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Meandering beyond the Single Case in Urban Studies

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1. Introduction: Shifting from Single to Multiple Sites in Urban Studies

One strand of urban studies has had a long distinguished history of developing insights based on a single case study using ethnographic methods where the lone researcher invests a significant amount of time with informants (individuals, families, businesses) in local communities which are represented by groups in place-based settings. But as communities are sucked into globalization's embrace, sociologists who continue to take an active interest in understanding the city have good cause to go beyond single case studies. If we believe that the local matters in reshaping and modifying the effects of globalization, then the purpose of comparison lies in the ability to uncover different agencies on the ground over a range of issues. This focus on understanding global-local intersections will require the researcher to think more conceptually and comparatively.

Forms of economic globalization may work on a similar logic but as Michael Peter Smith (2001) argues in his debate with Harvey, the key is in understanding agency on the ground, the nature of representative power and how the global and the local come together in particular urban formations. This need to locate local agency is in keeping with urban studies' focus on understanding the contexts which these cases represent and how these contexts influence the outcomes that the researcher is interested in studying. This process of observation and explanation is better understood with a helpful distinction by Ragin (1987: 8-9) between the unit of observation (the unit at which data is collected and analysed) and the unit of explanation (which is the level at which explanation occurs). In urban studies, the unit of observation, as well as the unit of explanation, is almost always at the macro-social level (region, city, community and neighbourhood) and is closer to what Ragin (1987: 16) terms the case-oriented (as opposed to variable-oriented) approach. This approach has implications in terms of the relatively small number of cases which can be considered for comparative analysis as well as the sampling strategy.

The need to stay local with urban settings requires the researcher to confront the multiple linkages that are embedded within each study site. This problem is highlighted by Foster and

¹ First presented at the panel on "Methods and Methodologies in Urban Studies", Research Committee 21 (ISA) Conference on Urban Justice and Sustainability, Vancouver, August 22-25, 2007.

Kemper (2002: 138) in their review of urban anthropology fieldwork practices: “where faced with the choice between examining the internal structure of the group or on the relationships of its members to the rest of the urban population, most anthropologists, following the community study approach, [have] chosen the former”. For anthropologists, the “community study approach” is known by a more popular word “ethnography” which collectively embraces a number of attributes that describe this approach: developing close personal ties with the people studied, a reliance on informants, and living on site for an extended period of time. Such fieldwork choices must necessarily mean a decision to keep the unit of observation down to a manageable level. And even then, Suttles (1976: 14) points out the inherent difficulty of maintaining the intimate level of familiarity at the local on the one hand and linking such observations to the wider society on the other. Hannerz (1980: 54) also highlighted this issue by reference to Matza’s (1969: 70-71) observation that Chicago ethnographers “were blind to overlap and connection”, adding that later ethnographers shared this blindness by exaggerating the isolation of the social world which they studied².

Case studies of single sites have been valued for their ability to uncover the complexities on the ground and bring these to bear in developing an understanding of the local impacts of globalization. But for researchers in urban studies who seek to understand the nature of global local intersections, comparative research takes an added urgency. A globalizing world, with its transnational connections, creates the necessity for multi-site studies. The challenge of doing urban studies in a globalizing world lies in how we understand transnational practices at the level of the household as well as the individual and the reactions of multiple locales as threatened places, as sites of strategy and innovation and more generally localized responses to globalizing forces³.

How can we do creative urban fieldwork beyond a single case? Because the focus of urban studies lies precisely in the examination of the connections of the subject to its external relations, can the ability to generate insights be enhanced by the addition of more sites? Multi-site studies also add complexity to the research problem as the relationship between sites now has to be included as an issue to be conceptualized. And as Hannerz (2003: 206) points out, in multi-

² The more recent collaborative ethnography approach, explicitly takes a community position by suggesting co-conceptualization with local community participants (see Lassiter, 2005: 17). While this approach brings the researcher closer to the world-view of the community, it does not really address the “isolation” issue if the community, in a globalizing world, is increasingly influenced by external forces which local participants may be partially aware of. We return to this issue when the role of the informant is discussed in the concluding segment of the paper.

