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De-naturalizing the national in research methodologies: key concepts of transnational studies in migration

Anna Amelina and Thomas Faist

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Abstract

Building on the transnational approach to migration, this introduction outlines some elements of the programme of an emergent methodological transnationalism. This effort aims to de-naturalize the concept of the national within migration studies. First, the analysis identifies methodological challenges of migration studies, such as contextualization, the ethnic lens and the essentializing view on ethnicity. Second, it indicates the relevant conceptual elements which deal with these methodological challenges, such as the critique of methodological nationalism, cosmopolitanism and the relational concept of space. Third, it addresses the relevant methods, such as multi-sited ethnography, the mobile methods approach, as well as researchers' positionality and strategies of de-ethnicization, all of which correspond to the new epistemology of migration studies. Finally, it highlights the common characteristics of the contributions to this special issue, which go beyond the normative view of cross-border migration.

Keywords: transnational migration; cosmopolitanism; relational space; multi-sited ethnography; mobile methods; self-reflexivity; strategies of de-ethnicization.

This special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* addresses the methodological challenges of empirical studies on cross-border migration. The set of concepts herein suggests paying more attention to the forms and mechanisms of unfinished and multi-directional migration flows. However, it does not define multi-directional geographic mobility as significant by itself, but as relevant in respect to the formation of cross-border social entities such as transnational professional networks, transnational kinship groups, transnational

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organizations and diasporas. Consequently, the transnational approach rejects the nation-state as the sole starting point of empirical analysis (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Faist 2000; Portes 2000; Vertovec 2007; Pries 2008). Criticizing so-called methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003; Beck and Grande 2010), the transnational approach calls for a de-naturalization of categories such 'nation' and 'space'. Yet, although criticisms of methodological nationalism have been increasingly accepted within migration studies, we still lack a systematic reflection on how to build an empirical research programme that goes beyond. Therefore, this special issue elaborates a methodological programme that aims to enable the study of transnational mobilities and transnational formations by avoiding a nation-state-centred methodology. This new research methodology, which we call methodological transnationalism, encompasses various research methods that correspond to current epistemological approaches to the relationship between space, the social and mobility (Hannerz 1996; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Urry 2007).

One of the basic aspects of such an approach is to consider the simultaneity of the transnational practices of individuals, organizations and institutions taking place in multiple localities. This position focuses on transactions between 'those who have migrated and those who have stayed in place' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, p. 1012). An additional tenet is to make use of so-called mobile methods by studying transnational, interpersonal and organizational networks (Büscher, Urry and Witchger 2010). Furthermore, researchers into transnational migration pay attention to multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and global ethnography (Burawoy 2000 *et al.*), as well as to scale (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009) and cosmopolitan approaches (Tsing 2005; Beck and Sznaider 2006).

However, no attempts have been made to provide systematic insights into strategies for research on cross-border migration. Consequently, the major body of literature on methods of migration research still refers to the nation-state as the most important framework for empirical research on international migration (Bonifazi *et al.* 2008; Raymer and Willekens 2008). Innovative methods relevant for migration studies have neither been systematically consolidated nor have they been reviewed within an integrated frame.

This special issue aims to close this gap. Collecting various elements of methodological transnationalism, it aims to stimulate research procedures which produce new and unexpected data and thus contribute to theorizing cross-border relations in migration research. Additionally, the application of new research strategies also points towards possible limits of a transnational epistemology, which sometimes falls into the trap of naïve normativity by portraying transnational phenomena in an excessively positive light.

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The six articles collected in this issue address methodological tools rooted in an epistemology which seeks to de-naturalize the national. The contributions emerge from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives including sociology, social anthropology, social geography and gender studies. Jointly they provide detailed insights into the relationship between the new epistemology of migration and the relevant methodological innovations. Building on a multi-sited ethnography approach (Coleman and von Hellermann 2009; Falzon 2009), the authors explore ways in which multi-sited methods can be used, employing, for example, in the context of quantitative and qualitative studies, online and offline research, as well as mobile and stationary research on transnational migration. Moreover, the articles discuss a multi-sited methodology which is characterized by a self-reflexive turn (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Such an approach revises researchers' positionality as well as the application of ethnic categories within migration studies. Hence, the contributions explore the facets of multi-sited methodology by presenting the results from ongoing empirical studies.

