

Exploring migrants' affective ties at a distance: is "multi-sited" ethnography enough?

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Is “multi-sited” ethnography enough?

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Introduction

The paper revisits the multi-sited ethnography debate, with a view to advancing it with respect to the “human side” of migrant transnationalism. How can this method work in mapping the dense relational spaces which may be maintained for long between migrants and non-migrants? I will draw some lessons in the respect from my ethnography on the transnational social ties between a group of Ecuadorian migrants in Italy and their family members in Ecuador (Boccagni, 2010a, b).

The assumption that societal spaces are ever more irreducible to (single) territorial spaces enjoys increasing consensus, even though, when it comes to migration, this has arguably always been the case. However, the paper contends that migrants’ life spaces are not reducible even to societal spaces alone. They rather involve more fragmented and plurilocally situated transnational networks, at least as long as migrants’ significant others live far away. This requires an understanding of the diverse forms of transnational communication and interaction between migrants and their motherland, which is clearly relevant to several issues: transnational caregiving, the use and the consequences of remittances, or the broader impact of social remittances, to mention just a few.

Ethnographic fieldwork is a privileged option for studying transnational migration (Glick-Schiller, 2003), with especial respect to transnational family life. At stake here, however, is not only the need to do simultaneously research on more than one site. The actual unit of research, in this perspective, is less migrants themselves than the interpersonal social ties between the latter and their significant others left behind. In order to make empirically sense of such interconnections, one should move not only beyond methodological nationalism, but even beyond a methodological focus on societal spaces only.

The challenge lies not so much in multispatiality, as in multirelationality, so to speak: in exploring, first, migrants’ simultaneous reference to two (or more) significant locales being physically remote, biographically displaced from one another, and still potentially connected, to a degree, by migrants’ transnational ties; second, the tangible effects – if any – of their interconnectedness, both in the country of origin and of settlement. How can this diversity of reference points, and of translocal impingements, be approached – and assessed in its intensity and extensity, scope and impact – through an individual ethnographic effort?

With an eye to providing preliminary answers, as well as food for further research, the paper will discuss the potential of multi-sited ethnography in delving into the disjunctures between the territorial, the social and the affective spaces, emerging in the daily lives of the Ecuadorian migrants I met and stayed with.

1. From multi-sited to multi-relational? Embedding ethnography in transnational migration studies

Multi-sited ethnography, as an agenda of research coping with “mobile and multiply situated” objects of study (Marcus, 1995: 102), has been discussed at considerable length by now, in itself (Falzon, 2009) and against the (somewhat) competing approach of global ethnography (Lapegna, 2009). The most remarkable “methodological tensions” emerging in this debate include the potential trade-off between breadth and depth, resulting from a limited ethnographic involvement in every relevant site (Hage, 2005) – although, in a sense, this approach may extend and diversify the articulation of face-to-face fieldwork, rather than undermining it (Horst, 2009); the challenge of dealing with the simultaneity of the cross-border interactions being studied, while most research still rest on a gradual and cumulative, spiral-like development (e.g. Riccio, 2010; Mazzucato, 2009); the implications of the distinct forms of mobility (physical or symbolic ones) involving the ethnographer and her object of study, along with the ways to detect the faceted connections and associations among remote, if interrelated sites, and the grounds of such interrelations.

In the face of these ambivalences, a convincing case has been made for developing integrated research methods and équipe-coordinated efforts (Fitzgerald, 2006; Mazzucato, 2009), or even “strong” ethnographic collaboration (e.g. Matsutake, 2009). My paper aims instead at assessing the scope for an individual ethnographic effort, by revisiting my PhD fieldwork experience. I regard this as a worthwhile task, less for practical reasons – as time and resource constraints often militate against ethnographic teamwork –, than for a matter of reflexivity. What can a personal immersion in a given field – in cognitive, sensorial, relational and emotional terms – grasp of phenomena, such as transnational social relationships, which slip out of the full control of any single person (as they are delinked from a communal physical background), be they field members or researchers?

While participating in the social lives of some 150 Ecuadorian labour immigrants in Northern Italy (and to a lesser extent, of their family members in Southern Ecuador), I addressed this

issue, by assessing the relevance of multi-sited ethnography to transnational migration studies.

The constructs of transnational and multi-sited have much in common, including an outstanding academic success story, which has exposed them to the risk of being over-used and overburdened with meanings and expectations (Hage, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2006). Yet, scant literature expands upon the ways how they speak to each other in methodological terms – compared to the number of essays in which either concept has been separately (if fruitfully) developed and applied.

