Chapter Two: Engaging Informants in Multisited Research

Gea Wijers and Heidi Dahles

2.1 Introduction

Research on transnational migration poses methodological challenges that emerge in particular from the partial invisibility and multisited anchorings of the research population in their movements through transnational networks. The methodological challenges faced emphasize the inevitability of a multisited research design in migration research as much as the engagement of research population as participants instead of mere ‘respondents’. This article reflects upon these challenges and discusses ways to address them. It aims to inquire into ways in which researchers may face the partially contradictory challenges of the unboundedness and multiple rootedness of their informants in a constructive and participatory fashion. The approach developed to deal with the methodological challenges holds the promise of an integrated perspective in data collection, analysis and writing, the benefits of ‘engaged scholarship’, and the acknowledgment that ‘anchorages’ are as much part of a research design as are ‘movements’ in order to capture transnational behaviors. With these inquiries illustrated by an ethnographic research project we argue that an integrated and participative approach is needed in the study or transnationalism in order to understand its dynamics as well as anchor the social ties binding host- and homelands.

The focus of reflection are the first author’s experiences with the methods used in her research project inquiring into the professional engagement of Cambodian returnees in their homeland. This project explores the ways in which first generation Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees navigate transnational networks as resources for their contributions to the transformation of Cambodia. Cambodian migrant communities came into being as a consequence of the turbulence of Cambodian civil war (1970-1975), the Khmer Rouge takeover (1975-1979) and the Vietnamese intervention (1979-1989) that forced many Cambodians into exile. Among the nations that offered refuge, America and France stand out for the number of Southeast Asian refugees that were accepted for resettlement (Chan 2004, Ong 2003). Decades after these conflicts, the first generations of refugees are resettling in Cambodia (Center for Policy Analysis and Research on Refugee Issues 1991). This first generation, the research population, combines the personal experiences of pre-conflict Cambodia and a prolonged stay in countries of exile with the process of ‘getting reacquainted’ with a post conflict and aid dependent Cambodia suffering from widespread corruption and often characterized as a fragile state (Becker 1998, Un 2005).

In order to address the specific characteristics of the Cambodian experience in migrant communities, the research design encompasses:

- within-group comparisons in Cambodian communities across national systems (Candea 2007, Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004);

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- ethnographic multisited research to follow the empirical connections under study and to look at the practices of people in places and the movements between them (Falzon 2009, Marcus 1995);
- the engagement of the research population in the study as informants and participants (Van de Ven 2007, Wiesenfeld 2000).

Acknowledging the socially constructed nature of reality and the social embeddedness of individual agents, in the comparative multiple case study research design the cases are built around selected returnee key participants, their social networks, and other stakeholders in their professional contexts. The classic triangular interdependence between three parties, the returnee, the overseas migrant community and homeland society is taken as a starting point (Cohen 1997). The returnees’ contributions to the change of societal conditions in Cambodia are traced from, first, their experiences in exile to, second, the resources available in their transnational networks to, third, their life upon return to Cambodia. To address these subjects adequately, multisited, comparative embedded case studies were produced and analyzed in order to follow the informants in their social fields while acknowledging their embeddedness in multiple locations and contexts and communities (Richter 2013).

This paper is structured as follows. The following section presents a literature review that discusses conventional approaches and their shortcomings in transnational migration research in order to position the contribution of the current research project within relevant academic debates. Next, the research process is described by addressing matters such as the research design, locating the research population, locating the field and getting access, case selection, data analysis and engaging participants. The article wraps up with reflections on the research process and the achievements of the approach, and concludes with an appeal for multisited research in transnational migration research and the engagement of ‘informants’ as coproducers of both data and interpretations.

### 2.2 Literature Review

With Walter Benjamin (1989) we agree that all knowledge claims are necessarily embedded in particular subjective understandings of how the world works. Working in the field of transnational migration in particular, we need to acknowledge the multiple embeddedness of the people under study and their movements across social space. Therefore, a methodology conducive to capturing the ensuing multiple realities. Contested understandings of the concept of transnationalism have contributed to the debate on adequate research methods (see, for instance: Falzon 2009, Lauser 2005, Richter 2013).

