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Key methodological tools for diaspora studies

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Key methodological tools for diaspora studies

Combining the transnational and intersectional approaches

Anna Amelina and Karolina Barglowski

In this chapter, we review the key social science strategies used to examine cross-border linkages and transnational migration and discuss their merits for empirical research on diaspora formation. As Roger Brubaker noted, most early discussions on diaspora ‘were firmly rooted in a conceptual “homeland”’ and were ‘concerned with a paradigmatic case, or a small number of cases’ (Brubaker 2005: 2). Today, however, the concept encompasses a proliferation of meanings and applications. Influential thinkers like Paul Gilroy (1993) and James Clifford (1994) have paved the way for a decidedly non-essentialist understanding of diaspora, which focuses on migrants’ cross-border linkages, flows and circulation, and practices of establishing social and symbolic ties. Rather than relying on notions of fixed connections to places, identities and cultures, we now see diasporas as communities that are constantly negotiated and constituted (Faist 2010). The negotiations involved reveal that ethnicity is not a stable category, but one that relies on the social practices of people who organize their membership of a group and evaluate their experiences of it according to what they consider to be ‘ethnic’. Because understandings of ethnicity vary across time and space, people by no means agree on ethnic sameness and otherness and, although diasporas may bring together individuals and offer them sources of community feelings, not all migrants from the same country of origin are equally included in diasporic life. In a study of Peruvian associations in the United States, Paerregaard (2010) observed that some organizations are open to all Peruvians who want to come together – for example, to play football, dance or engage in traditional folklore – whereas others select their members according to their regional origin or socio-economic status. Thus, it is important to focus more attention on the power relations and inequalities in the countries of emigration and immigration that coalesce in the diaspora.

Intersectional perspectives

In addition, scholars of queer and gender studies have offered numerous empirical examples of the complexities and challenges of diasporic life. More specifically, they have focused on heteronormative notions of heterosexual reproduction and intimate relationships, particularly in relation to those who deviate from the predominant ideas about the ways of life that are
common in their communities (Peña 2013). Queer studies that focus on diaspora have provided evidence of the contingent nature and flexible use of categories like ethnicity that are often taken for granted. In some circumstances, ‘queer’ migrants may emphasize a specific ethnic belonging to maintain membership in a diaspora, whereas in interactions with the non-migrant population, they may emphasize their ‘queerness’ to avoid racialized resentment (Manalansan 2000). Conversely, they may downplay their sexual belonging to gain access to economic and social resources from the diaspora in which they are living, even if doing so reinforces heteronormativity (Peña 2013). Other scholars have criticized the concept of diaspora for its failure to consider the distinct experiences of women in diasporic communities. Although women fulfil a crucial function in the reproduction of diasporas and ‘homeland’ attachments, and although they are given a distinct place in the global economy, they are often not represented in diaspora studies, which leads to the normalization of male experiences (Spivak 1996).

The works of these scholars resonate with constructivist notions that social categories and forms of belonging, such as gender and ethnicity, do not necessarily unite people (Anthias 1998; Wimmer 2008). For a study of diasporas in general, and especially an analysis of identity formation, it is thus imperative not to privilege ethnicity and nation over other types of boundaries, such as gender, class and sexuality. The criticism levelled at such approaches relates to the more recent intersectional perspectives that examine the interplay of gender, ethnicity, race, class and other axes of difference on various levels of social life, including the micro level of lived experience, the meso level of social relations and organizations, and the macro level of the social structures in which power and hierarchies are embedded (Amelina 2017; Lutz 2014). Accordingly, research on the formation of diasporas must consider the heterogeneity of the diasporic experiences of actors confronted with attributions relating to ‘gender’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘race’, ‘class’, ‘sexuality’, ‘disability’, ‘age’, ‘generation’ and ‘space’ (see also Bilge and Denis 2010).

