

Special Issue Multi-locality studies:
Recent insights and future pathways

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest editors

Marco Alberio
Simone Caiello
Tino Schlinzig



Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Editorial manager: Carmine Urciuoli

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Redazione di Fuori Luogo

✉ redazione@fuoriluogo.info

tel. +39-081-2535883

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FUORI LUOGO MEETING

Exploring Multilocality: Family Transformations, Belonging, and the Challenges of Mobility - Interview with Laura Merla

Laura Merla is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Families and Sexualities (CIRFASE) at the Catholic University of Louvain, and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia.

QUESTION: *Although originally inspired by sociological reflections on behaviors in contemporary flexible and individualized society (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2000; Sennett, 2011), the debate on multi-localism, and the use of the term, is often attributed to the field of the social geography, in particular thanks to the work by Weichhart (2015). Is this a possible description of its origins? How would you define multi-localism and how did you get involved into this field of studies?*

ANSWER: It was the Swiss sociologist Cédric Duchêne-Lacroix that first introduced me to the concept of multilocality, back in 2013, at a conference on “Family life in the age of migration and mobility”. At the time, my work focused on transnational families and the way in which members of these families maintain a sense of belonging through the exchange of care across geographical borders. In collaboration with anthropologist Loretta Baldassar (UWA) and sociologist Majella Kilkey (University of Sheffield), I examined the forms that different types of support might take as they circulate across borders, as well as the structural factors that make it easier or harder for transnational family members to participate in these flows. This work was part of a research programme I was conducting at the UCLouvain that analysed - and still analyses today - contemporary family transformations in the context of distance and geographical mobility. Listening Cédric talk about multilocality, multilocal residentiality, and multilocal living, I realized that a whole field of research, mainly rooted in social geography and the sociology of space, had also developed conceptual tools that were very useful to examine the question of belonging and the practices deployed by families in a context of distance and mobility - this time, mainly within state borders. While the field of study of transnational families - which is mainly rooted in migrations studies - tends to emphasise what happens across borders, between ‘here’ and ‘there’, while recognising the importance of situating these dynamics within local contexts, the study of multilocality focuses more on questions of local anchoring, territoriality and territorial appropriation, and the effects of these multiple anchorings on feelings of belonging. For me, one of the central questions posed by multilocality concerns the ability to “make do” with multiple territorial anchors and to create stability and continuity in this context. Two metaphors are particularly inspiring in this respect. The first one is the archipelago. Duchêne-Lacroix uses it to characterise multilocal families (a “family archipelago” includes all the living quarters of family members), and to designate the fact that, through processes of appropriation, distant living spaces can be apprehended as forming a whole in the experience of individuals (through a process of “archipelisation of living spaces”). In both cases, the archipelago metaphor emphasizes issues of spatiality and territoriality, while at the same time challenging the often-heard idea that family life, when it unfolds in multiple places and through episodes of separation and intermittent co-presence, is necessarily fragmented and destructuring. The second one is the choreography of co-existence, which Duchêne-Lacroix borrows from time-geography. It refers to the delicate work of synchronisation that family members engage in to deal with the logistical challenges associated with multilocality. This conceptualization of family life across distance (which shows that families can do ‘with’ distance rather than ‘in spite of it’) strongly resonates with my own approach, which consists in de-constructing normative conceptions inspired by a

¹ Simone Caiello, Università degli Studi di Milano - Bicocca, simone.caiello@unimib.it, ORCID: 0000-0001-8641-1406; Marco Alberio, Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna, marco.alberio2@unibo.it, ORCID: 0000-0002-7713-9639; Tino Schlinzig, ETH Wohnforum - ETH CASE, Zurich, Switzerland, schlinzig@arch.ethz.ch, ORCID: 0009-0008-9534-9657.

traditional - and, I would dare say, conservative and outdated - vision of families that demonizes distance, mobility, and separation.

QUESTION: *How are you working on the topic in this period? What are the most interesting aspects to be addressed on the base of your research experience?*

ANSWER: I was very keen to build bridges between transnational and multilocal studies, and to do so, I decided to put transnational family studies a little bit to the side and design a research project on post-divorce multilocal families, called 'MobileKids'. Thanks to an ERC Starting grant, I explored during the last six years how children who grow up in shared physical custody arrangements (SPC) after a parental separation appropriate this multilocal mode of living and potentially develop new forms of habitus. SPC is a living arrangement where children reside alternatively (equally or nearly equally) in their mother's and their father's dwellings. My research focused mainly on Belgian children (a field study was also carried out in Italy from a slightly different angle and is currently being analysed) because SPC is strongly supported by Belgian family law and concerns around 1 in 3 children in post-divorce families. Parental divorce and separation are also important phenomena in Belgium, where only 60% of children grow up in classical nuclear families. Together with Bérengère Nobels, my doctoral student, I explored children's sense of home and the practices they develop to appropriate their own mobility, to manage the logistics involved in constantly transitioning between homes, to anchor themselves in each dwelling and negotiate the family relationships that unfold in each site, and to maintain a presence during their absence. Our main results have been published in 2022 in the book *"Deux maisons, un chez-soi. Expériences de vie de jeunes en hébergement égalitaire"* (Academia-L'Harmattan) and an English adaptation of the book is forthcoming in 2024 at Bristol University Press under the title *"Belonging and belongings. Children sense of home in shared custody arrangements"*.