Transnationalism as a concept put in its place the idea of interconnected flows of people, information and goods across the world and captures the dynamics of globalization. On the one hand, these flows have been theorized as a “state of being” (for instance, Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999) or a set of practices creating “unbounded” transnational spaces working for the good of “transmigrants” (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1992). Considered too vague by others, the concept is also described as being in need of clear delimitations and definitions, as well as distinct methodological approaches (Appadurai 1991, Vertovec 2001).

While the need for multisited ethnographic research in transnational settings is most explicitly pronounced by Marcus (1995) as early as the mid-1990s, his response to the problem never truly finds its way
into general practice and debates until recently. A few years later, Smith and Guarnizo (1998) add the (still) unresolved question of the appropriate level of analysis to the debate. Again, methodological advancements are slow to follow.

One aspect of the criticism is the call for comparative research. As introduced above, Appadurai (1991), Vertovec (1999), Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004), Lauser (2005), Falzon (ed. 2009) and others have critically commented on methodological approaches to the research of globalization and transnationalism calling for more comparative empirical studies ‘to explore and to explain the differences’ (Vertovec 1999: 456).

We agree with these calls for comparative research relevant to the study of transnationalism. However, as previous multisited research by Mazzucato (2007) and others has shown (see also: Horst 2002, Davids and Van Houte 2008, Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), even a comparative research does not highlight important aspects of transnationalism such as the anchorages and flows of transnational social ties. While acknowledging that the ideal practice of multisited research, in effect, is a complex and often underestimated process (Hage 2005), we propose that the anchors of time, people and space are indeed needed to research transnational social space. Research endeavours would need to be multisited in order to follow the networks under comparison back to their roots (Richter 2013).

Currently, this partial attention to the social ties that make a transnational network is still prominent in, especially, the empirical study of diaspora connections. While studying the triangle of connections between people in exile, their host countries and home countries, over the years, research designs remained firmly planted within either host land or homeland communities in order to make local comparisons (see for instance: Bloemraad 2006, Constant and Massey 2002, Flores 2009, Stepick and Stepick 2009, Sussman 2011, Tsuda 2009). Conversely, as the transnational ‘state’ of diaspora groups is often assumed to be “unbounded”, the research was focused on the virtual “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) that are supposed to bring them together. These “digital diasporas”, communities in exile made up of members with a distinct and shared commitment to a distant homeland and connecting through the internet (Cohen 1997), are generally studied through their digital, virtual communities (Brinkerhoff 2009, Kilduff and Corley 1999). The approaches, again, do not allow for a balanced overview of transnational relations. Even an imagined community cannot be studied without paying attention to the physical contexts of the senders and receivers that, together, create and recreate this social construct.

Additionally, with Yeung it is agreed that returnees are “both facilitated and constrained by ongoing processes of institutional relations in both home and host countries”(Yeung 2002: 30). Transnational institutional relations are perceived of by Yeung as consisting of social and business networks as well as political-economic structures and dominant organizational and cultural practices in the home country and host country in which participants are embedded and that may shape the outcomes of their activities (Yeung 2002, also: Stepick and Stepick 2009). The inclusion of this approach to transnational migration explicitly allows for an exploration of the degree of the unboundedness of the participants’ activities, their anchorages in host and homeland and the interactions between unbounded and anchored dimensions of the participants’ professional life.

Embeddedness is understood, not as an act or situation but as a process, an ongoing ‘production’ of social legitimacy that may continuously change in its depth, breadth and width (Granovetter 1985, Schweitzer et al. 1997). Based on our research findings, we argue that the returnees’ embeddedness, binding them to host land institutions and homeland governmental or non-governmental organizations, creates the potential for both
positive and negative effects for all parties entangled in the transnational triangle. In order to compare the nature of these dynamics, the positioning of returnees in the contexts of host- and homelands need to be part of fieldwork investigations. In effect, the compilation of embedded cases proposed here adds value by allowing for an acknowledgement of national institutional structures while tracking participants’ social ties in an engaged approach.

