Achieving temporal and local multidimensionality: experiments in cross-generational research collaboration

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1. Introduction

By increasingly turning toward the study of the "here and now", temporalizing becomes a key problem for ethnography (Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion & Rees, 2008). The different paces of social dynamics in the field of ethnographic research, characterized by its slowness, complicate the spatial mapping of the field and the contextualization of the temporal frame (Marcus, 2010). In the face of this complexity, it is necessary to consider the use of new approaches in research-based teaching that places collaboration at its core.

Collaborative research is not a new concept in cultural anthropology. Rather the cooperation of different field actors has been a common and important part of anthropological and ethnographic research tradition in various ways: as a politically involved "activist anthropology" based on interventions, as co-authorships of local scientists or actors with anthropologists, as "native ethnographies", popular scientific publications for local groups or by co-construction of anthropological knowledge in different research generating contexts (Rappaport, 2008). In applied anthropology, collaboration results out of practical cooperation between economy, industry and welfare.

Recently, collaborative ethnography in cultural anthropology has been discussed more intensely and in a new manner (Binder, Bose, Ebell, Hess, & Keinz, 2013; Lassiter, 2005). Additionally, a trade journal titled Collaborative Anthropologies (University of Nebraska Press) was founded in 2008. Collaboration is now seen in a broader sense, referring to the whole research process including the collaborative development of research designs (Field, 2008; Howe, 2009) and theory building (Rappaport, 2008). The concepts of these kinds of research practice emerge out of postmodern and feminist anthropology, mainly focusing to the integration of actors in the field from different research perspectives into the ethnographic production of knowledge in the sense of multiperspectivity and equal participation of research processes and their representations.

Detached, there are also documentations of collaborations between anthropologists (Gellner & Quigley, 1995). Different from most cases, these do not mainly focus on the creation of schools of thought but are rather linked with reflections about new forms of collaboration in bigger research groups such as research labs and design studios (cf. Rabinow et al., 2008). In light of this, the present work refers to such a kind of collaboration. By introducing our cross-generational – Bachelor, Master, and PhD students alongside professors – research project in Berlin-Neukölln we do not only propose a particular form of

cooperation but also address the given dilemma of temporality in ethnographic research. More precisely, we discuss how collaboration across different generations of researchers can enable an inherent acceleration, consolidation and amplification of ethnographic research processes. Based on explorative ethnographic research in Berlin-Neukölln, the questions to be discussed are: how are relations among different researcher personalities in the field articulated in collaborative and experimental ethnographies? What defines these relations as collaborative? How is expertise redistributed? Who contributes with expertise in these relations? What are the contexts of these in spatial and temporal terms?

Doing research in bigger scientific groups is not very common practice in cultural anthropology today. However, this collaboration mode with different researchers in one field can be an efficient way to study highly complex societies by ethnography, as several research personalities approach the field from different angles. We believe that each research personality – independently from their academic credentials – holds a particular set of skills that enriches ethnographic research and contributes to grasp the complexity of the field. Therefore, training in anthropology should reconsider the role different generational academics play when approaching the field. It is in this spirit that various models of collaboration across different researcher generations and cohorts being engaged in the field of Neukölln at different stages of the study will be discussed. The following chapters introduce our research project and conclude with a detailed examination and widening of collaborative practice.

2. Collaborative research in Berlin-Neukölln

The district of Berlin-Neukölln sets a precedent of urban social problems in Germany. With regard to its negative image, the district continuously draws the attention of researchers, local and regional German media and at times causes an international media echo. Simultaneously, Neukölln's image has changed in recent years, increasingly attracting students, creatives and members of the middle-class. In certain areas processes of gentrification have emerged, hustling previous inhabitants into less attractive parts of the district and thereby enforcing the district's socio-spatial imbalance.