In this work, we apply Duchêne-Lacroix' archipelago metaphor to the family configurations we study and envision each dwelling as an island with its own material and relational characteristics. The dwellings and their material environment can be very different from each other, as are the people that inhabit them, and the norms and values that prevail, and we analyse how children navigate within, and between, their two islands. The boundaries that parents draw between these islands can be more or less watertight or open, and we also show how young people sometimes circumvent these boundaries or put boundaries where there are none. It is difficult to summarise the contributions of this work here, but I would say in particular that this research has shown the crucial role that materiality plays in the lives of multi-local children, such as their personal effects, which they use to anchor themselves in places and/or to create stability in movement. Children also use the space and materiality of their living environment to negotiate their family relationships and their place in the family. More broadly, our research shows that children apprehend their two dwellings as connected and forming a whole in their experience. At the same time, the way children feel at home on each island can be different, while being complementary, depending on whether it is based on material (linked, for example, to the configuration of the premises), personal (having the opportunity to create your own cocoon), and/or relational dimensions.

QUESTION: *What are the current gaps in the research on Multi-locality? What could the Social Sciences contribute in the development of the field and are there interrelations to other fields already developed and to be further deepened or, on the other hand, some that should be built that are lacking?*

ANSWER: My knowledge of the field of study of multilocality is fairly limited, in the sense that I have mobilised the multilocal approach to study a very specific subject, that of family relationships in a context of geographical mobility. From this perspective, I would say that a lot still needs to be done to bring together transnational and multilocal family studies. In 2021 I coordinated with my MobileKids team a special issue of the journal *Recherches sociologiques et anthropologiques* entitled 'Family transformations and residential mobilities: the challenges of 'doing family' in, and through, space'. We brought together scholars from transnational and multilocality studies, and tried to identify in the introduction to the SI common lines of thinking,

based on their concrete empirical work. Several extremely rich common themes emerged. These include a) the multiplicity of affiliations and reference frames that people must deal with and the practices they adopt to navigate between these different frames and create continuity in their life experiences, b) the various forms of co-presence that people engage in to maintain a sense of belonging across space and time, their potentials, and their limitations, and c) the power relations that structure the relationship between family and space in a transnational/multilocal context. Brought together, these works highlight that “doing family” in a transnational/multilocal context requires the acquisition of particular skills, of ways of being in the world, that shape a specific habitus. I call this a “multilocal habitus”, drawing on the concept of transnational habitus and extending it to encompass multilocal families in all their diversity (thus considering that transnational families represent a form of multilocal family). A multilocal habitus “constitutes sets of potentially contradictory habits, patterns and dispositions, constructed in a multilocal family context. They are shaped by the experience of multiple referential frameworks and help social actors navigating between and dealing with them. They also help to define the contours of family and family inclusion at local and global levels - “here”, “there”, and “in-between” - through various forms of co-presence, and multisensorial, symbolic, virtual and material practices, which produce common knowledge and experiences » (Merla *et al.*, 2021). Much remains to be done to understand how family socialization works in practice to help children forge this habitus, what specific resources are needed, and how inequalities operate in this context. In this respect, I think it is vital to take an interest in the situation of young people who grow up in a violent environment - whether this violence is intra-familial, institutional or linked to a geopolitical context.

QUESTION: *What are the future social developments that could make it necessary to initiate further research? And what is the potential role, also in term of third mission, of the academia on that?*

ANSWER: For me, the climate crisis and the ecological transition that goes with it pose major challenges for people who live a multilocal lifestyle. Transnational family studies emerged in a world where travel had become much more accessible, to the point that regular visits ‘home’ were taken-for-granted for many families - although strong inequalities remained between those who had the legal documents and the financial/social/time resources to travel regularly, and those who didn’t. Tomorrow, these inequalities will dramatically increase. Air travel will become a luxury that few will be able to afford. We had a glimpse during the Covid crisis of the terrible consequences of restricting travel for transnational families. The Covid crisis also revealed the limits of technology for maintaining satisfactory relationships at a distance. As researchers, we have a fundamental role to play in the face of the changes that are coming. It is vital that we analyze in depth the way in which they unfold and impact on people, paying particular attention to the potential increase in social inequalities. We also have a responsibility to use our expertise to alert policymakers to the effects of the measures that will be considered.

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