2.3 The Research Process

2.3.1 Designing the Research

For the research on transnational networks we are using to illustrate our arguments in this article, in accordance with the level of inquiry, ethnographic methods were considered most pertinent for data-collection. Fieldwork was conducted with key-participants and individual community members in: Lyon, France, Long Beach (CA) USA and Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. The research is designed to compare embedded case studies on Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees’ practices in exile and upon return (Marcus 1998, Schweitzer et al. 1999, Yin 1994). The case studies focused on the dynamics surrounding a single key participant in host and home countries.

Key informants were selected based on theoretical sampling rather than statistical sampling. This selection isolated specific cases that participants perceived as ‘successful’. Also, it balanced key participants’ gender as well as the governmental and non-governmental sector they were active in. Multiple data collection methods were combined. Observation, interviews, literature study and archival sources provided the input for analysis in order to explore and contribute to theories on transnationalism, return migration and institutional entrepreneurship (Eisenhardt 1989). The multisitedness added value resulting in a form of juxtaposition of phenomena in cases that conventionally appear to be “worlds apart” (Marcus 1995: 100-102).

An embedded case is characterized by the idea that cases can only be understood in their social context, thus, next to analysis of key participants experiences, a case study will include contextual analysis to come to an integrated interpretation of their practices, cultural conditions and the institutional structures they are governed by (Flyvbjerg 2006). In this research this is done by, first, collecting “narrativizations” (Kohler Riessman 1993) of personal experiences on three components of refugee/returnee life: the migrant community in a host land, the cohesion and diversity of their (inter)national social networks and their professional life upon return to Cambodia. During fieldwork and in relevant literature, furthermore, field level conditions in host and homeland that restrained or enabled the use of resources available in their transnational networks were evaluated.

In this study, issues are approached through conversation and narrativization in order to obtain not only comparable information about past actions in multiple sites, but also to infuse them with the meaning the actor awards to them (Kohler Riessman 1993). While the term of “narrativization” has long gone unnoticed in ethnographic research design, Kohler Riessman’s narrativizations certainly propose a distinct approach to ethnographic interviews. In contrast to personal “narratives” such as life stories, the full chronologic story of the narrator’s remembered life events, a narrativization focuses on particular limited sets of experiences (Atkinson 1998, Kohler Riessman 1993). Narrativizations may evolve naturally from a semi-structured interview in response to focused questions. Interviews aimed at narrativizationed responses are much like conversations that both interviewer/listener and narrator/interviewee engage in as participants (Mishler 1986).
2.3.2 People in Places

Data collection for this research took place during four three-months periods spent alternately in France, Cambodia, the United States and Cambodia in 2010 and 2011. These settings were selected based on prior investigations, virtual and physical, establishing that the research population would be ‘observable’ in and linked to the Cambodian communities in place (see, for selection of sites also Candea 2007).

The countrywide Cambodian population in France (2000) is estimated at 63,300 (Nann 2007: 148). As there is little literature or statistical data on the Cambodians in this region, French research locations were explored during a private holiday. Lyon was selected because it hosts one of the largest Cambodian French communities after Paris and Marseille, while the dispersal of Cambodians in the region is relatively limited. The apparent cohesion and strength of the local Cambodian community, and the responsiveness of some preliminary contacts, was assumed to allow for the establishment of connections and participative observation in data collection (Wijers 2011). In 2010, fieldwork was conducted in the Lyon region which holds about 14,000 people of Cambodian descent. In that same year, Cambodian French key participants were selected from the Lyon sample and studied in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

The countrywide Cambodian population in the United States (2000) is estimated at 149,047 (US Census 2000). There is a relatively large amount of information to be found on the Cambodian Americans on internet and in literature (see, for instance; Smith-Hefner 1999, Ebihara, Mortland and Ledgerwood 1994). Among other Cambodian American communities, the Long Beach community prides itself on being the largest Cambodian community outside of Cambodia. It was selected as a research location based on its relative ‘institutional completeness’ (Breton 1964). This concept refers to the number, variety, and nature of institutions in a community, serving as important communal reference points and providing opportunities for individuals to meet and interact. In 2011 fieldwork was conducted in ‘Cambodia Town’, the Long Beach Cambodian American community which holds about 30,000 people of Cambodian descent. In that same year, Cambodian American key participants were selected from the Long Beach sample and studied in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

2.3.3 Where to start?

In France and the United States, resettlement was studied as it was facilitated by community leaders and community members in the migrant organizations that contribute(d) to the Cambodian community. Migrant communities as a social space, thus, were a central structure in the research design. The community, its members and leaders, were meant to facilitate:

- producing an overview of the reasons for its members to consider remigration;
- developing an understanding of their social networks;
- providing an example of the returnees’ reception and situation in the host lands;
- case selection in Cambodia.