To meet the goals of the special issue we first highlight the relevance of methodological problems in contemporary migration studies. Second, we provide an overview of methodologies and methods that already have been used in empirical research on transnational migration, pinpointing their benefits and limitations. Third, we sketch the specific strengths of the collected issue and introduce the particular contributions.

The call for new research strategies: which problems do new methodological strategies address?

Without being exhaustive, this special issue identifies three methodological problems of contemporary migration studies in general and of transnational research in particular. First, migration researchers too often presume the nation-state as the central relevant context for empirical studies on international migration. Second, some migration scholars select ethnicity as the dominant category relevant for research organization. Third, a great many of empirical studies are characterized by concepts naturalizing ethnic belonging.

First, the problem of contextualization is rooted in the nation-state-centred epistemology of migration studies, which presupposes the natural congruence of society, the institutional arrangements of the nation-state and the related territorial framework (Martins 1974; Smith 1979); in other words, of the people, state authority and territory (Faist 2004, pp. 331–2). This naturalizing position assumes that nation-state institutions are the main social context within which migration occurs and for which migration is relevant. Consequently, it

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limits the organization of empirical research to the territorial 'container' of a nation-state, usually an immigration one. We find this 'container' thinking not only in older assimilation theories (Gordon 1964), but also in theories of multiculturalism (Taylor 1992; Kymlicka 1995).

In sum, this double gap – the nation-state as the main social context of migration as well as the territorial framework of empirical migration studies – determines strategies of research design as well as methods of data collection and analysis (see, for example, Bonifazi *et al.* 2008; Raymer and Willekens 2008). Of course, for specific purposes, a focus on the nexus between state authority and territory is helpful, for example, in understanding immigration control. Over the past decades many immigration states have stepped up the efficiency of migration control and thus control over migrants (Faist and Ette 2007). Yet emphasis only on this congruence is not adequate if researchers want to focus on the study of cross-border migration.

Second, migration scholars too often use an ethnic and national lens to conceptualize migration and settlement processes (Wimmer 2007). We find such assumptions in non-essentialist theories of assimilation as well as in incorporation approaches (Portes and Zhou 1993; Bean and Stevens 2003; Morawska 2004). To be more precise, the starting point of this type of research is not geographic mobility, social networks or decision-making as such, but the particular 'ethnic' or 'national' group. Consequently, the sampling schemes of national surveys re-inscribe ethnic and national categories into the procedures of data collection. In a similar way, qualitative studies select interview partners according to their 'ethnicity' or 'national belonging'. This is why empirical studies usually consider the social interaction between migrants and non-migrants only insofar as they belong to the same ethnic or national 'group'. In short, methods of data analysis or data interpretation are characterized by an ethnic lens because ethnic and national categories are used as the main variables to explore research outcomes.

Third, the use of an ethnic lens within the organization of empirical research is sometimes accompanied by naturalizing views on ethnicity (Brubaker 2002). By defining 'ethnicity' and 'nation' as naturally given entities resulting from common cultural scripts, researchers consider neither the constructionist quality of 'group formation' nor the processes by which ethnic and national categories are socially developed, distributed and applied. This is why migration scholars who study the mobile trajectories of particular 'ethnic' groups should acknowledge the complexity of self- and outside ethnicization and the whole problematic of ethnic belonging generally.

In which way are these methodological deficits addressed by transnational studies (Khagram and Levitt 2008)? First, to deal with

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the problem of contextualization, transnational scholars propose to identify the nation-state as one of many possible social frameworks in which to situate empirical studies. For alternative social contexts to the nation-state, transnational social spaces (Faist 2000), postcolonial contexts (Spivak 1988; Dhawan 2007) or the global cosmopolitan arena (Beck and Grande 2010) are available conceptual tools.

Moreover, transnational scholars are initiating a reflection on spatial concepts which are often implicitly applied during empirical analyses. To be more precise, methodologically nationalist scholars assume the interpenetration of the social context, namely the institutional nation-state setting, with the container of the nation-state territory. In contrast, transnational researchers assign to the respective social context a relationally organized spatial framework. For example, in his article Besim Zirh analyses the religious activities of Alevis by studying them in dispersed urban localities, such as London, Berlin and Drammen.