³ From a different research domain, Deleon and Rensnick-Terry (1999: 18) have suggested that for contemporary policy analysts: “that context counts has become a guiding principle in the second generation of comparative policy analysis”.

case or multi-site studies, the relationships between the cases, are as important in a study as the relationships within the site or case.

Using three examples from Asian urban studies, I want to think through the relationship between the nature of the research questions and explanation and how this is influenced by the unit of analysis, the levels of sampling, principle of selection, and order of selection. The aim, as expressed in Chabal and Daloz (2006: 171), is to “seek to devise a method able to account both for singular experiences and to provide a means of contrasting their evolution”.

2. Meandering beyond the Single Case: Three Approaches

If a globalizing world is constituted by transnational linkages and increasing external connections between localities, then doing urban studies should increasingly take a comparative perspective in an effort to understand how the global and the local interact. What options are there to develop a conceptually meaningful comparative research strategy? We address this problem by examining three approaches to qualitative comparative research and describe three studies whose research strategies approximate these approaches (see Table 1). My point in introducing these three approaches is to show the association of particular research strategies with epistemological positions and how these positions influence the way a comparative project is conceived.

a. Grounded Approaches

The link between epistemological position and research strategy is best demonstrated in the famous grounded theory inductive approach proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1976). The purpose of grounded theory lies in its objective to generate new insights from data rather than to verify hypotheses, (which forms the key objective of deductive approaches). The primacy given to data informs their approach to selecting cases, which requires the researcher to keep the task of concept formation undeveloped before they enter the field.

“The sociologist may begin the research with a partial framework of “local” concepts, designating few principal or gross features of the structure and processes in the situations that he will study... These concepts give him a beginning foothold on his research. Of course, he does not know the relevancy of these concepts to his problem – this problem must emerge...”

This injunction to keep preconceptualizations⁴ undeveloped and let theorizing emerge from the field has several procedural implications.

Firstly the role of literature is unimportant to the research endeavour. The focus on discovery leads to a healthy scepticism with regard to existing theory. In arguing against the opportunistic use of theory, Glaser and Strauss' (1967: 4-5) starting point in grounded theorizing is that data should discipline theory⁵. Suttles (1976: 1) makes a similar remark in justifying the position taken by ethnographers that "theory is sometimes thought to distort or obscure one's native, or somehow unguided, capacity for observation". This position is aptly captured in the following passage of a recent paper (O'Brien, 2006: 28):

"It (the research strategy) encourages us to shop for existing theories and concepts before and after we head to the field, but not buy much of what we find, especially when interviews make it clear that our preconceived notions have led us to miss the real question or imagine a dilemma that does not exist... It attaches considerable importance to the subjective experience of interviewers and regards shoe-horning evidence into 'ill-fitting categories' to be just the greatest sin imaginable".

The adoption of an "emergent perspective" commits the researcher to keep initial interviews relatively unfocussed and only when patterns and relationships emerge does the researcher move on to more focused questions (Glaser and Straus, 1967: 76). The initial sampling design is accordingly relatively uninformed. As noted by Cutcliffe (2000: 1477), because theory does not guide the initial sampling, some form of purposive sampling has to start the initial sampling process before the data analysis and conceptualization takes over as a further guide. In fact, as Platt (1992: 31) points out, the research fieldwork site takes on the formal properties of a case only after insights emerge from the field.

Such a position also fits with the selection of the most familiar case as the first case. Lofland and Lofland's (1984: 8) useful manual on doing qualitative research begins with the following observation that: "much of the best work in Sociology and other social sciences – within the naturalistic tradition and within other research traditions as well – is probably grounded in remote and/or current biographies of its creators". This suggests that first case in

⁴ To keep the researcher's mind uncluttered by existing concepts does not however mean an unfocused research strategy. Glaser and Straus (1967: 59) distinguish their research strategy from the ethnographic approach by arguing that the grounded approach selectively collects data to aid concept elaboration rather than full data on a group or community.