The migrant community is understood as a social network of voluntary and autonomous social organizations that are part of civil society and may be extended into a collective transnational network (Fennema 2004). The social networks formed within a migrant community may be an organized system of solidarity for the allocation of
opportunities for cultural conservation, social adaptation and homeland development (Bloemraad 2006, Um 2006b). The research strategy was built on the assumption that migrant communities channel the beliefs and behaviors of immigrants in their social adaptation and transnational networks thus allowing for an exploration of both their social capital and multiple embeddedness.

The research population is limited to the first generation of Cambodians, born in Cambodia and entering a resettlement country before 1979. They are assumed to inform this study based on their belonging to first waves of overseas refugees who have been eye-witnesses to and participants in the events dividing and reuniting Cambodia and the Cambodians overseas in host countries. While there was little research on Cambodian French community organizations to refer to on this subject, literature on the Cambodian American community (see for instance Chan 2004, Ong 2003, Poethig 1997) shows that this generation has played an important role in both the establishment of migrant organizations in the host land, as well as being relatively active in homeland politics.

In the sections above, the underlying assumptions of the research design and the starting point of the study were introduced. In the following, a reflection on some of the most forceful fieldwork experiences will be offered in order to build our argument. We start with the fieldwork in France and the United States.

2.3.4 Looking for community
It came as a surprise that upon arrival in Lyon and meeting again with the participants contacted earlier, it seemed as if the Cambodian community was barely discernible. In effect, it proved very hard to meet its people and inquire into their experiences. Compared to other migrant or ethnic communities in Lyon, such as the Gambian, Algerian or Moroccan, the Cambodians were almost invisible. It felt like the research mission had failed before it had even started. Understanding improved when a Cambodian French friend offered a copy of Prak’s *La Communauté Khmère dans l’ombre. Les difficultés rencontrées par les Refugiés Cambodgiens pour leur installation en France* (1992).

His study of the Cambodian community in Lyon confirmed the relative invisibility and restrained nature of the Cambodian community also in 1990. Underneath the surface of Asian communities in Lyon, Cambodian presence now manifested itself for inquiry. Having found some informants and being introduced to other Cambodians enthusiastic about our research, at the pagoda the different groups in the community started to share their experiences and paint a picture of this hidden and hiding, community (Wijers 2011). Where, at first, an absence was perceived, eventually Cambodians became recognized being behind a large number of Chinese restaurants and Asian foodstores.

Mixed findings on the (lack of) strength and cohesion of the local Cambodian communities in both Lyon and Long Beach affected the focus of the research. In France, the Cambodian turned out to be “in the shadows”, with little current activity in the social organizations making up the community as compared to the stories on its vibrancy in the 1980s and 1990s that individual participants brought forward. Some things had certainly not changed. As Prak (1992) and Ebihara et al. (1994) had already suggested, the centre of Cambodian attention was focused on the Buddhist pagodas, and that is where many Cambodians could be found. Instead of the community, the Cambodian Buddhist congregation became the vehicle of this research (Wijers 2011).

In Long Beach, the Cambodian community seemed to be caught up in a very different dynamic. While Cambodia Town was supposed to be the home uniting a large part of the Cambodian Americans, instead, its establishment turned out to be one of the many factors accentuating divisions among conflicting groups of Cambodian Americans and their organizations. Attempts to come up with an overview of the community’s
structure were frustrated by a multitude of dividing lines that were separating its members and produced conversations filled with suspicions and accusations. Only through an engaging effort and actively sharing information with participating and non-participating Cambodian American community members, an understanding of the dynamics within this community could be obtained. This understanding facilitated the case selection for the fieldwork in Phnom Penh and enabled our following of the transnational movements of our informants (Nadai and Maeder 2005).