Second, addressing the problem of the ethnic lens, transnational scholars insist on avoiding the non-reflexive use of ethnic categories when defining the unit of analysis (Glick Schiller, Çağlar and Guldbrandsen 2006; Telles and Ortiz 2008). Categories such as 'migrant' or 'non-migrant', 'Mexican' or 'American', 'labour migrant' or 'refugee' are too often used as central criteria in research designs with no regard to either the ways in which these categories are formed by scientific and non-scientific discourses or the conditions under which they are relevant for the social practices of mobile and non-mobile people. This is why researchers benefit from strategies reflecting upon the dichotomization and ethnic labelling of research designs, methods of data collection and data interpretation. This careful reflection prevents an unintended conjunction among conceptual tools such as ethnicity, nation and culture. Several contributions in this issue (David Fitzgerald, Bruno Meeus, Mieke Schrooten and Kyoko Shinozaki) include procedures of self-reflection in the design of the empirical study.

Third, in designing their empirical field transnational scholars are increasingly addressing the problem of the naturalizing view of ethnicity by including self-reflection on the researcher's positionality (Bockert *et al*. 2006; Köttig *et al*. 2009). For instance, in her contribution Mieke Schrooten pinpoints the relevance of ethical issues in this regard. She addresses the general vulnerability of migrants' (online) lifeworlds, which are targeted during the research process. In addition, Kyoko Shinozaki reflects on ethicized power hierarchies between the researched and researchers, which heretofore have rarely been considered. Such hierarchies emerge in situations in which the two parties define their interactions by using ethnic terms and assign more or less powerful social positions to each other.

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The contributions explicitly reflect on these challenges, yet address them in different ways. Building on a multi-sited ethnography approach they not only display a new epistemology of migration, but also show how to implement it in quantitative and qualitative research strategies as well as in mobile, immobile, online and offline research on cross-border migration. At the same time, they disclose the methodological and empirical limitations of non-national epistemology. Finally, they consider the self-reflective approach (Ganga and Scott 2006; De Tona 2006; Sheridan and Storch 2009), as an important tool for empirically researching transnational phenomena.

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What have researchers already done to develop new methods? Innovative methodological tools

We have already stressed that the contributions to this issue build on new epistemological notions about the relationship between space, the social and mobility. However, we did not provide a deeper insight into its core elements. Therefore, this section starts by exploring the pivotal conceptual notions. To begin with it addresses the critique of methodological nationalism, the cosmopolitan approach and the relational understanding of space. Subsequently, the section outlines research programmes such as multi-sited ethnography, the mobile methods approach, as well as the self-reflexive approach, including researchers' self-reflection on power hierarchies and strategies of de-ethnicization in designing research.

Defining contexts of research and units of analysis from a transnational perspective: epistemological foundations

The special attention to the contextualization of empirical migration research was stimulated by an article by Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003), which outlined the negative consequences of 'methodological nationalism' in migration studies. In particular, the authors differentiate between three types of methodological nationalism. First, they argue that many migration studies do not pay attention to nationalism and its effects on nation-building processes in current societies. According to the authors, sociology defines 'the limits of society as coterminous with the nation-state, rarely questioning the nationalist ideology embedded in such founding assumption' (2003, p. 579). Second, they criticize any approach whereby nation-states are understood as natural entities. This analytical limitation is conditioned particularly by the relationship between nation-state authorities and social science. Funding programmes of social science are generally governmental and thus the research agenda tends to focus on nation-state-related topics. Also, teaching programmes at

universities remain state-dependent because universities generally cooperate with the government's education authorities. Third, Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) argue that empirical social research is unduly circumscribed by the territorial boundaries of nation-states. The 'territorial limitation' of power relations is a historically new phenomenon that emerged in the process of nation-state establishment, whereby the latter was itself determined by cross-border power dynamics and activities (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003, p. 581; see also Levine, Grant and Trentmann 2007; Tyrell 2007). These criticisms are highly relevant for transnational studies on migration, because they point not only to the need to formulate new research questions, but also to the need to contextualize them in an alternative manner.