This chapter builds on the above-described more nuanced and non-essentialist understandings of diaspora that rely on transnational and intersectional approaches to provide research strategies for studying the complexities of diasporic life. Methodologically, this involves acknowledging three central dimensions of diaspora formation. The first of these is the analysis of the practices of people who act together and, as a result, establish temporally stable forms of social and symbolic cross-border ties. This approach does not focus on the boundaries of diasporas, or on an ontology of ‘what is a diaspora?’, but rather on how actors draw boundaries to construct forms of belonging (Wimmer 2008). Second, these practices may involve ideologies of a ‘homeland’ and of an idealized return (Safran 1991) – an aspect strongly emphasized in the classical understanding of diasporas. More generally, they may also involve dense and continuous cross-border linkages (Faist 2010). Third, practices of ‘doing diaspora’ are linked to hierarchies of gender, ethnicity/race, class and other socially constructed axes of difference, which cannot be known a priori but must be studied empirically as social attributions.

This focus on diasporas certainly has its merits, but while it offers new opportunities to understand contemporary social life in an increasingly globalizing world, it also poses challenges and raises important methodological questions about the definition of our empirical field, the sample, and how to conduct our empirical analyses. In this chapter, we provide some guidance on studying the cross-border linkages of diasporas, though without favouring one form of belonging over others. Most importantly, we avoid methodological nationalism and ‘ethnic lenses’, for they disregard the multiple boundaries that together produce a diaspora. We begin the chapter with some reflections on the methodological challenges involved in researching diasporas, followed by a discussion of the most important research strategies for collecting and interpreting data. The chapter concludes with a closer look at the need to deconstruct the ‘groupist’ and fixed connotations of the concept of diaspora.
Pitfalls of homogenization: methodological predicaments

In empirical research on diasporas, it is important to guard against viewing diasporic communities as homogeneous. Homogenization occurs when diasporic entities are predefined exclusively by their ethnic or national origin, and/or when cultural similarity among community members is assumed. To overcome this form of naturalization during analysis, scholars must be aware of the challenges of methodological nationalism, the ethnic lens and heteronormative bias, all of which may be implicitly inscribed in their conceptual and empirical research efforts.

Methodological nationalism, which has been common in migration research since its origins (for a counter view, see Amelina et al. 2012; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003), addresses nation-states as the main contexts of empirical analysis and as the central frameworks of conceptual work. ‘Diaspora studies often trace dispersed populations no matter where they have settled, focusing on the dynamic interconnection, nostalgia and memory and identity within a particular population, relating them to a particular homeland’, but sometimes they reproduce elements of a methodologically nationalist position by approaching ‘nation’ as ‘extending across different terrains and places but nevertheless imagined as an organic and integrated whole’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 598). Paradoxically, it is exactly this imagination of a territorially unbound (yet homogeneous) ‘national body’ that makes it difficult to study how ‘nation-state building processes . . . impinge upon diasporic populations in its various locations’, which in turn makes it impossible to examine concrete ways in which state policies contribute to and shape cross-border diasporic communities (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 598).

Similarly, the ethnic lens (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016) and ethnic groupism (Brubaker 2002) in diaspora research create the risk that diasporic entities are approached as uniform communities characterized by consistent ethnically defined ‘cultural’ traits. By addressing ethnicity as a personal attribute of individuals, this approach ignores the relational and interactional production of ethnic belonging among those socially designated as members or non-members of diasporic communities (Wimmer 2008), and its essentialist perspective addresses ‘cultures’ as ‘package cultures’ whose members have unchangeable values and principles (cf. Amelina and Faist 2012).

The heteronormative bias of studies on diasporas is another aspect of homogenization. Researchers working in the areas of gender and queer studies, for example Manalansan (2000), have criticized this bias in the social sciences for perpetuating the idea that individuals rather than practices build diasporic communities and that migrant men and women (often biologically defined) produce the future generations of diasporans. However, given that both gender studies and the social sciences now commonly accept that gender relations are socially generated (West and Zimmerman 1987), this must be applied to research on diasporas. Instead of naturalizing and biologizing diasporic masculinities and femininities, researchers must ask how gender relations are constituted socially both within a diasporic community and in interactions between a diaspora and its social context.

The challenges posed by methodological nationalism, the ethnic lens and ethnic groupism, and the heteronormative bias in empirical research in the field make it necessary to develop research strategies that increase researchers’ sensitivity and reflexivity when studying cross-border diasporic phenomena.