⁵ They allow for the influence of existing ideas and models, but point out that these elements must relate back to data (pages 5 and 253).

qualitative research is often the most familiar case⁶. This interplay between biography and sociological imagination is particularly fruitful because the researcher's familiarity and insertion in the local context generates significant guiding questions and connections. This intimate involvement with the local setting is also in keeping with a symbolic interactionist perspective where the key concern is with understanding the lifeworlds of the respondents. Glaser and Straus' suggestion of conceptual sampling proceeds from insights generated from the most familiar case. Through either minimum or maximum contrast, the research proceeds to add cases along a conceptual dimension informed by the first case (thus "grounded theory") until saturation (no new insights) is achieved.

The call to let theory emerge from the field represents very much a solo researcher enterprise where the researcher enters the field relatively uninformed and only leaves the field when the theorizing is complete (Glaser and Straus, 1967: 224-225).

Table 1: Contrasting Three approaches to Multi-Site Studies

Approach	<u>Initial</u> Relationship between Theory and Data	Case Selection Example from Asian Urban Studies Literature
Grounded Theory (Glaser and Straus, 1967)	Inductive (uses insights gleaned from field site to generate concepts and establish relationships)	Start with most familiar case, subsequent cases based on Minimum or Maximum Contrast until saturated. (see pp. 51-62) Maria Heimer (2006) "Field Sites, Research Design and Type of Findings" in <i>Doing Fieldwork in China</i> , Edited by M. Heimer and S. Thøgersen, NIAS: Coopenhagen
Analytic Ethnography (Snow, Morrill and Anderson, 2003)	Deductive (extending or refining theory): shift from discovery to development of theory	Theory guides selection. The next case is the Contrast Case. Aihwa Ong (1999) <i>Flexible Citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality</i> , Duke University Press, London.
Comparative Case Approach (Chabal and Daloz, 2006)	Inductive (context informs the relevance of questions generated by theories and concepts). p.172	Focus on different geographical sites, with sensitivity to local conditions. (see pp. 177-186) Rüdiger Korff "Global and Local Spheres: The Diversity of Southeast Asian Urbanism" <i>Sojourn</i> vol.11 (2): 288-313

⁶ Marcus' (1998: 15) review of the development of ethnography within anthropology noted the shift from distant to familiar subjects.

In searching for examples from the Asian urban studies literature that fit the grounded approach to multi-site comparisons, I was fortunate to find a fairly detailed writeup of Heimer's (2006) discussion of her fieldwork methods when she was doing her PhD fieldwork on local state corporatism in China⁷. From the onset, Heimer (2006: 59, 64) adopted an open-ended and exploratory approach, inspired but not influenced by existing work on the topic, putting "discovery before verification". Her departure from the "conventional anthropological approach" (Heimer's phrase) was to sample examples of local governments which have been successful in promoting development, leading her to 12 counties in China. Heimer (2006: 65) terms this a "one case-multi-field sites" approach and this fits quite closely with what Glaser and Strauss (1967: 51-62) describe as the minimal contrast to conceptual sampling. As Heimer (2006: 69) points out, such a strategy is useful in uncovering the essential features of the phenomenon under study. Using this sampling strategy, Heimer (2006) was therefore in a better position to cross check similar material from multiple sites which allowed her to gain a more in-depth understanding of why growth was promoted by local leaders. This invaluable ability to cross-check within a sample of similar examples allowed Heimer to assess motives of government officials in promoting local development through "probing for similarities while downplaying variations across place (or across regime types)" (2006: 69).

b. Analytic Ethnography

The second approach is suggested in reaction to ethnographic and grounded theory approaches⁸. By Snow, Morrill and Anderson's (2003) reckoning, ethnographic approaches have sacrificed theoretical insights in the search for understanding local subjectivities. They "suspect that very few ethnographers actually engage in theoretical discovery in the systematic manner Glaser and Strauss had in mind, and in a fashion Charmaz (2001) has clarified" (2003: 186). From this perspective, the idea of going into the field relatively uninformed seems naïve as it ignores a potentially helpful literature which is available to the researcher. The strategy to keep adding new cases until saturation is difficult to realize in practice. Instead, the approach suggested by Snow, Morrill and Anderson (2003) puts theory back into the driver's seat. Instead of allowing data to lead the researcher to discovery, the focus on extension or refinement of theory uses the existing

⁷ Maria Edin [Heimer] (2000) "Market Forces and Communist Power: Local Political Institutions and Economic Development", PhD Thesis, Uppsala University.