There are however obvious commonalities between a transnational perspective and a multi-sited methodology, as to their assumptions and topics of concern. Especially remarkable is the overlapping between Marcus' (2009) critique of the "Malinowskian complex" – i.e. the siting of ethnography within a supposedly isolated, natural and fundamentally "other" cultural system – and the critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2003), widespread in the literature on migrant transnationalism. Both stances highlight the current implausibility of the traditional, if tacit overreliance on a bounded, territorially based and supposedly homogeneous entity – whether a culture or a society – as a field, or even as a unit of analysis.

Aside from the fact that either critique may well depict its target in simplistic terms (Cook et al., 2009), the point at issue here is less obvious: is a simultaneous reference to a range of interconnected "sites" enough to make sense of migrants' interpersonal relationships with those left behind – the "crucial migrant-left behind nexus" (Toyota et al., 2007)?

Among the subjects of migrant transnationalism (Vertovec, 2009), transnational family life across a large distance calls for a grassroots and dynamic understanding of migrants' interpersonal relationships. In order to approach the topic, the primary focus should be less on a multiplicity of (interrelated) sites, than on the multiplicity of personal interactions spanning between them. The units of reference, in Pries' (2007: 2) terms, should be migrants' transnational relationships as "relatively dense and durable configurations of transnational social practices, symbols and artefacts". The consistency of such units is provided not only by their pluri-local embeddedness, but rather by the density and the extensity of the exchanges of resources they allow, regardless – at least in part – of their geographical dispersion.

As my fieldwork suggests, the ensuing methodological challenge lies not only in finding the facets (if any) of migrant daily lives being affected by a reference to "something" which is physically absent: a dear one left behind, the past ways of living, or the motherland overall.

To be sure, appreciating the weight of migrants' homeward references, even as they have been settled abroad for long, is a necessary starting point. As Gallo (2009) puts it,

The feeling that while researching [in Italy]... I was encountering with a wider reality of people's lives, that their experience of migration in Italy was deeply informed by a map of places and of possibilities of alternative lives, was a key factor in deciding to extend the research to a related context.

Here is however, in my experience, the real puzzle: finding methodological tools suitable to explore migrants' involvement in those potentially "alternative lives" – provided it is a real matter of dual social participation, resulting in actually existing social practices, rather than of expressive nostalgia with no significant impingements in their social lives (Fitzgerald, 2006). I found the transition from a broad "multi-sited imaginary" (Marcus, 2009: 184) which may be found anywhere in migrant lives, to more limited set of multi-sited practices, a necessary condition for multi-sited ethnography to make any difference in transnational studies.

This, however, implied some revisiting of the very notion of field, as ethnographical setting (Nadai & Maeder, 2009). I sympathized with a number of constructions of this "fetishised concept" (Coleman, 2006: 33) as a not necessarily geographic space, be it local or multi-local. This may lead to frame one's field in basically conceptual terms (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997): as a "relational" (Pries, 2007) and even an "unsited" one (Cook et al., 2009), insofar as it is the interactive outcome of a range of translocal connections, contingent on the latter's endurance. By the way, this does not deny – indeed, it stresses – an ethnographer's responsibility in fixing the selective, if somewhat arbitrary boundaries of their subject of concern (Candea, 2007).

2. What if there is no transnational social field?

One of the more intriguing critiques to the multi-sited perspective involves, in my opinion, its unspoken pretensions to holism (Hage, 2005; Candea, 2007). At issue is the expectation that multi-sited ethnographers should be able, by interlocking multiple ethnographic sites and concerns, to produce a unitary epistemological picture of a given phenomenon; one inherently relevant to every single ethnographic context (which would afford only, in itself, a limited glimpse of the whole). Apart from the viability of this research agenda, a contentious point involves the actual existence of the phenomenon in question, or indeed the specific conditions and factors under which it does exist. "What if there is no elephant?", Cook et al. (2009)

wonder, after telling the Buddhist parable of blind people touching an elephant, as a metaphor for the strives of ethnographers in approaching globalization-related phenomena. Out of the metaphor, the very existence of a global (or even only transnational) social phenomenon, affecting every relevant local context, should be empirically substantiated rather than aprioristically, and perhaps ideologically posited.