Starting in August 2011, research in Berlin-Neukölln has been conducted, divided into different field phases and involving several research generations of diverse academic status without external funding. The research team was composed, on the one hand, out of three cohorts of BA and MA students from the Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen (Germany) who prepared term papers as well as theses on a wide variety of subjects. On the other hand, it also included doctoral, post-doctoral and habilitated generations of researchers from the Zeppelin University researching and supervising the different projects in Neukölln. Moreover, on the basis of the project at hand, two former MA students involved in the project are continuing with their PhD projects at the University of Hamburg[1] (Germany).

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[1] http://www.fbkultur.uni-hamburg.de/de/vk/personen.html

The following sections introduce our modes of collaboration and explain the structure of our project.

Opening the field[2]

In the first phase three successive BA theses were conducted in the context of the events of the *Rütli*-school and the emerging *Campus Rütli*, which caused an international media echo. In a public letter in February 2006, the teachers of the secondary *Rütli*-school declared social bankruptcy due to violence and lack of interest by the pupils, as well as missing structural support by the local government.

In a broad sense, the three BA theses focused on the success factors of education employed in a deprived urban area. Christine Wagner examined inter-organizational aspects by posing the central question: how can trust between the various stakeholders in the educational institution grow? Mahyar Nicoubin explored the principles of student inclusion by asking why dropouts still take place at the well-run inclusive school today and why students still slide off in alternative measures. Her research focused on the interface between school and social environment. Finally, and some months later, Anna Henke concentrated on the networking and integration efforts of the school into the social space of the district Berlin-Neukölln. Of her special interest was how important these networks are for the positive development and its turn-around from a problem school to a model school.

During their research and field phases, all three students were living in Neukölln and collected data on the general development of the district, the redevelopment and regeneration processes of the Reuter district[3] where the school is located at, as well as statistical material and further data. The development of the three theses was accompanied by an intense exchange between the students and their supervisors, taking place in face-to-face as well as weekly Skype-meetings. The temporal sequence of the BA students' field phases allowed for reciprocal learning benefits, and a back-and-forth immersion into the field. The principal investigators thus closely stayed in touch with the field even in periods when they could not be there personally.

Moving further into the field and keeping it in sight

Parallel to the last of the three BA-theses, a research seminar took place with fifteen Master students, who, as a "second student cohort", devoted their work on the redevelopment processes of Neukölln associated with very different research perspectives. Departing from the obvious in this urban district, the socio-cultural heterogeneity and the emerging gentrification, the individual projects focused on problems related to crime, discrimination, the role of internet cafés as information-hubs, artists and hipsters coming to Neukölln, social life in public places, local markets as well as local, regional and international news coverage and reports about the district. Using mixed methods approaches this was explored ethnographically and media analytically. The field phase of the master seminar was prepared

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[2] Our understanding of "the field" follows Gisela Welz (2002).
[3] The Reuter district is an area in North Neukölln where gentrification is particularly strong (cf. Topos, 2011).

on the basis of the knowledge that was gained in the previous ethnographic work. It started with a city tour guided by Christine Wagner, who at that time had finished her thesis. Meetings of reflection took place at the end of each research day, stimulating a vivid exchange between the BA-researchers who took part in the meetings, the Master students and the supervising professor. The sessions were documented in the form of field notes, serving as a valuable resource of information at later stages of the individual projects as well as the overall project. Preparing discussions for the research tasks of following day concluded these meetings.