⁸ See Charmaz (2006: 178-179) distinction between the original version from Glaser and Strauss (1967) and subsequent elaborations independently from the two authors.

literature as a guide to further research. Accompanying this shift to theory extension is also a shift from inductive to deductive approaches where an existing theory or study guides the selection of the next case. Summarized, the focus in analytic ethnography is “to explore the possibility of transferring concepts and theory representing social forms or types across diverse contexts” (p.190).

That an existing literature can be used to get the sampling scheme is also very much in keeping with John Walton’s (1992: 121) point that “cases are ‘made’ by invoking theory”. By suggesting that theory guides the selection of cases, Walton (1992) is in favour of putting theory before the data and that cases only have a structure that is illuminated by an existing theoretical lens. This position is clear when Walton (1992: 124) remarks that “case studies... drift without anchor unless they are incorporated into some typology of general processes, made causally explicit within the case, and ultimately referred back to the universe which the case represents”

As an example of research approximating the analytic ethnographic approach, I examined the following work by Aihwa Ong. In *Flexible Citizenship*, Ong (1999) describes a particular social form or a new category of persons that has emerged, conditioned by, as well as taking advantage of, opportunities created by globalization. Ong’s work is significant because she attempts “an ethnography of transnational practices and linkages” (1999: 5). And in the afterword to the book, she lays out quite clearly a role for anthropological research in a globalizing world, where research provides “an enlarged space for telling the stories of modernity in ways that capture the interplay between culture and the material forms of social life” (*ibid*: 242). Here, Ong lays out the conceptual arguments which guide the ethnography of transnational practices, one which specifies practice as shaped by domination as well as reciprocity, where personal strategies relate to systems of governmentality, and where the person and the state adjust to the unfolding socio-economic order⁹.

Chabal and Daloz (2006: 12) argue that “the theoretical ambitions of the discipline demand that the conceptual framework and its attendant methodology be clearly in place before any research is undertaken”. While Ong’s conceptual arguments are nicely laid out, her research strategy seems more difficult to discern. The focus on Chinese subjects keeps the geographic focus on China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese ethnic communities in Southeast Asia (Ong, 1999: 7). The social type that has been identified “the flexible citizen” and the associated transnational practices, extends the geographic focus to America and Canada (Ong, 1999: 25).

⁹ There is more to Ong’s ambitious book. As the focus of the paper is on ethnographic research strategies, I skipped part 3 of *Flexible Citizenship*, which utilizes various mass media material to construct the new Chinese subject and part 4 which uses non ethnographic material to develop the concept of governmentality in Pacific Asia.

What seems unclear is the form of “the flexible citizen”, specifically what are the essential attributes that make up this category. In the densest ethnographic portions of the book (part 2), we encounter a banker, a hotelier and an middle-aged investor operating between San Francisco and Hong Kong and a civil servant posted to San Francisco, along with a several “site” visits to homes of wealthy Chinese Americans, along with profiles gleaned from the mass media. It is worth repeating that while the analytic ethnography approach often is useful in using theory as a compass to guide us to potential field sites and respondents, and in discussing the relevance of local insights to a larger literature, this has to be supplemented with a clear methodology that addresses the relevance of the data to conceptualizations, and that elaborates on the features of a particular social form or social type. While Ong (1999) has been deft in moving between different levels in the attempt at understanding the transnational practices, we are left wondering about the exact nature of the social type; who are the agents of such practices and the specific ways in which local context shape their practices¹⁰.