Although an increasing number of migration scholars have responded to the criticisms of methodological nationalism, they rarely use it to transform their research strategies. In general social theory, the research programme of methodological cosmopolitanism strives to go beyond mere critique (Beck and Sznaider 2006; Beck and Grande 2010). It is relevant for both the definition of units of analysis and the contextualization of research questions.

The ambivalence of multiple identities is the starting point for a cosmopolitan methodology (Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Beck and Sznaider 2006). It acknowledges that under global conditions individuals hold several memberships in different social spheres to which they affiliate themselves. To be more precise, individuals are able to hold multiple ethnic, national or religious belongings simultaneously. This methodological tool recommends considering the 'both/and' logic of multiple memberships to define the units of analysis. In this view, researchers broaden empirical procedures by refusing the old-fashioned 'either/or' logic of methodological nationalism, which mirrors only a nation-bounded perception of a social world.

The advocates of a cosmopolitan approach (Darieva, Glick Schiller and Gruner-Domic 2011) argue that methodological cosmopolitanism may help to contextualize research questions in transnational studies. One of the main analytical problems of current studies on globalization and transnationalization is a clear analytical differentiation between the global/local and national/international spatial levels. This problem is rooted in the conventional nation-state-bounded research perspective that expects researchers to think in 'clearly differentiated oppositions' (Beck and Sznaider 2006, p. 18). In contrast, the 'both/and' logic of methodological cosmopolitanism facilitates the contextualization of research questions in a double 'multi-perspective' way. First, it proposes to focus on 'multi-perspective'-oriented strategies of actors, which may simultaneously correspond to relationally defined local, national, transnational or

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global spatial contexts. Second, this strategy suggests considering the multiple scaled ways of scientific observation of these contexts.

The main advantage of this strategy for transnational studies in migration is the focus on the multiplicity of perspectives, which allows us to define the unit of analysis in a new manner. For instance, there may be a multiplicity of belongings – religious, political, social – that guide the respective activities of migrants and non-migrants (see Glick Schiller *et al*. 2005). Moreover, it also helps to contextualize research questions without falling into the trap of juxtaposing the global/local or national/transnational spatial frameworks. For example, research on multiple citizenship indicates that the dynamics of its factual expansion can fruitfully be analysed on multiple scales (Faist 2010).

Cosmopolitan methodology seems to be gaining importance in transnational studies. So far, however, it underrates the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences. Social geographers (e.g. Brenner 2004; Massey 2008), followed by migration scholars (Faist 2004; Pries 2008), pay attention precisely to this topic, drawing upon the analytical differentiation between the essentialist and the relational understanding of spatiality.

The essentialist concept of spatiality presupposes an empty container of space, which can be filled in with different social content. For example, researchers who implicitly build on this ahistoric notion select 'national society' as a starting point of analysis and assign to this social unit its respective territorial container. However, the relational perspective to space rejects the defining of spaces without their social content. To give an example, researchers analysing formation of diasporas identify ways by which actors relate to multiple localities to organize transnational activities (Bauböck and Faist 2010). Therefore, social relations and the social positions of actors are constitutive of a relationally defined space. This viewpoint considers space as a contingent and historically changeable nexus between material artefacts and social actions, which is created, represented and appropriated by social actors (Brenner 2004; Massey 2008).

The relational view on spatiality suggests one of the ways of overcoming so-called container thinking in empirical migration studies. According to it, researchers profit if they do not pre-define the existing territorial container, but study actors' strategies of space formation and space appropriation. For example, Besim Zirh (in this issue) explores how the relation between several urban localities creates a specific socio-spatial context for Alevi identity building. This flexible strategy allows an alternative way to contextualize a particular empirical study. By situating units of analysis such as transnational networks, kinship groups, organizations and diasporas

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in this manner, researchers do not impose, but disclose ways in which spatial frameworks and boundaries are formed by actors.