The media played a crucial role in keeping the field in sight. They provided the means for a dense communication between field researchers and supervisors. Moreover, a methodology seminar lead by a professor and a graduate student involved in the project focused on discourse analytical questions, phenomenological structures and the constitution of discourse of the *Rütli*-school matter. The students went on analysing, evaluating and deepening the project's data and gained new insights. Central subjects included violence, migration, education and future developments.[4]

Deepening and widening of the field

The previous stages of research (BA theses and MA seminar) show a variety of aspects that are relevant for the topoi, which characterize daily life in Neukölln. Some of the aspects identified in the different research projects were: social deprivation and their reproduction in educational contexts, dynamics of cultural diversity and heterogeneity, gentrification and displacement. This wide range of topics served as a starting point for new projects to develop, both individually and collaboratively. On the individual level, three master theses were developed. The first one by Alejandra Tijerina García focused on current migration flows from Spain caused by the financial crisis and the migrants' pathways and their trials of gaining ground in Neukölln. Teresa Stumpf conducted the district's capacities of resilience in the course of urbanization, migration and gentrification as well as the social networking structures of the inhabitants in times of social change. The third thesis by Samantha Lutz included an analysis of diversity discourses focusing on the question of how the concept of diversity and the exposure to diversity were related to the district of Neukölln.

The development of these individual master theses was deeply affected by an accompanying research colloquium as well as an intense exchange between the three students who supported each other daily and openly shared their ideas and insights.

To conclude the research process, a collaborative project in the form of a co-authored paper gathered the different aspects of the empirical results from the MA research seminar with a re-evaluation of the material using a new perspective. This project focused on examining how individuals experience gentrification, their strategies and socio-spatial mobility patterns

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[4] The insights of the different courses also influenced the conceptualization for further ones: A seminar lead by a doctoral student and a post-doc researcher addressed the topic of urban research by using the example of Berlin-Neukölln. The seminar included a field trip into the district and was accompanied by two of the student researchers who had been involved in the previous overall project.

in the face of this process in their local context of Neukölln. The interviews conducted for individual research were then analysed using this particular focus.

Even though the co-authored paper topped off our project of a two-years process, new perspectives opened up, requiring further research and activating two PhD theses to broaden and deepen the field of Neukölln anew.

3. Discussion

The mode of collaboration that evolved during the Neukölln research project can be regarded as a mode of working together which Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) call a *Community of Practice*. A Community of Practice as a shared space that has evolved around the research of Neukölln creating, expanding and exchanging knowledge and developing individual capabilities. Here, collaboration is seen as a *social form* and *epistemic mode*, as "specific ways of joint thinking and information sharing" (Estalella & Sánchez, 2014). This type of community shares knowledge in various ways and takes different forms and stages of collaboration.

What links all the different perspectives is the so-called *domain* (Wenger et al., 2002), a shared set of issues and problems that is explored by the different research cohorts. While Neukölln is known as a German hot spot of poverty, violence, multiculturalism, unemployment and lack of education, a new image in the local and international media has evolved: Neukölln as a trendy urban area, as a wellspring of creativity, cultural diversity and urban vitality. The different contributions previously described examine local problems of ordinary life and ask for the substance of these contradicting media representations in Berlin-Neukölln. Research was conducted without a fixed research question but took place in the light of concepts like urbanity, diversity, organisation, communication, medialisation that served as meta concepts as well as a common starting point into the field.

Hence, collaborative research means to acknowledge that research fields tend to be open-ended in two respects: Firstly, only gradually the intrinsic logics and complexities of the field, such as the constellations of stakeholders and their multiple degrees of engagement, can be revealed by ethnographic research. Furthermore, the dynamics and temporalities of the field itself reveal its open-ended character (Marcus, 2013).

With respect to finding an area of shared interest that the different generations were to explore, collaborative ethnography can be understood as an epistemic mode. It covers the whole research process as well as the process of co-conceptualization and theory building (cf. Rabinow et al., 2008; Rappaport, 2008).

