Museum Tusculanum Press :: University of Copenhagen :: www.mtp.dk :: info@mtp.dk

COMMENTS

Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology Volume 39:1
E-journal © 2008 Museum Tusculanum Press :: ISBN 978 87 635 3187 0 :: ISSN 1604 3030
http://www.mtp.hum.ku.dk/details.asp?eln=300267

Museum Tusculanum Press :: University of Copenhagen :: www.mtp.dk :: info@mtp.dk

Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology Volume 39:1
E-journal © 2008 Museum Tusculanum Press :: ISBN 978 87 635 3187 0 :: ISSN 1604 3030
http://www.mtp.hum.ku.dk/details.asp?eln=300267

Museum Tusculanum Press :: University of Copenhagen :: www.mtp.dk :: info@mtp.dk

THE STRENGTH OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Gisela Welz

With the growing interest of anthropologists in transnational processes and spatial mobility, the local community ceased to be an obvious or "natural" site for fieldwork. Yet, also in so-called "multi-sited research", basic tenets of the ethnographic method continue to be valid. This commentary engages with the methods employed in the project "Sense of Community", pointing out that in addition to giving the community study approach a fresh lease on life in ethnology, the project also shares some traits with regional surveys in the social sciences. The commentary concludes that by selecting two regions as research settings, the project also contributes to a revitalization of the comparative approach.

Keywords: multi-sited research, community study approach, regional survey, comparative approach

During the 1990s some anthropologists raised the point that community studies, conventionally understood as long-term participant observations in a rural village or some other small-scale social situation, were "not particularly suited for research perspectives in the ways in which the local and the global today are mutually entangled and interrelated" (Welz 2002: 138). This was particularly the case for studies of transnational migration, media and computer-mediated communication, supranational governance, commodities and consumption, and science and technology – all of which have been included in anthropology's research agenda in recent years. In the context of this methodological shift, the community study approach suddenly appeared as "a slow and clumsy instrument" (Welz 2004). It was also during the 1990s that some new methodological approaches were created, most notably the suggestion put forward by George Marcus (1995) to make ethnography multi-sited. Research projects were designed to connect various geographical sites and bridge the distances between them. A number of anthropologists predicated the adoption of this type of more mobile ethnography as a shift of attention away from small-scale local units towards social formations and cultural practices that transgress national boundaries, that are geographically dispersed and that link local and translocal social actors and institutions (see Hannerz 1998).

As a consequence, the local community ceased to be an obvious or "natural" site for fieldwork. In actual fact, we have come to realise that the field has never simply been "out there" as a place or social group that we could visit or dwell among, but has always been constructed by the anthropologist. As a consequence, "the ethnographer is less a chronicler of self-evident places than an interrogator of a variety of place-making projects" (Gille & O Riain 2002: 278). The interrogation of such place-making projects does, however, greatly profit from ethno-

Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology Volume 39:1
E-journal © 2008 Museum Tusculanum Press :: ISBN 978 87 635 3187 0 :: ISSN 1604 3030
http://www.mtp.hum.ku.dk/details.asp?eln=300267

Museum Tusculanum Press :: University of Copenhagen :: www.mtp.dk :: info@mtp.dk

graphic research at the local level. Indeed, there is no contradiction between a research interest in translocal phenomena and a firm belief in the special kinds of insights that only ethnography can afford. Even in more "mobile" projects, some of the basic tenets of the ethnographic method continue to be valid, among them the bodily presence of the fieldworker in the places that she or he studies, the attention given to the quotidian rather than the exceptional, and the focus on life as it is lived (see Welz 2008[1998]). The inventor of the multi-sited approach in anthropological research, George Marcus, emphatically insists that ethnography remains "predicated upon attention to the everyday, an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups" (Marcus 1995: 99). However, he concedes that some critics may view multi-sited research as an attenuation of the strengths of ethnography. (See also Marcus 2008.)

The study conducted by the interdisciplinary team, under the leadership of Jonas Frykman and Bo Rothstein, is neither a multi-sited project of the type that George Marcus envisioned nor is it an ethnography of the community-study type. The authors' intention, however, is to give the community study a fresh lease of life in ethnology. Their impressive team-based project, with its sensitivity to the local dimensions of social life and society's functioning, has little in common with what we have learned to recognize as "community studies". In fact, the research team emphatically asserts that they did not set out to replicate the kinds of local ethnographies that portray villages "in terms of continuity, tradition and history".

