

The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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**Ethnography as a Method for the Exploration
of the Social Production of Space**

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Introduction

In this paper I am exploring the method of ethnography for the research of the everyday production of space. My research has been especially interested in the connections of the construction of space and the construction of sex, gender (and sexuality). I asked *how* space is produced in everyday life and in social practices, and how gender and sexuality are, like other social dimensions of difference, woven into space and its social construction considering that the production of space is a process which is shaped by heteronormativity.

The concept of heteronormativity emerged in queer/feminist poststructuralist theories in the 1990ies. It assumes that heterosexuality is a strong, omnipresent norm which imposes persons to decide between two clearly differentiated genders. Also it assumes that people are attracted only to the opposite gender. Heteronormativity organizes society as an a-priori category of interpretation which implies a bundle of norms of behaviour (Wagenknecht 2007: 17).

My example for the exploration of the everyday production of space in social practices in the context of the relations of gender, sexuality and space is an ethnographic field study I carried out from 2004 to 2009 in the subcultural scene of drag kings and transgender in German cities, especially in Berlin and Cologne as well as in the small university town Marburg and in the Ruhr Region.

The scene of drag kings und transgender became more visible while issues of transgender and the rejection of the heteronormative matrix were made a more important topic on a practical level as well as on a theoretical level, especially in the context of queer transgender movements and queer theory since the mid-1990s (Feinberg 1997, Wilchins 1997, Stryker 1998, Volcano/Halberstam 1999, Butler 2004). Till now, there is not much empirically based research done on transgender and drag kings (exceptions are the studies by Halberstam 1998, Hasten 1999, Doan 2007, Schirmer 2010). My ethnographic study (Schuster 2010) represents a new approach to the issue, as it undertakes a multi-perspective exploration of the scene, of its socio-historical and spatial contexts and its place making. It takes account of people's social practices of (un)doing gender binary, of the materialities of their practices and places and of the underlying norms in the scene organizing inclusion and exclusion.

An important aspect of the researched scene is that the persons who form the scene are quite eager to reflect on the social construction of sex and gender along with the heteronormative conditions of society. This is becoming manifest especially in their practices. Drag kings are often persons who are socialized as women but can't identify with the ascribed sex and gender "woman" for different reasons. Some of them test out the frontiers of gender binary in a playful way. They are doing this in everyday settings as well as in the safer sphere of the scene where some also perform on stage. By performing masculinity as well as ambiguous genders, they confront the audience with the processes of the social construction of sex and gender. Moreover, they expose that the concept of an authentic and real gender is quite brittle and that there exist a range of possible genders.

Some, not all drag kings, feel quite familiar with the heterogeneous group of transgender. The concept "transgender" is used here just as in many subcultural contexts as an open term for all people who transgress gender binary, some with the idea of a transgression from one pole to the other (female to male or male to female), some with the intention of not belonging to one of both at all but feeling and living in-between.

"The term transgender has been appropriated by some gender variant individuals as an umbrella term referring to people who feel the need to contravene societal expectations and express a gender variant identity on a regular basis. These people include: cross-dressers, drag queens, drag kings and pre-operative, post-operative, and non-operative transsexuals." (Doan 2007: 58 f.)

In the course of my research, it became obvious that the concept “drag king” is inseparable from the concept “transgender” or “trans man”. Respectively, the spaces of drag kings and transgender are connected with each other in various ways while also intersecting with the spaces of lesbian, gay and “queer” scenes and other alternative scenes like the scene of the political left and the independent cultural scene. This was my reason to name the researched scene quite openly the “drag king and transgender scene”. Thus, I investigated the coherences within the scene as well as its connections with other subcultural scenes, places and spaces.

Ethnography as a sociological method

In my explorative research on the social production of space, ethnography has been an approach that opened up new perspectives, on the one hand on the researched subject of a subcultural community and its spaces, and on the other hand, on a more abstract level, on the multi-faceted production of space in the context of the construction of gender and sexuality.