Field construction and the organization of research from a transnational perspective: methods and techniques

We argue that transnational scholars need to address the methodological challenges of contextualization, the ethnic lens and a naturalizing view on ethnicity not only by specifying contexts of research and units of analysis, but also by identifying the actual empirical field. Hence, multi-sited ethnography is currently one of the most popular methodological tools for de-nationalizing the construction of the empirical field. To be more precise, it enables the reorganization of research designs, methods of data collection and data interpretation because it corresponds with a non-national way of research contextualization (Amelina 2010). Transnational scholars make increasing use of multi-sited ethnography, not only because it justifies simultaneous research in different geographic localities and social sites, but also because it provides insights into the complexity of transnational phenomena (Marcus 1995; Mazzucato 2008).

The high relevance of multi-sited ethnography for migration research results from its capability to define 'sites' of an empirical field both as territorial and social or cultural entities (Falzon 2009). On the one hand transnational researchers receive a chance to identify the empirical field as de-territorialized by, for instance, studying migrants' online communities (see Mieke Schrooten in this issue). On the other hand these scholars may also construct the empirical field by indicating various geographic localities (see David Fitzgerald, Ken Horvath, Bruno Meeus and Besim Zirh in this issue). Furthermore, multi-sited ethnography provides an adequate tool to justify researchers' geographic and virtual mobility in the course of the research process, which heeds Marcus's suggestion to 'follow' the movement of actors, objects, cultural scripts, and artefacts.

As the next section shows in detail, the articles collected in this issue extend multi-sited ethnography in different ways. David Fitzgerald carefully compares the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of multi-sited migration studies. Kenneth Horvath explores how to include this method in quantitative studies on transnational labour markets. Mieke Schrooten identifies steps for multi-sited ethnography of virtual migrant communities, while Besim Zirh and Bruno Meeus combine it with the mobile methods approach.

Furthermore, multi-sited ethnography has inspired the *mobile methods* approach (Büscher, Urry and Witchger 2010), which offers insights 'into a multitude of mobile, material, embodied practices of making distinctions, relations and places' (Büscher and Urry 2009,

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p. 105). This strategy recommends collecting data by 'observing people's mobility', 'walking with', 'stalking' or 'lurking' around others (Büscher, Urry and Witchger 2010). It is exactly these strategies which Besim Zirh, Bruno Meeus and Mieke Schrooten apply in their empirical studies. They state that transnationally oriented scholars could profit from a mobile ethnography approach not only because this method enables them to define geographic and virtual mobility as an empirical field, but also because it acknowledges a dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility, offering a chance to analyse even practices of immobility from a transnational perspective. According to this position, transnational scholars would need to go beyond state responses to mobility and also look at practices of (potential) migrants which may result in both mobility and immobility (see contribution of Kyoko Shinozaki in this issue).

In addition to multi-sited and mobile ethnography, the self-reflexive approach offers transnational scholars an additional chance to go 'beyond' methodological nationalism, while defining the empirical field and research organization. Inspired by the 'writing culture' debate in social anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Smith 1989) and accepted in qualitative migration studies (Ganga and Scott 2006; Sheridan and Storch 2009; De Tona, Frisian and Ganga 2010), this post-empiricist position questions the neutral researcher's role in the production of scientific knowledge. It defines scientific outcomes not as objective knowledge, but as 'invented' scientific narratives, which are produced not only by researchers but also by researched objects, subjects or institutions (Geertz 1973; Lyotard 1984).

In particular, the contributions by David Fitzgerald, Bruno Meeus, Mieke Schrooten and Kyoko Shinozaki address self-reflexivity as being highly important. Because it makes researchers aware of their own limitations, it becomes instrumental in setting up the research process. On the one hand self-reflexivity discloses a situational power hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. On the other, it promises transnational studies additional research perspectives by shedding light on strategies of de-ethnicization in research organization.

Addressing the subject of potential power hierarchies, the contributions by Mieke Schrooten and Kyoko Shinozaki focus on who holds the power of definitions during the research process. In contrast to ethnic minority studies (Fisher and Ragsdale 2006; Henry 2003) which argue that researchers mainly have the power of definitions over the researched because they have the power to select empirical observations, questions and results, the authors in this issue define the power relationship within the research process as relational and changeable (see also Jensen and Lauritsen 2005). Thus, these contributors address

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questions that can reorganize research in an ethically sensitive way, such as:

- How to represent lifeworlds and experiences of researched subjects without generalizing the social practices of transnational migrants?
- How to interpret research results without using stereotypical representations of categories of mobile persons?
- How to give researched subjects a chance to represent their relevant experiences?