At least one of the two regions chosen for in-depth research appears to abound with the kind of isolated rural villages that for decades were sought out as the favourite research sites of community studies in ethnology and anthropology. These studies were usually in-depth and long-term ethnographic projects conducted by a sole fieldworker who immersed her- or himself in the life of one village for eighteen months or more, acting on the firm belief that the village being studied served as a microcosm for the study of an entire culture and its traditions. In contrast, the Lund-Gothenburg team set out to avoid one of the pitfalls of such studies, namely that these all too often obviated the presence of modern nation state institutions that penetrate the most remote hamlet. Frykman and his co-ethnographers achieved this by widening the scope and scale of community studies, rather than viewing the village as a closed system of traditionality and considering the ways in which translocal influences are worked into the social fabric of local life.

The team project examines the workings of state administration at the local level. By looking at both the "everyday micro-processes" and the ways in which local people relate to national institutions, they show how "local cultural codes" facilitate specific "pathways of trust". These are derived from the ways in which social capital is accumulated differently, against the backdrop of distinctly regional patterns and localised capabilities. Apart from some of the more individual studies – especially those by Isabell Schierenbeck and Mia-Marie Hammarlin that look at what is considered "normal" in terms of patients' sickness behaviour and doctors' diagnoses of disorders – the studies appear to be less about health seeking behaviour and the medical system and more about relations between civil servants and their clients and the special organisational culture that has sprung up in the local branch offices of the national Social Insurance Agency.

For a more pronounced emphasis on the public health issues encountered, cooperation with medical researchers, especially experts in epidemiology, and psychologists would be a good way of extending the project and learning more about the interplay of lifestyles, exposure to stress, the disposition to certain kinds of disorders and environmental factors. Ethnologists are particularly well equipped to do participant observation in clinical settings and on the doctor–patient-relationship (see Lottermann et al. 2005). In particular, the case study based on the textual analysis of medical case files would have benefited greatly from interviews with doctors and patients.

The project "Sense of Community" shows how external influences – among them the support systems of the welfare state – are worked into the patterns of

Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology Volume 39:1
E-journal © 2008 Museum Tusculanum Press :: ISBN 978 87 635 3187 0 :: ISSN 1604 3030
http://www.mtp.hum.ku.dk/details.asp?eln=300267

Museum Tusculanum Press :: University of Copenhagen :: www.mtp.dk :: info@mtp.dk

local life. In the process, they are modified to achieve a better fit with local conditions and needs, and are even subverted, as in the case of people applying for sick leave benefits, in order to be better able to cope with the challenges of various subsistence activities and the demands of community life. A key statement that clarifies the relation of local-level research to much bigger units of analysis is that the researchers attest to the "strength of ethnography" which "lies in its ability to show how *differing* communities adapt to the presence of institutions" (emphasis added by GW). The point of departure of this project is regional disparities within Sweden, and the research design consequently engages the comparison of two Swedish regions. However, the research was conducted strictly at the local level, in selected communities, based on the tenet that there is a significant and socially productive "interplay between local life, health, and the presence of government agencies".

By looking into how trust in the state and people's co-citizens is developed and maintained differently in separate regions within the same nation state, the study shares some research interests with other regional surveys based on a number of in-depth studies in selected locations ("community studies") within a region. This type of regional research appears to be a tradition in a number of European countries – one that in many places has been discontinued. In a research project addressing the history of German Volkskunde, Antonia Davidovic-Walther and I looked at the development of the community study method in German ethnology and sociology during the post-World War II period(see Davidovic-Walther, forthcoming). In this research, we have been particularly interested in regionally-centred clusters of community studies – both in the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic – guided by a research interest in the interaction between local rural life, the industrial economy and the modern institutions of the post-war German states.[1] A group of community studies on the German town of Darmstadt and its surrounding villages during the late 1940s and into the 1950s is an example of such a regional project. This research project was inspired by American social research, most notably the studies of "Middletown" and "Yankee City",[2] and initiated and funded by the American military government of the state of Hesse. The aim was to inquire into the social bases of modernity and democracy, and the project was conducted under the auspices of the reopened Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Indeed, Theodor Adorno later acted as one of the directors of the project (see Davidovic-Walther & Welz 2009). One of the studies undertaken in that context also looked at the interface between the state's service provision and the citizens who make use of these services. The study by Lindemann (1952) focused on public service provision and citizens' attitudes to the public servants they encountered in the local offices. However, and perhaps predictably so, the study was based on the very precepts of rational choice-based decision-making that Frykman, Rothstein and their team have successfully superseded by wedding it with an ethnological perspective on cultural processes.