The findings in Long Beach show that pre-and post-settlement as well as current Cambodian political affiliations are still considered influential in the choices for cooperation and community participation. This turned out to be a very relevant finding on Cambodian transnational networks in the host land that could be traced back to Cambodia and discussed with former Long Beach community leaders now active in Cambodian politics as well as compared to the experiences of Cambodian French returnees who know the Lyon Cambodian community.

In both Lyon and Long Beach, the Cambodian communities, the vehicles of this research, were moving and being moved by inside and outside structures as well as transnational ties. They offered little to hold on to in the way of surveys on returnees or descriptions of community cohesion. This, however, was also an important insight, as the anchorages of transnational networks in these host countries and the embeddedness of the Cambodians in their migrant communities and host societies appeared to be extraordinarily mixed.

2.3.5 Case selection

After these introductions to the host land settings and the research population, we now continue on to actual processes of case selection as compared to the ideas described above. While, at first, members and leaders of community organizations in Lyon and Long Beach were contacted systematically, these individual participants assisted in the recruitment of others (“snowball sampling”, see Goodman 1961). Next to questions on the local migrant community and their perspective on return, contacts were asked to refer to others they considered prominent in their position within the overseas Cambodian community and in their contributions to the transformation of Cambodia. Exemplary cases were selected based on transnational reputations, gender and organizational fields. The frequency of French or American references to returned Cambodian compatriots were used as leads to select key informants in Cambodia. The informants thus, in many ways, fulfilled the promise of becoming active participants in conducting this research (Wiesenfeld 2000). They showed their commitment after the interviews in France or the US and helped to approach prospective key informants in Phnom Penh. After gaining access first findings were verified and, eventually, during the fieldwork periods in Cambodia, some of participants were invited to continue participating in the research.

Following the network home, the selection criteria for key participants referred to in Cambodia were:

- working in the Cambodian governmental or NGO-sector, sectors explicitly facilitating contributions to the transformation of Cambodia;
- belonging to the first generation of refugees;
- having left Cambodia before 1980;
- returning after the Vietnamese occupation, after 1990.
As much as the migrant conditions of Cambodians in different host lands both converge and diverge, so does their situation upon return to Cambodia.

Conversations in host lands and homeland brought forward that the kind of return often generally referred to as ‘remigration’, meaning the permanent return of former migrants to their home country, is not a distinctive act with firm delimitations (Kazmierska 2005). For the group of returnees central to this inquiry the singular term remigration does not seem to adequately describe their plans and intentions and the full spectrum of continuing relationships in international social networks still operating between the Cambodian homeland and the American and French countries of exile (Davids and Van Houte 2008, Poethig 1997, Um 2006a). In fact, it is a sweeping generalization to even refer to a ‘host’ and ‘home’ land, as this notion is inherently ambivalent to groups of refugees of different generations, experiences and ambitions. The thoughts on and the act of return are not one-dimensional but may encompass provisional visits leading to remigration, short visits and permanent repatriation as well processes of circular migration (De Haas 2006). To study transnational networks in the assumption of a permanent return proved impossible. It required a multisited and ethnographic approach, however, to come to this insight and find an understanding from multiple perspectives of the returnees’ lives and contribution to (community) development both in the host country and Cambodia (Falzon 2009).

2.3.6 Data analysis

Data analysis can be described in terms of iterative processes of establishing and comparing categories, summarizing and interpreting during and after data collection. Data analysis evolved through several rounds of recording, transcribing, organizing and interpreting. In the multiple sites of this research these processes had their own dynamics, under the influence of practical factors, like for instance, the researcher’s language proficiency in Khmer, French and English and the need for translations. In many ways, cooperation with participants was just as central to the first stages of data-analysis, while still in the field, as it had been during data collection.