Furthermore, this self-reflexive turn stimulates strategies for empirical studies, such as de-ethnicization (Rosenthal and Köttig 2009; Maleševič 2010; Fenton 2011), which build on constructionist and process understandings of ethnicity (Barth 1969; Wimmer 2008). The reflection on the ethnic lens gives researchers a chance to discover empirically explorative factors alternative to ethnic belonging. In conducting empirical study on a particular 'ethnic group' of migrants, researchers can transcend the ethnic focus by not prematurely assigning common cultural traits and other commonalities to the category of migrants in question.

Those contributions to this issue that use ethnic categorizations do so with great care. Kenneth Horvath, for instance, offers a strategy to de-nationalize items of quantitative surveys, while Kyoko Shinozaki suggests paying more attention to the gender, class and marital status of interview partners while doing qualitative research instead of focusing exclusively on migrants' ethnic belongings. In sum, in de-ethnicizing empirical research transnational scholars receive a tool that helps to de-essentialize ethnic differences and, consequently, to overcome methodological nationalism in setting up the research organization.

Multi-locality, mobility and self-reflexivity: methodological transnationalism as a strategy of de-naturalization

This special issue follows an epistemology which de-naturalizes the national, as proposed by the pioneers of transnational studies. Moreover, our perspective connects the criticism of methodological nationalism with the self-reflective turn in the social sciences. This is why the collected contributions build on the three core conceptual elements already mentioned: first, they follow the logic of multi-sitedness, applying a relational approach to spatiality in order to research, for example, both offline and online practices of migrants. Second, they make use of mobile methods that address the co-constitution of mobility and immobility in a dialectical manner.

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Third, they relate to the self-reflexive approach, which sheds light on both the application of ethnic categories and the transformation of the power of definition over the course of a particular study.

The present special issue starts with a theoretically oriented and empirically grounded contribution by David Fitzgerald. First, Fitzgerald systematically compares benefits of various kinds of multi-sited ethnography in studies of international migration. Second, he questions the research programme of assimilation studies that generally concentrates on the destination context of migration. Criticizing the one-sided focus of these studies, he introduces a 'homeland dissimilation' perspective proposing the inclusion of both the context of departure and of destination in the research design. Third, building on the research on migrant home-town associations, Fitzgerald revises existing transnational approaches which do not sufficiently compare international with internal migration flows. In sum, he pleads for multi-sited studies to include both the 'international' and 'domestic' migration flows in the analysis. In conclusion he insists that researchers have to be careful in 'extrapolating from the local to national patterns' (see Fitzgerald in this issue).

While David Fitzgerald's contribution addresses methodological problems emerging in the context of multi-sited studies of cross-border migration, the article by Kenneth Horvath identifies practical challenges to organizing a multi-sited mixed-methods survey. An ethno-survey is one way to organize a mixed-method survey. Ethno-surveys conducted by Douglas Massey (1987) combine the logic of ethnographic studies with that of quantitative surveys. In general, mixed-method surveys can be characterized by different balances of qualitative and quantitative methods within the research design. Increasing the generalizability of results, they provide insights in cases that might be missed when only a single method is used (Bloch 2004, 2007).

Using the example of migrants' incorporation into transnational informal labour markets in Central Europe, Horvath explores ways to combine quantitative research methods with multi-sited ethnography within an ethno-survey (Massey 1987). First, the author indicates explicit weaknesses of most quantitative research designs in this field, which tend to presume the sedentary nature of the researched population. Second, Horvath illustrates in detailed steps how to design a transnational sampling and transnational questionnaire. In essence, the contribution outlines how the continuous multi-directional mobility of labour migrants between states and regions can be studied by approaches that contextualize migration within a pluri-local spatial framework.

