traditionally been a marker of anthropology). The context and person dependency of in-depth fieldwork militate against thick comparison and may make it barely relevant or attractive. However, for MSE, comparison is more than an external interference or an (unwelcome) import from different methodological backgrounds, which can be easily discarded as "non belonging" here. Instead, the simple fact of getting engaged with more sites, whatever the way of understanding and experiencing them, raises an issue of comparison between them (and between alternative methodological options for studying them). If this is the case, multi-sited ethnographers may have to take a position somewhere on an ideal continuum between two opposite stances: a conservative one, which boils down to a question of sufficient comparability ("I chose these 'sites' because they were similar enough, good instances, etc."), or a more open and innovative one, which investigates how (or even why) different locations, steps in a process, rings in a chain, and so on fare against each other and mutually interact in coproducing a given research object.

Moving the multi-sited from an additional collection of (supposedly neutral) backdrops *for* the same performance, to an ongoing process in which each backdrop is an actor *of* the performance—and worth comparing with the others—is crucial, overall, for a dual achievement: to give more intellectual life to MSE, and to save it from the empty shell condition—cherished as a label, substantially irrelevant as a concept—of so many recent buzzwords in social sciences.

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