Shared reflections on preliminary results included the informants in the production of tentative conclusions. While we do not propose that the informant relationship was perfectly symmetric, certainly their co-involvement and cooperation was based on a solid foundation of mutual respect (Wiesenfeld 2000). These distinct processes, per fieldwork site and cumulatively, added layers of meaning to the data collected as the reflections relayed information on contexts and relational dynamics as well as enable the juxtaposition of information. This held an extra dimension in the work with key-informants in Phnom Penh as they were selected on their distinct characteristics, knowledge and rapport with the research and they were central to each case. This allowed for a co-operation that also helped determine the relative positioning of the data (Johnson 1990) and helped shape the contributions to academic debates (Eisenhardt 1989). While the researcher remained the leading ‘sense-maker’, practicing “engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven 2007) the informants evolved into their roles of “participants” and, in this role, helped to identify, reorder and reflect on the data. However imperfect in its claim to equality in cooperation, participants did share in the interpretation of draft overviews and tentative conclusions we presented to them.

The narrativizations collected in the interviews do not represent a static ‘truth’ but are inherently subjective and descriptive and, therefore, require interpretation. The participants themselves suggested some frameworks of interpretation, for example, by the compilation of narrative sequences of their accounts as well as
their comments on the compiled narrativizations resulting from fieldwork. The process of data analysis was focused on finding salient issues in the narrativized experiences and did not involve detailed syntactic or semantic analysis, nor a referential content analysis that went into detail in its attention to emphases and silences by the narrator in conversations (Kelle 1997). Thematic analysis of the narrativizations was approached by comparing plot lines across the key-participants accounts, as Flores (2009) proposes, central to the inquiry across the multiple sites of research was the accumulation of information on recurring and acknowledged “turning points” in the narrators’ lives. The acts, aims, causes and consequences of the returnees’ working on contributions to the transformation of Cambodia, are processed per case in personal “tales of learning and turning” that address the periods before, during and after exile from the perspective of the present (Flores 2009).

To analyze the data on these processes, the following actions were involved. First, interviews were recorded and transcribed in integrated, original language accounts. This data, corroborated by information found in other sources, was coded by hand and plot lines were identified. Themes were generated from the data (“coding up”: Fielding 1993). During each of the four fieldwork periods these were written down in a draft article and returned to selected participants for feedback. Generally, this resulted in an effort to plan additional interviews as well as an exploration of alternative directions of research.

By the end of each three month fieldwork period, several of such documents were produced and had been commented on. The dialogue with the participants generated awareness of the findings’ strengths and weaknesses, and it was possible to formulate additional questions for the periods of fieldwork to come. For instance, feedback on the first draft of conclusions on the Long Beach Cambodian community resulted in the identification of the underrepresentation of certain age groups. The interviews conducted showed a bias towards middle-aged participants (50-60 years of age) with limited contributions by senior (70+) members of the community, thus not including the perspectives of an important selection of first generation community members. Discovering this gap at a relatively early stage, it was possible to approach additional participants to address the problem.

A second round of analysis of the data involved the identification of specific overall themes in participants’ responses (“open coding”, see: Mikkelsen 2005:182). This formal and computer aided coding of all data was undertaken after fieldwork was finished. In order to recognize patterns in the data, a first general coding of the transcribed interviews with common sense codes resulted in the creation of a coding list used to order the data in Atlas.ti software (Kelle 1997). Separate – distinctly different - code “trees” were created for the Cambodian French and the Cambodian Americans. For instance, while the Cambodian Americans explicitly addressed the theme of community leadership, no such category needed to be made available for the organization of the Cambodian French data. Also, while almost all Cambodian French participants mention generational differences as a threat to the migrant community’s cohesion, this is only sporadically mentioned as a problem by the Cambodian Americans.

Subsequently, more discerning and critical rounds of coding the interviews and additional materials focused on comparing these two groups in terms of systems and concepts underlying recurring themes (“axial coding”, see: Mikkelsen 2005: 182). In an iterative process of revisiting theoretical literature and processing empirical information, assumptions were assessed and theoretical propositions explored (“selective coding”, see: Mikkelsen 2005: 182). This final phase of analysis that we view as the process of discovery addressed the complexity of comparing groups of participants:
• separately between all sites studied;
• making grouped comparisons between all returnees and all overseas community members;
• making separate comparisons between all Cambodian American and all Cambodian French participants involved.