c. Comparative Case Approach

While grounded approaches advocate discovery and remain suspicious of theory and analytic ethnography takes theory extension as its primary objective and uses theory as a guide to sampling and research, the third approach attempts to strike a balance. Chabal and Daloz (2006) work within a comparative politics tradition and grapples with developing a comparative approach that will be faithful to the complexities of the local context and yet driven by questions relevant in an existing literature. This relationship is clearest in their explanation of what they mean by an inductive approach:

“By thinking inductively, we only mean to express the fact that our approach consists in employing concepts and theories that are most relevant to the questions being asked and the cases being studied” (p.172)

The call to use the existing literature as guide is evident in their argument that “comparative analysis requires above all a degree of conceptual and theoretical abstraction” (p.84) and their balance between theory and data: “the key to our approach lies in the quality of the ‘fit’ between the universal connotations of a ... concept and the unique local texture of the question being investigated” (p.189). Thus, for Chabal and Daloz (2006) the process of inductive research is to

¹⁰ It seems that the focus on the transnational practices of Ong’s informants have left them rather ungrounded as there is little ethnographic information to show how the particular localities which they have to operate in shape their practices.

refine explanation, not to generate concepts, which is the approach taken by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

And while grounded approaches implicitly support a solo researcher model that has the researcher spending considerable amounts of time in the field and developing close links with the informants, Chabal and Daloz (2006: 83-84), being aware of the difficulty of the researcher amassing a variety of cases with sufficient local texture, provide the following advice:

(the) ... approach requires a high level of local knowledge and it is not easily feasible for a single scholar to accumulate such data from a large number of distinct environments¹¹. Comparativists can use judiciously the material¹² garnered by those scholars who have specialist knowledge. They can also work in collaboration or collectively¹³.

A comparative research focus in urban studies will clearly favour social research as a collective enterprise. Research teams of varying sizes spread out over several countries may be able to arrive at a powerful set of insights working in tandem on a common set of research problems. Indeed, Chabal and Daloz (2006: 83-84), see research collaboration as an essential step in doing focused comparative research while maintaining thick description at the local levels.

If the danger of analytic ethnography lies in using cases to confirm conceptual arguments, then the inductive roots of the comparative case approach attempts to strike a balance. The approach offered by Chabal and Daloz (2006: 186-187, 203) suggests a role in letting existing theory guide research through its concepts, linkages and questions and yet takes a more inductive line by letting the local context speak to the researcher with regard to the relevance of such lines of reasoning and their limits. It is possible that judicious use of the existing literature may guide the research to select several sites to form a comparative sampling frame. However, the adoption of an inductive position also requires the researcher to assume a position of openness and which then prevents the researcher from making a stronger variable specification with regard to

¹¹ A multiple sites research design will require a more careful specification of the research problem and therefore represents a departure from the ethnographic tradition which emphasizes a strategy of "collecting the fullest data on a particular group" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 58). If ethnography is defined as an approach which uses observation, participant-observation and open-ended interviews (Prus, 1996: 103), then what we have lost by not using ethnography is participant observation and the accompanying insights which come from a more intimate involvement.

¹² The practice of developing a working knowledge through the local literature extends to site sampling as well. If the research question is specified, accessing the local literature on a potential case (e.g. an organization, a neighbourhood, etc) aids the researcher by providing a set of case attributes which allows the researcher to make a decision with regard to the usefulness of the potential case either as a similar or contrast case to other cases which the researcher is considering, in a multi-case or multi-site design.

¹³ For example, a multi-person, multi-site research approach focuses on a common research theme, leveraging on a number of significant local cases where each collaborator has specialist knowledge to facilitate comparisons.

selection beyond the initial case-driven guide. The inductive roots of this approach also require the researcher to invest enough time to understand various contexts as a prelude to case selection. Compared with grounded approaches, the cultural comparative approach is less suspicious of theory's polluting effects on data collection and yet Chabal and Daloz's call to ask "real questions" represents an inductive call to research by reminding researchers to use the local context to reshape and recast questions stemming from theory and concepts.