Complexities of diasporic life: methodological tools for empirical research

Research on processes of diaspora formation must involve an analysis of the social practices through which actors establish social and symbolic cross-border ties. Their often-unpredictable
practices underlie complex forms of belonging to other individuals and places across the globe. In this section, we discuss social scientific methods of data collection and data interpretation. Our discussion focuses on qualitative methods, for the lower degree of pre-structuring they involve makes them the most suitable methods for approaching the complexity of diasporic life. The most prominent research strategies for data collection we introduce here are multi-sited ethnography, mobile ethnography, matched sampling and open forms of data collection, all of which call into question the sedentary views of social life that normalize immobility.

George E. Marcus’s (1995) seminal article ‘Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography’ has had a major influence on research on mobility and transnationality. His main premise is that ethnographic methods should not conceive of their empirical field as having clearly defined boundaries. In the mid-1990s, this view was ground-breaking because cross-border spatiality was still a relatively new concept in the social sciences. Marcus’s multi-sited ethnography includes reflections on cross-border spatiality as a distinct dimension of research design, which makes this methodology very useful for studying the complex character of the formation of diasporas that connect a variety of different people and places within and across borders. To allow researchers to identify their field, Marcus (1995) proposed six modes of analysis – ‘follow the people’, ‘follow the thing’, ‘follow the metaphor’, ‘follow the plot, story or allegory’, ‘follow the life or biography’ and ‘follow the conflict’. These, he argued, provide a more appropriate understanding of the cross-border organization of contemporary social life.

Mobile ethnography, which draws on the modes of analysis that Marcus proposed, places researchers’ mobility, as well as their ‘object’ of investigation, at the centre of their methodological reasoning. For example, Büscher and Urry (2009), who believe that neither mobility nor sedentarism should be regarded as the predominant ‘grammar’ of social life, argued that these two dimensions are interwoven and that researchers themselves are ‘on the move’. ‘By immersing themselves in the fleeting, multi-sensory, distributed, mobile and multiple, yet local, practical and ordered making of social and material realities, researchers gain an understanding of movement not as governed by rules, but as methodically generative’ (Büscher and Urry 2009: 103–4).

Likewise, the ‘matched sample methodology’ developed by Valentina Mazzucato takes into consideration that social phenomena may involve various sites (see Mazzucato 2009). Mazzucato is interested in how flows of goods, money, services and ideas between Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands and the individuals they know back in Ghana are transforming the institutions that shape local economies in the two countries. Mazzucato generally agrees with George E. Marcus that researchers should follow people, things, metaphors and so on, but she is also aware that it can be challenging to synthesize research in the various locations that play a part in the formation of a diasporic community, especially with in-depth and contextualized knowledge about these locations. Instead of following people, things, metaphors and so on, Mazzucato developed a research programme that reflected migrants’ simultaneous connections to various localities (usually, though not always, ‘home’ and ‘host’ localities) and suggested that researchers should work with scholars in the emigration countries to enable the international research team formed as a result to conduct research in various locations simultaneously.

Scholars must decide how to collect data, regardless of whether they follow people, and so on, or whether they work with scholars in other geographic locations. Quantitative methods such as large-scale surveys do have their merits, but qualitative methods are more useful for studying the formation of diasporas because of their less structured character (on designing semi-structured interviews in multi-sited ethnography, see Barglowski et al. 2015). The methods of data collection used in this area, the most common of which are interviews and participant observation, range from highly structured to highly open. The more open a data collection process, the more likely it will reveal the complexities of diasporic experiences.
An analysis of the social formation of diasporas that avoids a homogenizing view on diasporic communities requires appropriate qualitative tools not only for the collection but also for the interpretation of empirical data. Of importance in this regard are strategies for studying social signification processes, such as transnationally oriented social scientific hermeneutics, biographical approaches and data-interpretation methods inspired by intersectionality.