2.4 Reflection

As these experiences in the research process have brought forward, multisited ethnographic research offers several opportunities to follow both the flow and anchorages of social ties. It helped avoiding the rigidity of quantitative categorizations while cherishing individual differences and soliciting informants’ explicit participation. It has allowed for unexpected contributions to current academic debates on multisited research on migrant communities and their movements in transnational migration, it has built and provided nuances to existing propositions on informant relationships, also, it has permitted for midway adjustments during the exploration of Cambodian returnees’ transnational networking practice that proposes the re-evaluation of transnationalism theories and find a balance in addressing the ‘local’ within the ‘global’.

Theoretical contributions to the study of transnationalism are deduced by exposing how the returnees’ embeddedness in multiple sites may either become a resource or a restraint for their activities upon return. The Cambodian returnees’ transnationalism takes place indirectly through social networks but it is also, still, a physical presence passing national borders. It is affected by institutional structures and less ‘unbound’ than bidirectional. Informants’ experiences confirm what Tsuda (2009) has proposed as returnees’ “Geography is destiny” (Tsuda 2009: 229), meaning that the geopolitical position of a host country affects the returnees’ reception, and their social legitimacy, in the homeland. Moreover, contributing to transnationalism theory, findings in this research imply that we should call the undiscerning label of ‘transnational social fields’ into question and focus on the lasting bilocal influence of national institutions and structures on the remigrants in these case studies set in multiple localities.

Multisited research, however, is not an easy process. As this article illustrates, the data collected with ethnographic methods, semi-structured interviews, multisited observations and the study of French and English sources would hardly have provided comparable tales of turning without a thoughtful design. Multisited perspectives on participants’ practices and perceptions may be difficult to interpret in a meaningful way and require both analytical tools and frameworks as well as the backup of organized involvement by informants as participants. In order to produce a baseline of comparative data to explore the research question, methods require a degree of systemization. On the one hand, computer aided qualitative data-analysis can certainly facilitate these processes. On the other hand, the researcher will and should remain the most important interpreter in bringing it all together, especially when key assumptions are not met, turn out to be ‘invisible’ or untenable. The researcher needs to maintain a balance in order to render comparable data, adjust frameworks and explore themes within cases to the ultimate aim of contributing to building theories.

The multisited approach, when used in an integrative way, shows its inevitability in the rigorous practice of a relational sociology that binds multiple locations, multiple forms of collaboration, multiple types of
informants within multiple cases and multiple frames of interpretation while still enabling multiple comparisons. Its allure evolves from the researcher’s challenges in opening up these fields for comparison in cooperation with informants and turning these informants into ‘participants’ in parts of the work. Comparison between sites and practices hold a richness of data as well as layers of interpretation to fuel empiric analysis of transnational networks from multiple perspectives through engaged scholarship.

2.5 Conclusion

We stand at the beginning of a new decade of transnationalism research promising new insights into its patterns, products and consequences. In 2011, the observation still was justified that most of these works use a research design based either on virtual or local data-collection. Paradoxically, however, while collecting their data in these selected and singular locations, researchers often cling to the idea of transnationalism as an unsituated and uncontextualized phenomenon in an ‘imaginary space’. Even though such studies adopt conventional methodological practice, they aim at describing the ‘unboundedness’ to localities. It seems inevitable that this shortcoming distorts research findings.

In the research project on Cambodian returnees that was presented to illustrate our arguments it is particularly striking that, feeling the threat of exclusion, these privileged returnees isolate themselves in order to retain autonomy. This self-exclusion, however, makes them less effective in their activities and prevents their embeddedness. In this way, the awareness of a cultural identity, a dual experience and knowledge works against the effectiveness of their contributions upon return. The focus of their activities is solely on change and transformation, but their lack of social legitimacy makes it hard for them to be heard, acknowledged and accepted.

In order to validate these conclusions, in this article we have reflected on the challenges and changes in multisited research on Cambodian returnees and show that the aim and method of research need to converge. We have inquired into ways in which researchers may face the partially contradictory challenges of the unboundedness and multiple rootedness of their informants in a constructive and participatory fashion. As a result, we argue that an integrated participative approach is needed to make an attempt at understanding the dynamics at work in host land and homeland societies that anchor social ties. Moreover, we are convinced that, when we acknowledge the advantages of the multisited approach to address issues in transnationalism, we will effectively do justice to the fascinating, multifaceted and multisited nature of transnational lives.