Since the Lund-Gothenburg team did not set out to study one single region in-depth, but from the outset selected two regions as research settings, the venture contributes equally – perhaps even more so – to a revitalisation of the comparative approach in ethnology and anthropology. The individual case studies and different research foci of this team project show why the social insurance system is used quite differently in the two regions being compared, regions with contrasting cultural profiles. In recent decades, the use of cross-cultural comparison as an anthropological approach has consistently been underestimated, misrepresented and sidelined as being too "reductionist" or "one-dimensional". This view urgently needs to be reconsidered in order to regain what Laura Nader called anthropology's "comparative consciousness" (Nader 1994). It goes without saying that we all want to leave behind us those types of cross-cultural comparison that delimit its objects to fit taxonomic classifications, chop cultural systems into transculturally comparable bits and pieces, and in the process of constructing all-too-neatly bounded units abandon an interest in contextual meanings as well as the links between societies and cultures. The inter-regional comparison undertaken

Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology Volume 39:1
E-journal © 2008 Museum Tusculanum Press :: ISBN 978 87 635 3187 0 :: ISSN 1604 3030
http://www.mtp.hum.ku.dk/details.asp?eln=300267

Museum Tusculanum Press :: University of Copenhagen :: www.mtp.dk :: info@mtp.dk

by the Frykman-Rothstein team shows considerable promise here, and is more like a juxtaposition of striking similarities and differences than a rigidly systematic and absolutely symmetric comparison.

Both regions, however, appear to be markedly similar in one respect – a similarity that they apparently share with other Swedish regions. This is that the welfare state's service provision is predicated on face-to-face social relations that take place in local contexts. This local context figures prominently in the relations between civil servants and citizens because their interactions are embedded within a situated social system. They meet face-to-face, often over many years, and are even able to form stable "working" relationships. This is not necessarily the case in other countries where the degree of anonymity in such encounters is much greater, especially if people are unable to visit an office in their local community but have to travel to a central town or even the nation's capital. Of course, these may also be societies in which the inclination of the state to step in and sustain people when either industry or their health fails is a lot less pronounced than in Sweden.[3]

The new interest of anthropologists in the cultural logics of modern statecraft looks at how the state is framed and routinised differently in each country. James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2005) have argued quite convincingly that states represent themselves as entities with particular properties through discursive metaphors and practices, among them quite mundane bureaucratic routines. In particular, they mention two types of spatial images that help to achieve what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls the "state effect". One is the "pervasive idea of the state as an institution somehow 'above' civil society, community, and family", while the other locates the state "within an ever-widening series of circles that begins with the family and local community and ends with the system of nation states" (Ferguson & Gupta 2005: 106). Pursuing the question of how the cultural representations and understandings of the state are performed and acted upon on at the local level within different types of political and economic settings would indeed be worthwhile. This could be done, as the authors of the Lund-Gothenburg team show, by positioning carefully selected case studies – intranational or transnational – within regions that are conducive to comparison. Obviously, within the framework of neoliberal downsizing and the outsourcing of public sector services that one can observe elsewhere, perhaps most visibly in the United States, there is a marked trend to not having much face-to-face contact between clients and staff in matters pertaining to medical benefits and social insurance. Instead, faceless clerks in call centres and forms to be filled out on-line have mostly replaced the "real person behind a counter or a desk" type of situation. Comparing such countries with the Swedish cases, in order to tease out how the "governmental presence in the lives of citizens" (Trouillot 2001: 125) makes itself felt, would be both fruitful and interesting.

Notes

1 Our research project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and conducted within the framework of a larger collaborative project involving colleagues from Berlin, Goettingen, Kiel and Tuebingen within the framework of a Forschungsverbund "Volkskundliches Wissen und gesellschaftlicher Wissenstransfer". For more information, see: http://www.volkskundliches-wissen.uni-tuebingen.de/.

2 Exemplary studies on the modernisation of small towns in the United States were conducted by Lynd & Lynd (1929, 1937) and by Warner (1941) and continued to serve as models for post-World War II social research.