This typically applies, in the perspective of transnational migration studies, to the so-called transnational social field, as “a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004: 1009). At the beginning of my fieldwork I happened to be highly fascinated by the concept – assumed as an empirically significant one, rather than a mere metaphor. I however felt disappointed at discovering, in the everyday lives of the Ecuadorian migrants (and of their family members at home) I stayed with, a different, less pleasing (to my expectations and to their own wishes) and still obdurate reality (Boccagni, 2010a).

Within a recent labour migration flow through a large distance, resulting in daily strives to scrape a living and to retain some fragments of an “Ecuadorian way of life” even abroad, Ecuador was indeed, in most cases, the object of a strong transnational attachment. For those with close kin left behind, especially transnational mothers, it was much more than that: significant relationships of transnational caregiving, fuelled by remittances and by frequent communication, did persist over time. Yet it was not difficult to sense, after staying with migrants and delving into their narratives, that the efforts to keep in touch at a distance, even when simultaneous and reciprocal, were hardly enough to restore something similar to physical co-presence. This was much more the case, as their transnational interactions involved the attempts to circulate affection, emotional proximity and, as far as migrant parents were concerned, to display a still pivotal role in their children’s socialization in Ecuador. Apart from the family life, most people I met did still approach the motherland as a source of identification, nostalgia and reminiscences. In fact, however, their transnational practices were sporadic, and their interest to the current events there was poor and anecdotal at most.

In short, nothing like a field – assuming this to be a matter of collective, communal concerns and engagements – did really exist between Trento, the Italian setting where I did part of my fieldwork, and Pasaje, the Ecuadorian community of origin of the bulk of “my” migrants. While transnational ties did persist in their private life realms, they resembled intermittent tracks – as to their scope, reach and actual impact – more than structured fields of any sort. If the picture of a highly fragmented and inconsistent transnational engagement holds true, what about the attempts at delving into it, in methodological terms?

3. How can you be here and there (and how can I sense it)? Insights from my fieldwork

That something like a transnational social field may exist at all, and under which circumstances, may seem an issue of poor relevance to ethnographers, not to mention migrants. In less abstract terms, however, I found the issue to be significant for both:

- as far as migrants were concerned, the critical point was to find ways and channels to keep some connection with those left behind in Ecuador, to share their life experiences, or at least to show and enact their persistent identification as Ecuadorians;
- from my viewpoint as a researcher, a parallel challenge lay in empirically mapping, at the two sides and in-between, the extent of such connections and the pressures driving them, as well as their perceived meanings and effects in migrant life.

Still, how can “the methodological imperative of being there” (Gille & O’Riain, 2002: 286) be met, as the relevant there is not only a physical place (such as migrants’ communities of origin), but also the range of interpersonal relationships being cultivated at a distance between migrants and non-migrants? I will briefly discuss the insights elicited by this question in the development of my ethnography, with respect to four “major methodological arenas” (Lapegna, 2009: 7): site, context, research design and reflexivity.

What kind of field/site?

Migrants’ attachment to the motherland, and even their transnational caregiving practices, are hardly a novelty or a prerogative of any specific immigrant flow. In itself, the choice of a plurilocal framework was a necessary consequence of my theoretical concerns, hence a matter of theory-driven selection (Cook et al., 2009: 58). However, it did mirror the personal relevance of homeward relationships, at least as an abstract moral duty, to the majority of the Ecuadorian migrants I met.

The choice of this particular migrant flow, instead, was driven by practical reasons such as the need to use a language I reasonably mastered, and the Ecuadorians’ relative “under-exposure” to ethnographies, in Italy at least. Another arbitrary, if necessary delimitation lay in the choice of two specific locales – one in the sending, one in the receiving country – being interlinked by a spontaneous, chain-led migration of about 300 individuals (most of whom I directly encountered).

This said, in a multi-sited perspective “the field site is understood less in terms of a space and more as connections” (Lapegna, 2009: 8). If so, what about the privileged contexts for my ethnography, the tools suitable to sense the connections spanning between them, and the implications of my physical and social participation in the field?

Which relevant contexts/situations?

While in fieldwork, my aim was to gather direct and personally-based knowledge on two crucial areas of concern:

- the significance of the absent ones in the daily lives of those “being there” – that is, the role played by the migrants in the everyday lives of non-migrants, and vice versa: as senders or receivers of remittances, of transnational caregiving practices, of future life projects, or of any persistent form of reciprocal (if mostly asymmetric) concern;
- the channels, flows, contents and impact of transnational communication between migrants and non-migrants (and the motherland, in broader terms).

