



## **Transnationalism**

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### **1 Definition**

The term “transnationality” is a reference point for research activities in such varied disciplines as anthropology, sociology, political science, geography, economics, history, etc. The field of “transnational studies” (Khagram/Levitt 2008) that has expanded so strongly in the last two decades encompasses a broad range of social phenomena: ranging from transnational migration circuits, families and communities, to transnational practices, identities and citizenship, to transnational networks, social fields, corporations, politics and capital flows. In view of this heterogeneity, Glick Schiller and Levitt (2006: 5) propose a broad definition of transnationality: “The term transnationalism or transnational processes emphasizes the ongoing interconnection or flow of people, ideas, objects, and capital across the borders of nation-states, in contexts in which the state shapes but does not contain such linkages and movements.” This (supposed) ubiquity of transnational phenomena (Vertovec 2009: 1) raises the issue of what constitutes the common ground and the specificity of the field of research which falls under this term.

The distinction between this concept and the “picture of the nation state as a container, in which a clearly defined territory confines culture, politics, economy, and community” is one of the basic starting points of transnational research. For the fact is that this notion of a (national) space as a container has for a long time prevented one from perceiving and studying practices through which border-crossing social fields are created. Fields of this type arise from continuous migratory movements, resulting not only in the development of transnational identities and lifetime projects but also in a material infrastructure, social institutions, basic political and legal conditions, and much more.

The complexity of transnational practices and social fields also points to the context of globalization and transnationalization processes. While transnationality research develops, however, a microanalytical perspective on these phenomena, globalization research instead explores the macrostructural aspects. It is precisely this actor focus that enables the study of the different meanings nation-state borders and differences have for transnational actors, how they cope with, transform or also reproduce them.

### **2 Main Issues**

Given the increasing attention to and research on transnational aspects of social life, it is surprising that social work up to now has hardly turned its attention toward this (cf., however, Homfeldt/Schröer/Schweppe 2007). Transnational practices in (at least) three respects play a central role in social work.

*Transnational Everyday Life*

The importance of transnational practices in social work first became evident in the area of transnational care work. Since the end of the 1990s, numerous studies have documented the fact that the need for nursing, education and care in families is to an increasing extent being met by migrants from neighbouring countries with relatively lower wage levels (Scheiwe/Krawietz 2010). Such migratory movements – especially of women – can be seen on every continent: between Mexico and the U.S., Indonesia and Singapore, Poland and Germany, the Philippines and Taiwan. In the course of these migration processes, so-called global care chains arise, since, through the absence of the mostly female care workers, care gaps develop in the countries of origin and these in turn have to be closed by other family members. These displacements have an impact on the network of family relationships, which extends over long distances and is maintained through isolated visits as well as the use of modern means of communication (such as Skype, e-mail, Internet platforms).

Transnationality research has repeatedly shown that such migration initiatives may lead to so-called transnational migration circuits. Family members, friends or acquaintances – inspired by supposedly successful migration histories – join migrants in the region of arrival, while other migrants return to their region of origin. The transnational migration patterns at the same time have repercussions not only on the countries and regions of origin but also on the countries and regions of arrival. Numerous research projects have made clear that this transnational migration results not only in significant financial remittances (Vertovec 2009) but that social and cultural remittances also flow back into the countries of origin (Khagram/Levitt 2008). What significance these complex processes have for the actors, communities, regions and nation-states has up to now only been studied on a preliminary basis.

#### *Transnational Organizations and Politics*

As the example of transnational migrant circuits has already suggested, such transnational migration movements are in many cases accompanied by support processes. Everyday social support is one of the decisive social processes that allow these transnational social fields to occur in the first place and act, as it were, as their lubricant. Both the form of social support (material, emotional, cultural support) as well as the support process itself (creating reciprocity, building the organization, use of networks) may, however, differ significantly. It should be noted that, along with the stabilization and institutionalization of transnational social fields, social support becomes formalized and organizations are created that ensure this support. This “meso-link” has received too little consideration in transnationality research up to now and until now it has also scarcely been taken into account by social work.