Focusing on the Alevi revival in Turkey in relation to the social and political mobilization of Alevis in Europe, the following contribution

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by Besim Zirh identifies the steps for a qualitative multi-sited research design. Including transnational Alevi associations in London, Berlin and Drammen as well as multi-sited family histories in the research design, Zirh shows how to avoid a generalizing view of ethnic communities. Using the example of mortuary practices, which imply the geographical mobility of the deceased from the immigration to the emigration localities, the author shows the ways in which the different institutional and geographical sites in his empirical field are connected by specific rituals. In sum, his research indicates how the geographic mobility of the deceased contributes to the transnational reproduction of a distinct religious network.

The next article by Bruno Meeus critically revises themigration studies approach that aims to fix migration in time and space. Building on his own study of transnational migration between Romania and Belgium, the author explores steps to combine multi-sited ethnography with a mobile methods approach. First, he problematizes the selection of field sites in the country of emigration, which sometimes leads to so-called methodological ruralism, an assumption that it is mostly rural populations who migrate and that in order to study them migration scholars need to focus on peripheral, rural localities in the country of departure. In addition, Meeus identifies practical problems in combining multi-sited ethnography with a questionnaire-based quantitative survey and focus group method. Finally, focusing on the mobile-methods approach, he shows how to make the mobility patterns of the researchers and the researched persons interact.

While the contributions so far have drawn attention to offline research methods, the article by Mieke Schrooten reflects on the methodological challenges of online ethnography, which is increasingly becoming popular in studies of migrants' online mobility. Building on her empirical research into the social network site Orkut, the author identifies steps to study the digitalization of the transnational ties of Brazilian citizens, migrants and non-migrants alike. Taking both the relational concept of space as well as the mobility turn as points of departure, she indicates the central challenges of online ethnography, such as access to the field, dealing with these kinds of data and ethical questions. She explicitly addresses the issue of the researcher's positionality during online ethnography and thus is able to reflect upon power hierarchies between the researcher and the research participants.

The article by Kyoko Shinozaki also reflects on the researcher's positionality by using the intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989). Building on her empirical research on the irregular employment of Philippine care workers in a German city, she identifies the challenges of empirical field construction and research organization resulting from the power asymmetries between the researcher and the research participants. Shinozaki defines these dynamics as a situational

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'boundary drawing' and 'boundary re-drawing'. In using an intersectional approach she is able to pay attention not only to ethnicized boundaries between the scientists and their counterparts, but also to national belonging, gender, class and the stage of the life cycle. Shinozaki calls upon researchers to acknowledge the multiple positionalities emerging in the research process in order to question and overcome ethnic and national lenses.

Outlook

The contributions share a common orientation although they address relevant methodological problems in different ways: they carefully reflect on the methodological and normative notions of both methodological nationalism and what could be called methodological transnationalism, albeit that the ending '-ism' connotes an ideological bent not intended. To be more precise, approaches to overcome methodological nationalism also risk falling into the trap of unreflective normativity and essentialism by defining transnational and cosmopolitan social worlds in a teleological manner, as linear trajectories from the local via the national to the global, or as fateful orientations which unavoidably replace national categories and contexts.

Following these considerations we return to the mobile-method approach (Büscher and Urry 2011), which points towards a dialectical co-constitution of mobile and immobile phenomena. In the future we need to pay more attention to both the various forms of mobility and to the constitution of immobility. The latter term needs to become a category not only in accounting for migration and non-migration (Hammar *et al*. 1997), but also in looking at the dynamics unfolding in transnational social formations, such as transnational networks, kinship groups, organizations and diasporas. Therein lies a considerable challenge for future research.

The various combinations of mixed methods and methods based on multi-sited research are not simply meant to unearth patterns of mobility. Such methodologies and methods are equally intended to reflect and dissect the processes of border and boundary creations that produce immobility, and find their expression in, for example, walls, camps, detention centres. Equally important is the attention to transnational social formations which are usually populated by both mobile and relatively immobile agents. To think in these ways about the mutual constitution of mobility and immobility beyond the confines of an exclusively nation state-centred prism also implies a consideration of various scales of analysis. Hence we call for approaches that enable us to take a multi-perspective view when conducting research based on national and transnational, local and cosmopolitan categories.

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