In considering the shift from a single to multiple cases and sites, an important question which the researcher has to consider is whether the variables under question can be specified in advanced and understood to the degree of specification expected in quantitative approaches. If it does, then more formal sampling methods can be applied to the selection of cases (see Ragin (1987), chapter 6). Variation along some scale is only possible if the variable or relationship is identified and its essential properties understood. However, urban studies favor the case-oriented rather than variable oriented approach because of its stress on local context. Moreover, when adopting a comparative perspective, urban studies tend towards comparisons between cities with regard to specific issues.

Given these requirements, I offer Korff's (1996) "In Global and Local Spheres: The Diversity of Southeast Asian Urbanism" as an approximation of this approach. Korff (1996) starts off his essay with an implication drawn from the globalization literature, namely that economic globalization also produces a low wage service class which supports the transnational class. Shifting to the context he is familiar with, namely Southeast Asian cities, Korff points out that this low wage service segment resides not just in low cost housing but in informal housing settlements which contain ambiguous property rights and therefore are open to redevelopment by businesses and authorities. Korff wants to see whether such locales contain associations that offer support for people lacking access to resources.

Comparing these three examples further reveals the different research positions and strategies these studies take. All three studies paid considerable attention to how the particular geographic contexts inform the study. Heimer's study was set within the economic ascendance of China as a rapidly industrializing country and Heimer was interested in understanding the role local government play in successfully initiating development schemes. Ong's famous study is one of the first in identifying the transnational strategies of mobile subjects within the context of East Asian economic success. Korff was concerned about the power of the urban poor within the context of rapidly globalizing capital cities of Southeast Asia.

Marcus (1999: 90-95), in his discussion of the object of study in the multi-site ethnographic approach asks a simple question: what are researchers "following" in their study.

Heimer was tracking instances of a particular variable – examples of successful local development efforts. Ong was following particular geographically mobile subjects, while Korff was examining slums as sites of urban poverty and organization.

We can repeat the question raised by Hannerz (2003) with regard to whether the cases in these multi-site studies are related in any way. For Heimer, the cases represented similar instances and because the minimal contrast approach was adopted, little can be said about the relationship between cases. While Ong specified the geographic context in her study, her sampling unit was focused on the subjects, individuals and households who are mobile and therefore demonstrate transnational strategies. We know very little about the differences between Hong Kong, Singapore and Taipei as contexts for influencing these strategies. We know most about the context of Korff's work at two levels. At the city level, Korff's choice of Southeast Asian capital cities as sites for his comparative analysis of slum dwellers' organization against the threat of eviction can be inferred from three lines of reasoning. First, his reading of Southeast Asian scholar Norton Ginburg (1955) lead to the argument that capital cities represent prime sources of urban power (and therefore worthy cases) as the strong concentration of elites and institutions in such cities act as a constraint on the formation of rival urban centers of power. Second, Korff (1996: 290) also suggests while Southeast Asian capital cities are prime examples of urban power, this power is also more diversified, making alliances between local communities and external groups an interesting topic of analysis. Third, as the capital city's integration with the global economy is strongest among the cities in Southeast Asia, this link also presents a threat to local communities in their need to develop external alliances as a way to resist evictions because of increased demand for urban land (Korff, 1996: 293).

At the level of the slum, drawing from his intimate knowledge of the three cities, Korff was able to develop an understanding of the life-worlds of slum dwellers and contrast the hierarchical patron-client relations in Bangkok's slums and the rather extensive links NGOs have with Manila slum dwellers with the strong horizontal links slum dwellers have within their neighbourhood. Korff (1996) was able to conclude that the vertical ties slum dwellers in Bangkok and Manila have, along with weaker state controls at the neighbourhood level, have allowed dwellers in these two cities to play a more active role in the development of the city, in contrast to Jakarta, where the affective ties are more restricted to a smaller group of neighbours and weak vertical linkages prevail.