Alongside such transnational migrant organizations, (at least) four other types of organizations may be identified which organize support and assistance on a transnational basis (Homfeldt/Schröer/Schweppe 2007: 16). Generally, they address and work on social problems that in the context of individual nation-states cannot be properly dealt with and/or are created by these in the first place: supranational organizations which (supposedly) focus on globally significant challenges (UNICEF, for example); welfare associations and foundations which for religious or moral reasons are involved transnationally (SOS Children’s Villages, for example); international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) which support, for instance, human rights (Amnesty International, for example) and transnational social movements that critically oppose, for example, one-sided, economically oriented globalization (People’s Global Action, for example). The increasing importance of such transnationally active organizations also leads to new “mixtures and forms of

cooperation between the economy, the federal government and society” (ibid.) and, as a consequence, to new forms of transnational or global governance.

### *Transnational Knowledge Production*

Third, transnational studies have made clear that the neglect of these everyday transnational practices, organizations and politics is also a symptom of an inherent weakness in social science methodology and theory building. For too long the latter has overlooked the importance and the changing meaning of the nation, the nation-state, and its institutions (e.g., territory, law, authority). Subsumed under the term “methodological nationalism” (Köngeter 2009), this blind spot hindered the exploration and theoretical modelling of those transnational processes already underway for some time. This issue also concerns theories of social work, at least in Germany (ibid.). With the increasing attention to and research on the previously cited transnational processes, social work as a theoretical-scholarly discipline also faces new challenges. Alongside research that is still extended too little in the direction of international comparative research, new paths have to be explored for also researching these transnational phenomena transnationally. A fundamental challenge will at the same time lie in the need for reflecting on the nation-state contextuality to be found in these concepts, theories and research methods. A transnational production of knowledge requires suitable translations of theories, research findings and methods in full knowledge of the fact that translations inevitably go hand in hand with transformations.

### **3 Critical Placements and Perspectives**

Transnational studies have in many respects and from varying disciplinary angles been criticized, without this having up to now damaged their popularity. A helpful survey of the main points of criticism is provided by Vertovec (2009: 17). One of the most widely-held objections in this context is the assertion that transnational studies view transnationality as a comparatively new or only in recent times widespread phenomenon. Although a few, mainly early, publications would suggest such an interpretation, it is precisely transnationality research that has developed a historical perspective on border-crossing processes and, in doing so, made clear that while the forms of transnational practices may have evolved because of new technological, social and economic conditions, transnationality itself must be seen nonetheless as equiprimordial with the development of the modern nation-state. The development of nations as “imagined communities” and the resulting assertion of a global territorialization of the social world in distinct nation-states is a precondition for the possibility or the necessity of crossing such borders in the first place.

Transnational studies thus must deal with a basic paradox: on the one hand, the interesting thing about social practices that cross over nation-state boundaries is precisely the fact that through this such boundaries are made visible and reproduced. In this context critics have blamed transnational studies for the fact that it remains unclear precisely what is meant by the prefix “trans-.” Transnational practices can not only lead to a lessening or canceling of difference; they can also deepen it. This objection is, however, less a problem for empirical and theoretical research on these phenomena and more an objection to the euphoric use of the term, with which the hope is sometimes linked that nation-state borders can be overcome.

Finally, this shows that there is still a need for making transnational studies theoretically precise. Common to most of the theoretical underpinning is that it operates with an insufficiently complex understanding of the term “border.” Although territory is one of the fundamental institutions of the modern nation-state, the latter is characterized by an entire

bundle of interlocking institutions (law, language, authority, affiliation, etc.) that are not at all congruent with the particular social space that a nation-state claims for itself. To this extent, transnational practices can even be observed, on the one hand, when no national borders are being crossed (for example in the context of multinational states). On the other, the reverse is also true, namely that not every single border-crossing practice is necessarily transnational in nature (for example in the context of certain scientific/scholarly networks). One can only speak of transnational practices when at the same time one or more institutions from different nation-state contexts gain importance, these are set in relation to one another, and translation processes occur. In the process, very much in keeping with the views of Glick Schiller and Levitt (2006), “interconnections of people, ideas, objects and capital” emerge – beyond nation-state borders. But borders are not identical here with territorial borders, thus objectifying these, as it were. Instead, they are understood as relevant differences between institutions of different nation-state origin. Such theoretical reformulations – which can only be suggested here – of the previous substantial, empirical findings of transnational studies have for the most part yet to be made.

## References

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