It was not only a matter of “following the people” or of “hopping around”, as Hage (2005) mockingly has it. The point was focusing, although with respect to a very limited number of individuals, on any social situation that could allow me to trace the reach and the import of interpersonal, grassroots connections between here and there.

In practice my fieldwork involved a relatively extended (one year and a half) frequentation of migrant homes, and above all of their informal initiatives of co-ethnic sociability (e.g. parties, football matches, religious events, or the simple going out together). The “there” where I used to stay (and where, at a later stage, I conducted some 50 biographic interviews) was provided:

- in the private sphere, by migrants’ (and non-migrants’) domestic (and sometimes, intimate friendship) spaces. These were as many sites where the significance of their interactions with “the other side” could be directly observed (e.g. phone calls, internet communication) or indirectly inferred (e.g. from the use and the saliency of family pictures or Ecuador-related symbols, the patterns of interior decoration, etc.). The same applied, to a lesser extent, to their narratives;
- in the public sphere, by the symbolic and practical relevance of any references to the motherland in their ways of staying together, of celebrating national feasts and events (including external voting), etc. As far as migrants were regarded, in fact, the identificational references to Ecuador in broadly patriotic-evocative terms, and their displaying of any distinctive form of

“Ecuadorianness” here, predominated on any actual concern with the current life conditions there.

To be sure, this focus of observation allowed only for a partial grasp of the major personal concerns of the ones and the others (Nadai & Maeder, 2009). To immigrants in Italy, negotiating better ways of inclusion here (without necessarily questioning their identification as Ecuadorians) was often a more important matter – even more after family reunification. To non-migrants there, Italy and their dear ones emigrated, while representing a potential opportunity, were however a secondary concern, the rest being a matter of business as usual. The marginality of transnational ties to a fuller understanding of migration, and of migration to a fuller understanding of their lives, is however – in my opinion – a stimulus for further research, more than an inherent shortcoming of my ethnography.

Which research guidelines?

Summing up, multi-sited ethnography was, to me, a matter of (tentative) relational proximity to migrants and nonmigrants. Approaching the circulation of material, emotional, moral and affective resources between here and there implied a twofold methodological commitment: first, physical presence in both sites; second, and less obviously, some involvement in a range of distance-bridging practices – e.g. phone calls, internet communication, or travels back home. The latter, as I discovered, enable the grassroots circulation of a variety of personally significant objects: letters, gifts, pictures and of course, money. I personally acted as a carrier of gifts to and from Ecuador, on reciprocity grounds and as a self-legitimizing device, while travelling between Trento and Pasaje.

In fact, my efforts towards a “polymorphous engagement” (Hannerz, 2003) – that is, a necessarily eclectic combination of sources and informants – resulted in several fieldwork steps. To begin with, a range of contacts with the more visible figures of the Ecuadorian “community” in Trento, paving the way for a gradual involvement in any collective initiative of theirs (with the explicit aim of “writing a book on the Ecuadorians” and mostly displaying a passive role – apart from some volunteering for their ethnic associations). This resulted in ordinary, respectful contacts with some 150 of them, and in closer friendships with some 20. After a few months I began also to do in-depth interviews with a minority of them, mostly people I had already observed and talked with several times. Building on such connections, I then did part of my fieldwork in their Ecuadorian community of origin. This step, apart from its inherent relevance, was remarkable in two respects: first, as the collaborative relationships in Italy allowed me to be hosted and systematically supported by migrants’ relatives in Ecuador;

second, as having been there – knowing what “their place” is like – provided me with valuable common grounds, and some novel legitimization, in approaching migrants in Italy.

I also maintained a constant tension, whatever I was doing, in investigating their predominant forms of transnational connection – whether amounting to attachments or real practices, and whatever the resources being circulated. Having said this, a research tool that would have deserved greater attention is participant observation in web-based social forums and chats. In fact, the now fashionable icon of the “connected migrant” was ironically remote from the daily lives of most of the people I met. A frequent internet access was more the exception than the rule for migrants and, even more, non-migrants. It also seemed to be stratified along age, education and social class lines. Even so, a focus on their distinct ways of self-representing towards “the other side” – along with the kind of information being circulated through these channels – would provide a promising way ahead. The same applies to the effects of the visual communication via webcams – i.e. the progress it may mark, with respect to phone communication, in enhancing the perceived proximity between those who left and those who stayed.

What scope for reflexivity?