3 In Germany, the marked decline in sick days taken by the working population in recent years seems to correspond with a fear of losing one's employment, and is as such a symptom of other, also quite worrying developments. It is accompanied by a populist discourse stigmatising "social parasites" and fuelled by a reality TV documentary series in which the audience accompany social service inspectors on their investigations to discover "welfare cheats" who collect benefits even though they are not entitled to them.

References

Davidovic-Walther, A., forthcoming: Community Studies as an Ethnographic Knowledge Format. *Journal of Folklore Research.*

Davidovic-Walther, A. & G. Welz 2009: Wer wird Gemeindeforscher? Ländliche Herkunft als Professionalitätsmerkmal. In: *Volkskundliches Wissen. Akteure und Praktiken. Berliner Blätter. Ethnographische und ethnologische Beiträge.* Heft 50. Münster: LIT-Verlag, 49–67.

Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology Volume 39:1
E-journal © 2008 Museum Tusculanum Press :: ISBN 978 87 635 3187 0 :: ISSN 1604 3030
http://www.mtp.hum.ku.dk/details.asp?eln=300267

Museum Tusculanum Press :: University of Copenhagen :: www.mtp.dk :: info@mtp.dk

Ferguson, J. & A. Gupta 2005: Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality. In: J.X. Inda (ed.), *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics*. Malden, Oxford: Blackwell, 105–131.

Gille, Z. & S. O Riain 2002: Global Ethnography. *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 28, 271–295.

Hannerz, U. 1998: Transnational Research. In: R.H. Bernard (ed.), *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. Walnut Creek, London, New Delhi: Sage, 235–256.

Lindemann, K.A. 1952: *Behörde und Bürger.* Gemeindestudie des Instituts für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung – Darmstadt. Monographie 8. Darmstadt: Eduard Rother Verlag.

Lottermann, A., G. Heinbach, G. Welz et al. (eds.) 2005: *Gesunde Ansichten: Wissensaneignung medizinischer Laien*. Frankfurt a.M.: Kulturanthropologie Notizen Bd. 75.

Lynd, R.S. & H.M. Lynd 1929: *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*. New York.

Lynd, R.S. & H.M. Lynd 1937: *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts.* New York.

Marcus, G.E. 1995: Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24, 95–117.

Marcus, G.E. 2008: The End(s) of Ethnography: Social/Cultural Anthropology's Signature Form of Producing Knowledge in Transition. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1–14.

Nader, L. 1994: Comparative Consciousness. In: R. Borofsky (ed.), *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 84–96.

Trouillot, M.-R. 2001: The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization: Close Encounters of the Deceptive Kind. *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 125–138.

Warner, W.L. 1941: *The Social Life of a Modern Community*. Chicago.

Welz, G. 2002: Siting Ethnography. Some Observations on a Cypriot Highland Village. In: I.M. Greverus, S. Macdonald, R. Römhild, G. Welz & H. Wulff (eds.), Shifting Grounds: Experiments in Doing Ethnography. *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures*, Vol. 11, 137–158.

Welz, G. 2004: Transnational Cultures and Multiple Modernities: Anthropology's Encounter with Globalization. In: G.H. Lenz, G. Mackenthun & H. Rossow (eds.), "Between Worlds": The Legacy of Edward Said. *ZAA Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 409–422.

Welz, G. 2008[1998]: Moving Targets: Feldforschung unter Mobilitätsdruck. In: R. Johler & B. Tschofen (eds.), *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft: Eine Tübinger Enzyklopädie.* Tübingen: TVV, 203–218.

Gisela Welz is professor of cultural anthropology and European ethnology at Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, Germany. Many of her publications engage the theoretical shifts and methodological innovations that have emerged with anthropology's interest in transnational processes and the cultural effects of globalization. Among her recent books is the anthology *Divided Cyprus. Modernity, History, and an Island in Conflict* (2006), co-edited with Yiannis Papadakis and Nicos Peristianis. She is currently working on a project inquiring into the history of community studies in German Volkskunde and sociology since World War II.
(g.welz@em.uni-frankfurt.de)

Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology Volume 39:1
E-journal © 2008 Museum Tusculanum Press :: ISBN 978 87 635 3187 0 :: ISSN 1604 3030
http://www.mtp.hum.ku.dk/details.asp?eln=300267