What is the researcher's involvement in a multi-site research strategy? Both Marcus (1999: 97-99) and Burawoy (1991: 284) maintain the same high researcher involvement standards as single site studies by insisting on participant observation as a critical condition for

understanding the lifeworlds of respondents. Such level of involvement aimed at generating strong grounded insights is not always possible in multi-site strategies. Heimer (2006: 61) employed interviewing as a data collection strategy and she was able to do 153 interviews with local officials and entrepreneurs at three administrative levels (village, township, and county). Cross-checking the information between different levels provided Heimer with greater validity. For the segment on transnational practices, Ong (1999) relied on interviews with individuals supplemented by home visits. While we pointed out earlier that Ong's fieldwork was not linked systematically to context, it is important to note that Ong shifted her analysis to different conceptual levels by her focus on media portrayals of East Asia and on governmentality. Thus, by keeping her ethnographic involvement limited, Ong was able to move to other levels of analysis, which when put together was able to capture a larger fragment of globalizing Asia. Lastly, in Korff's study, a combination of a long research involvement, reliance on the relevant literature and collaboration informs this comparative study. We see that Korff did his early qualitative work on Bangkok slums (Korff, 1986) and his insights of informal housing in Manila came from his collaboration with Berner, a Bielefeld alumni and Korff's PhD student (Berner and Korff, 1995). Lea Jellinek's well-researched ethnography *Wheel of Fortune*, as well as G. Somantri's PhD thesis (another Bielefeld alumni), were heavily referenced for the insights on Jakarta. Such a strategy echoes the remarks by Chabal and Daloz (2006: 83-84) quoted earlier regarding the need to work collaboratively and also depend on material by other scholars.

The choice of a particular approach influences the researcher's data collection strategy and outcome. Embracing a grounded theory position, Heimer (2006: 64) was clear in "putting discovery before verification". Such an approach allowed Heimer to understand the motives of government officials, but this finding remained very much a China experience. Of the other two, both studies pay attention to the relationship between theory and insights from the local context in shaping the research and I think the difference is one of emphasis. Ong (1999) was strong on theory and general literature and thinner on her dependence on actual data and so the outcome is that data is presented as confirming the ideas stemming from the literature. However, this limited dependence allowed Ong to shift her analysis to other fields and we are rewarded with broader slice of globalizing Asia. Korff (1996), on the other hand, pays less attention to the general literature in conceptualizing his study. He only uses it sparingly as a sampling lead (type of city) and once the comparative analysis is attempted, theory fades into the background. However, as mentioned earlier, Korff relies extensively on published ethnographic accounts to inform his comparative analysis.

3. Conclusion

The nature of places has changed in a globalized world and with this change; we need to recalibrate our approach to ethnography. In an excellent paper discussing ethnography in a globalized world, Gille and O'riain (2002: 271) point to the growing importance of external relations and the multiple spatial scales confronting the ethnographer where the "potential and uneven delinking of the spatial and the social under conditions of globalization upsets ethnography's claim to understand social relations by being there and thus demands that we rethink the character of global ethnography". Follow Tsing (2000), Gille and O'riain (2002: 278) go on to suggest that "the ethnographer is less a chronicler of self-evident places than an interrogator of a variety of place-making projects". However, while they understand the importance of multi site studies, Gille and O'riain observed that the process of site selection "seems somewhat arbitrary" (p.286).

The key challenge of doing research in a globalizing world lays in the necessity of developing multi-site studies in order to understand transnational practices at the level of the household and the individual, and to study the adjustments of multiple locales as threatened places, as sites of resistance, strategy and innovation and more generally as localized responses to globalizing forces¹⁴. In my opinion, taking into account globalization must necessarily push the researcher to consider multi-site studies as a necessary way of understanding the interplay between the global and the local, but the process of selecting sites need not be arbitrary.