Getting personally involved in the “human landscape” of my bi-sited research context required some identity negotiation at the earlier stage – in order to have my “writer identity” accepted. This, judging from the lack of negative reactions to my presence or to my requests for interviews, was relatively effortless. While in Ecuador, on the other hand, the transnational mediation of the migrants in Italy – as all their family members had been informed of my visits – resulted in no need to further negotiate my self-presentation and field access. (Sometimes, however, the fact of being hosted by some families inhibited to me the collaboration of others, whose “dear ones” in Italy had a bad relationship with the former).

Even so, the external ways I was constructed and identified did have their consequences – more in terms of social stereotyping, as far as I could see, than of any differential treatment based on ethnicity, gender or social class. As an Italian, among immigrants in Italy I was however constructed as “foreigner” – whether with negative consequences (any time I was assumed to be constitutively unable to understand their ways of living, tastes or feelings); or with positive ones (for instance when I was framed – at least by the few I did make friends with –, as more serious and reliable, on the same supposedly cultural grounds, than the bulk of their co-nationals). While in Ecuador, I was systematically bearer of the mixed range of expectations, notions and even memories (in the case of returnees) people had of Italy. Although this sometimes entailed extended negotiations with potential informants, I generally

felt being perceived as a privileged guest – less on grounds of hospitality as such, than for the selectively positive images of Italy (and sometimes, the status-reinforcement effect) that my presence elicited.

Two final points need to be mentioned. As Marcus (1995: 112) remarks, one can always find in the field – much more so if multi-sited – “others within who know (or want to know) what the ethnographer knows”. In my case, however, their voices were more a stimulus than a challenge. I had no official “truth” to offer them, nor real incentives – apart from my respectful curiosity (and some listening ability) to repay their efforts. I have dealt elsewhere with the debate on the potentialities and dilemmas of collaboration, emerging in such relationships (Boccagni, 2009). My fieldwork conundrum was rather that of finding ways (such as triangulation) for distinguishing, in that mass of narratives and rumours, what was empirically sound, what was dubious or inexact, and what had been simply counterfeited.

In the second place, despite my attempts to diversify my contacts and somewhat “naturalize” my presence in immigrants’ daily milieus, their distrust and self-selection did matter. When it came to the relationships with the family members in Ecuador, however, this was simply out of my control, as they were “telephonically oriented” by emigrants’ recommendations. To that extent, a multi-sited work was a source of further ambivalences. In the case, instead, of my “rapport” with the Ecuadorians in Italy, the problem lay less in rejections (which, of course, did occur), than in differentiating the channels of contacts: that is finding appropriate circumstances for keeping in touch with each potential interlocutor. In principle, the more vulnerable and less successful migrants – e.g. undocumented youth – were harder to be reached. Yet, getting accustomed to my innocuous (and perhaps irrelevant) presence was enough to tap valuable narratives, with some of them at least. On the other hand, if I had attended only Latino-dedicated events I would have probably had limited access to those (especially middle-aged transnational mothers and the better educated) who, perceiving themselves as more “integrated” than the rest, were sometimes reluctant to participate in “ethnic” social life.

Conclusion

Doing multi-sited ethnography, to me, has meant getting physically involved in a range of personal connections between places, in order to grasp the resources being circulated through them – hence migrants' scope for bridging distance, or anyway for alleviating its downsides on their daily lives.

Ultimately, the debate on multi-sited ethnography conflates two significantly distinct questions: "the search for some larger [than a local] scale of analysis", and "the study of connections between places" (Falzon, 2009: 5). As far as transnational migration is concerned, a deeper ethnographic involvement in the second respect – i.e. migration-led grassroots interactions between people here and there – is perhaps more prosaic and less rewarding than making general assumptions on broader transnational social formations (at the risk of essentializing them). Yet, a critical focus on migrants' connectedness, more than on multi-sitedness as such, would make the most of this approach in understanding the social construction, the reach and the impact of their transnational ties. The issue should be less spatial dispersal per se, than the potential interdependence between different locales, as it may emerge in migrant transnational practices.

As a way of closing the circle: judging from my case study on Ecuadorian migration, multi-sited ethnography is "enough", for a grassroots understanding of the migrant-left behind nexus, under a twofold (and not so obvious) condition: that transnational relationships are appreciated in their actual extent (which may sound defective, against nowadays' rhetoric on the global circulation of anything); and that the emphasis on a multiplicity of sites does not hinder the focus on those very relationships, as they mirror the attempts being made, from either side, to convey resources, affections and concerns, and to negotiate reciprocal expectations. It is their development, however fragmented and selective, that fully justifies the application of multi-sited ethnography in transnational migration studies.

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