The focus of transnational hermeneutics is on the reconstruction of the intersubjective knowledge incorporated into the social practices of diasporic communities (Amelina 2010). The aim of this method, which originally emerged in the sociological tradition of the German-speaking research community (Soeffner 2004), is to reconstruct meaning patterns, classifications or cultural beliefs that are incorporated into social practices and, thus, shape social actions. This research strategy can be used to analyse qualitative interviews and participant observations and is usually applied not by one researcher alone but by a team of them. Prior to the data collection stage, the researchers using this strategy conduct a reflexive self-assessment of their own theoretical and individual bias towards the object of their investigation (Shinozaki 2012). After the data have been collected, transcribed and anonymized, the research team identifies the most important parts of the interview (or other) text, usually by means of open coding (Strauss 2010). Then follows a sequence analysis of the most important parts of the interview transcript, which presupposes that ‘every sentence and even every word of the selected passage has to be analysed with the aim of extracting the meaning pattern within the text’ (Amelina 2010). During this procedure, the research team ‘tries to develop as many versions of potential meaning patterns of the respective text parts as possible’ (Amelina 2010). In the last step, the researchers discuss their assumptions about the potential meanings identified in the text and focus on the most significant ones. What makes transnationally oriented hermeneutics so useful in this context, then, is that it understands diasporic practices as embedded in situations in which patterns of meaning relating to a similar object or situation may overlap. For example, actors may be simultaneously confronted with two or more understandings of masculinity, femininity and ethnic belonging. This means that in the last step of the hermeneutic analysis, identifying the most significant assumption(s) about the meaning pattern of a particular passage, requires researchers to be sensitive to the potential multiplicity of cultural scripts (concerning the same object or situation) with which mobile actors are potentially confronted. Only then will the researchers be able to identify overlaps of the meaning patterns that often characterize diasporic practices. This data-interpretation strategy is critical for homogenizing and holistic descriptions of diasporic social spaces.

Since biographical approaches have drawn some inspiration from transnational migration studies (for example, Apitzsch and Siouti 2014), transnationally oriented hermeneutics can be fruitfully combined with biographical data interpretation methods. The starting point of transnationally oriented biographical research is its focus on biographies as the ‘nodal points’ of individuals’ multilocal lifeworlds. Narrative interviews, which often represent the initial step in studies using the biographical approach, give scholars an opportunity to reconstruct individuals’ experiences of mobility, immobility, long-distance relationships and multilocal life projects retrospectively. Here, the interpreter’s work involves two steps – a hermeneutical case reconstruction of life history – that is, the experience lived through the life course – and the reconstruction of the life story – that is, the narrated vision of the life. ‘The life story and the life history always come together; they are dialectically linked and produce each other’ (Rosenthal 1995: 60, author’s translation). The benefit of interpreting biographical interviews by differentiating between an individual’s life story (presented by an interviewee) and that individual’s life history (reconstructed by a researcher) is that this method can uncover individual experiences and knowledge patterns relating to the interviewees’ retrospective perceptions of cross-border
diasporic lifeworlds, which may include experiences in the migration-sending, the migration-receiving and any third countries or localities. In addition, this research strategy can also reveal the mutual shaping between individual biographical projects and the structures of diasporic communities (Bilecen and Amelina 2017). In the past, it was applied primarily in French- and German-speaking migration research communities, and it can be used to analyse aspects of diaspora formation, either as a stand-alone method or in combination with other research strategies.

The third data-interpretation strategy draws on one of the most recent approaches of gender studies – intersectionality (Lutz 2014; Walby et al. 2012). The key tenet of this approach is that to analyse processes of domination and social inequalities – in particular, in the context of migration and transnational processes – it is necessary to consider the interplay of various ‘axes of difference’ that are generated as a result of processes such as ‘gender’, ‘ethnicity’/’race’, ‘class’, ‘sexuality’, ‘health’/‘disability’, ‘age’/’generation’ and ‘space’ (Amelina 2017): ‘The overall aim of intersectional analysis is to explore intersecting patterns between different structures of power and how people are simultaneously positioned – and position themselves – in multiple categories such as gender, class and race/ethnicity’ (Christensen and Jensen 2012: 110; see also Phoenix 2011). Strategies for interpreting interviews and other data can build on the intersectional perspective by using Mary Matsuda’s well-known ‘ask the other question’ methodology. As she (Matsuda 1991: 1189) explains:

The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call ‘ask the other question’. When I see something that looks racist, I ask ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’

A major benefit of using the intersectional perspective for data interpretation is that it allows us to address the relational production of power and domination both (1) inside diasporic communities and (2) between diasporic communities and the institutional structures of the sending and receiving countries:

1. By analysing power asymmetries within diasporic communities, scholars can reconstruct dominant and marginalized masculinities and femininities within the diasporas they are studying, as well as their linkages to notions of ethnic/racial, class-specific, (im)mobility-related and other diasporic images and attributions. This enables researchers to reveal dominant and subordinated social positions within diasporic configurations and, thus, to describe diasporas as multifaceted and non-homogenous (Amelina and Faist 2012; Lykke 2011).

2. The focus of intersectionality-inspired data-interpretation strategies on the relations of domination between diasporic communities and the institutional structures of sending and receiving countries offers a better understanding of the relational and complex co-constitution of power relations between the immobile ‘majorities’ and mobile ‘minorities’. In other words, such analysis considers a ‘majority-inclusive’ principle in the study of diasporic relations (Christensen and Jensen 2012), in that it allows for analysis not only of those conventionally categorized as ‘minorities’ but also of interrelated ‘lives . . . of the more powerful and privileged’ immobile actors often overlooked in research because of ‘the imagined normality of [sedentary] majority groups’ (Christensen and Jensen 2012: 112). Having emerged from the work of the English-speaking research community, the intersectional approach can be fruitfully combined with the analytical strategies mentioned earlier, for it also focuses, at least in parts of the paradigm, on the processes of signification and meaning-making incorporated into inequality-related categorization processes (Amelina 2017).
Conclusion

In this chapter, we proposed a non-essentialist approach to diaspora analysis that offers valuable insights into the complexities of social life both within and across borders. The methodological programme presented here makes it possible to call into question homogenizing views on diaspora formation that are based on an assumed ‘sameness’ and instead points to the multiplicity of ‘axes of difference’ involved in the (re)production of diasporic communities. This research agenda certainly has its merits when it comes to gaining a more nuanced understanding of social life, but because conventional research often tends to conceive of diasporas as entities with clear boundaries and taken-for-granted forms of solidarity and trust, it is far from being unchallenged. Empirical research shows that diasporic communities are by no means homogenous, but that they are composed of various subjective experiences and meanings of ethnicity/race, gender, class, sexuality and space, among others, which include notions of migration, mobility and immobility (Amelina 2017; Clifford 1994; Manalansan 2000; Paerregard 2010). We have shown that the criticism of the sedentarist bias in migration research has contributed to the emergence of new social scientific data collection and interpretation strategies that benefit the empirical study of diaspora formation. Research methodologies such as multi-sited and mobile ethnography rest on the assumption that diasporic life involves different sites. We have also discussed important means of data interpretation, including transnationally oriented hermeneutics, the biographical method and interpretation strategies inspired by intersectionality. These methods, and the distinct focus that each represents, make it possible to trace complex significations on the edges of diasporic configurations and, simultaneously, to consider their socially produced spatiality. Hence, we argue that diaspora research requires multi-sited, open research designs to accommodate the wide variety of structures and meanings that exists within and across borders.

Notes

1 The term ‘culture’ is not used here in its essentialist sense, but rather refers to socially produced and changeable meaning patterns, scripts and schemes that are incorporated into social practices, networks, organizations and institutions (Amelina 2017).

2 Unlike ‘objective hermeneutics’, social scientific hermeneutics is based on the socio-constructivist premise that social meaning is not stable but historically specific and changeable.

3 This research programme, which goes back to black feminism and involves relational and processual perspectives, highlights often overlooked forms of social inequality that result from the interplay of ‘gender’- and ‘class’-related categorizations, or of ‘ethnicity’/‘race’- and ‘sexuality’-related categorizations (Amelina 2017; Choo and Ferree 2010).

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