This leads us to our second point: As it can be observed, there was a number of research personalities involved in the different stages of the collaborative ethnographic endeavour in order to explore the complex field of Neukölln in a most comprehensive manner. In addition to the various interdisciplinary backgrounds moving into anthropology (e.g. business administration, economics, international relations, public relations, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, etc.), especially the mix of different research cohorts – BA and MA students

together with post-doctoral and habilitated researchers – contributed to a vibrant *community* which cannot be forced or invented by a specific procedural program. In fact, it depends on the personal investment of the different research personalities in their common domain (cf. Wenger et al., 2002). Furthermore, collaboration in the sense of a Community of Practice depends on "recognizing that careers are still individual" (Rabinow et al., 2008, p. 85) and that everyone has a degree of autonomy and authority. Leadership is hence distributed in an "ecology of leadership" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 36) and can be regarded as a characteristic of the whole community. Everyone – early-academics and more experienced researchers alike – has the ability to contribute something specific to a larger project – the domain. The result of this kind of research attitude affects a "back-and-forth, a recursive shaping of each other" (Rabinow et al., 2008, p. 85) on an equal footing.

Moreover, the use of new media and communication technologies by early-academic researchers offers us new conditions for pedagogy and the production of anthropological knowledge. This potential of intergenerational collaboration, however, has not been taken into account by the contemporary reflections on new forms of collaboration in anthropology so far like the discourse about the conception of research labs and design studios as well as with respect to doctoral training programs (cf. Rabinow et al., 2008).

Therefore, collaboration also means to move beyond the well-established ethnographic practice of a single researcher exploring the field in a single-person project (cf. Rabinow et al., 2008, p. 84) – which leads us to our third point: the collaborative *practices*.

Ethnographic research in such vast and complex fields like Neukölln benefit when it becomes more experimental in nature. In view of this, individualised ethnographic work is opened and understood in some parts as a joint project in the example at hand. However, collaboration as understood here does not include research processes based on the division of labour and goes beyond teamwork, which is common practice in the fields of natural and social science alike. In contrast, collaboration is understood as a social form *and* epistemic mode: This means that we need to address ourselves to working in scientific teams (1) which facilitate the development of common questions by several researchers who have different levels of qualification and conduct research in the same regional area; (2) where knowledge is intensively exchanged between the different research generations even before the actual fieldwork in order to construct the sites beforehand "in a deeply informed, even ethnographic way" (Rabinow et al., 2008, p. 83); (3) which communicate directly with researchers as "field experts", who had already conducted their fieldwork or who have just been in the process of collecting their field data; (4) which closely accompany the individual ethnographic apprentice fieldwork step-by-step in interaction with more experienced and qualified research personalities and generations such as post-doctoral or habilitated research personalities; (5) which interact on a regular basis in order to create, expand and exchange knowledge on the field of Neukölln as long as the topic is deemed relevant and learning together is of interest and value for the community (Wenger et al., 2002).

Consequently, not only data collection and data analysis are to be seen as circular processes in the sense of Grounded Theory. The development of research designs is also an iterative process constantly integrating new insights and knowledge. In view of this observation,

Christopher Kelty (2008) refers to the research design as *composition*. In contrast to the understanding of research as a design process (Rabinow et al, 2008.), composition allows for more flexibility and more creative, spontaneous and unplanned variations in the discovery procedure of the whole research process.

4. Conclusion

Especially in the light of the dilemma of temporality in ethnographic research, this attitude and application of research in the sense of a Community of Practice (Wenger et al., 2002) allows cultivating slowness and enables an inherent density, consolidation and amplification of research processes. Instead of one researcher going into the field for a long period of time, the idea of different researchers stepping in at different points in time, coming back and sharing their experiences and results enables to gain a broad set of data with a comparatively low effort for the individual. Consequently, different sets of data can be interpreted based on a broad ground of research approaches, perspectives, and insights from the field. Diverse interpretations can be discussed and tested.

Certainly, the presented mode of cross-generational collaboration enriches common research practices in ethnography, anthropology and social sciences in general. It demands for rethinking academic hierarchies without aiming to abolish them. With respect to current research practices, limited semester times, restricted research funds and to the rapidness of everyday occurrences in general, we consider that this way of doing research can serve as one – but not the only one – forward-looking model and strategy which asks for more researchers to join.

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