Within a multi-site framework, consulting with local researchers, along with the existing literature is crucial. Such an approach has to be considered along the following avenues:

- (i) Research Direction. It suggests potential themes and relationships to investigate. Within the constellation of relationships, previous knowledge suggests key variables as initial guides and provides an understanding of the variation of these variables. This position is important for it makes explicit that the ethnographer's role is not to present a "comprehensive account of a self-contained set of social relations" (Gille and O'riain (2002: 278). It is in fact, following a narrower set of variables with the ethnographer relying on local collaborators and local sites and cases to refine explanation in the fashion suggested by Chabal and Daloz (2006).
- (ii) Site Selection. In urban studies, such consultations illuminate the role of specific local contexts. As Gille and O'riain (2002: 281) point out, "any global force relies on enabling local conditions in order to take hold in a particular location". As mentioned earlier, unlike quantitative sampling, case sampling of whole units do not have limits that can be pre-specified (the concept of "population" does not make sense). And so

¹⁴ This point is spurred in part by Justin Lee's suggestion to specify the conditions of appropriateness during a September 6th, 2007 seminar presentation at the Department of Sociology, NUS.

case or site selection needs to be clarified from the findings of earlier research and the local knowledge of researchers. It is also in this context that John Walton's (1991:121) assertion that "cases are made by invoking theory" rings true. The logic of relations between cases or sites must by necessity be defined by a conceptual thread which comes out of an emerging literature in urban studies and so provides a strong rationale for a multi-site sampling framework.

- (iii) Researcher's Role and Research Claims. In an early discussion of the internal validity of ethnographic research, Leconte and Goetz (1982: 50) pay special attention to role of the length of stay (and by inference, insertion into the field) in the research site as the basis for establishing research claims. This then represents an important challenge in multi-sited ethnographies which is the extent to which claims are compromised by the shorter research lengths devoted to a particular site in multi-site studies¹⁵. And it is also here that theory can blind in the sense that a pre-existing set of concepts and relationships can lead to a verification exercise without due consideration to the context defined by the site. There are two ways to counter this bias. The first course of defense is the reliance on local researchers as mentors. It is increasingly difficult to keep to a position advocated by Burawoy (1991: 284) and Marcus (1999: 97-99) and use single researcher participant observation in multi-site studies. The systematic involvement of other researchers in the fieldwork process has to be a critical intervention. The second course of defense require Chabal and Daloz's (2006: 187) catch phrase to "deploy relevant concepts" but "terrain drives analysis". This interesting blended wisdom requires the ethnographer to let theory lead initially but allow the site to interrogate and verify these leads.
- (iv) Informant's Role. Doing research in an increasingly interconnected world within multiple urban setting requires awareness that the internal dynamics of lifeworlds is increasingly penetrated by external (out-group) relationships (Foster and Kemper 2002: 142). Within this scenario, Ong (1999: 243) makes an important point that even local claims need questioning since localized understandings need to be embedded within a context that is linked to other fluid macro processes. Understanding the limits of informant and other local claims because these are by definition embedded in a particular scalar level then provided the rationale for Ong to move her analysis between different scales in her analysis. In the face of this increased complexity, we need take a more comparative and flexible stance in urban studies and pay heed to what Prus (1996: 216) terms as "reluctant tolerances and tentative methodological amalgamations". More generally, this will require Foster and Kemper's (2002: 142) suggestion to work with a variety of methods (to which I add, following Ong's work, different types of data), and Chabal and Daloz's (2006: 83-84) advice to look to the work of local scholars and do collaborative research for deeper comparative insights.

My sense in undertaking comparative research in urban studies is that we will probably end up switching between the two modes of theorizing and data gathering. I would like to see an approach that derives questions and leads from the literature (and therefore a departure from

¹⁵ In this sense, the ethnographer's claim that saturation (where new interviews confirm previous discoveries) is achieved through an extended stay is compromised. I thank Rachel Safman for raising this point during a September 6th, 2007 seminar. I also acknowledge Chua Beng Huat's point about the necessity of specifying the limits of one's claim in the same seminar.

grounded approaches). The existing literature should also provide clues to suggest which additional and/or comparative cases to pick. Yet at the same time, data should not be trotted out as confirmatory either. Thus, in this sense, theory need not blind (as grounded approaches suggests) and theory should not blind (a danger in analytical ethnography). Theory should act as a foil against which the researcher reacts, with insights gleaned from local realities. As Chabal and Daloz (2006) remind us, the research needs to be knowledgeable enough of the local contexts to let local insights reshape the questions and the anticipated relationships.

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