Let me say some words about the methodology of ethnography. Why is ethnography an adequate method for the research of the *everyday production of space*? As subject and research questions on the production of space in social practices had not been an issue of empirical research before, an exploring and interpretative research perspective seemed to be appropriate. Characterized by an understanding perspective, ethnography intends to reconstruct the sense of social realities within the knowledge and the practices of individuals and groups which includes also exploring the relevance they assign to them (Hitzler 2000: 22 f.).

The gain of ethnography, thus, is the ability to reconstruct the sense of social realities by analyzing social patterns of interaction and communication as well as patterns of interpretation and structures of sense. Taking on the perspective of the social actors of a social field, ethnographic research focuses on the interactive practices. It produces a comprehensive approach to the logics of everyday practices. In consequence, ethnographical research consists of getting to know the research field and its particular logics *from within*.

„Their study [of everyday activities] is directed to the tasks of learning how members’ actual, ordinary activities consist of methods to make practical actions, practical circumstances, common sense knowledge of social structures, and practical sociological reasoning analyzeable; and of discovering the formal properties of commonplace, practical common sense actions, ‚from within‘ actual settings, as ongoing accomplishments of those settings.“
(Garfinkel 1967: vii-viii)

The inductive research perspective allows taking on logics from the social field and prevents to project theoretical views onto the subject. The purpose is to reconstruct the logics of the field in a critical way, from inside-out as well as with more distance, in order to open up the perspective for a macro-social interpretation which is essential for critical sociological research with a focus on social relations of power and dominance. Within the process of research, it is therefore useful that the researchers spend alternate time in both fields: the researched field and the scientific community. An alternating of perspectives allows opening the view from the micro perspective of the field to wider sociological contexts. This enables an empirically grounded theoretical interpretation.

Gender, sexuality and the social production of space – some theoretical thoughts

Gender and sexuality

The guiding thesis of my research has been that drag kings and transgender who incorporate complex, historically new subject positions produce new spaces and new forms of living

challenging collectively the heteronormative concepts of sex, gender and desire. Queer/feminist theory discusses the already mentioned problem of the heteronormative social order. The concepts of sex, gender and sexuality going along with it are especially problematic for transgender and intersex people and others who, like lesbian, gay and bisexual, do not fit in the binary sex/gender order and the heterosexual norm. The analysis of the social organisation and the construction of sex, gender and desire as heteronormative is a quite important and influential orientation/paradigm in queer/feminist poststructuralist theory (Butler 1990; 1993). It questions identity categories as well as essentialist perspectives on sex, gender and desire and focuses on the analysis of processes of social differentiation shaped by social categories like class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, 'race', ability, age and others. It deals with social inequalities from a critical point of view and with a focus on relations of power and domination.

Space

The presented research is also based on the discussion of theoretical concepts of space. If we assume that social reality is socially constructed (Berger/Luckmann 1966), also space and the order of sex, gender and sexuality is constructed by the members of the society. An important aspect of these constructions is formed by the actions of individuals, groups and institutions. As a part of the social structure, groups and individuals accept social ascriptions or distance themselves from them. In my research, I followed some ideas of the production of space concept by Henri Lefèbvre (1974) which I combined with the concept of 'synthesis capability' (*Syntheseleistung*) and 'spacing' by Martina Löw (2001). Thus I considered the social placing of individuals as a hierarchically organized, dynamic relational social process. In consequence, the distribution of space shows the positioning of individuals and groups within the social order. Conflicts over space make visible the hierarchical distribution of space as well as the possibilities of spatial redistributions. Thus, space is never static but, at least in parts, dynamic and negotiable in its arrangements and functions. Correspondingly, the social practices that constitute space are variable as well.

Space and sex/gender and sexuality

When thinking the production of space and sex/gender together, norms that structure this relation become important. Research in queer geography (Valentine 1993; 1996; 2002, Duncan 1996, Berlant/Warner 2002, Doan 2007) shows that in their production of space queer groups and individuals have to deal with the omnipresent heteronormative order shaping their practices. Valentine illustrates this with the following words.

„Heterosexuality is expressed in the way spaces are physically and socially organised; from houses to the workplace, restaurants to insurance companies, spaces reflect and support asymmetrical family units. The lack of recognition of alternative sexual identities means that places and organisations exclude lesbian and gay life-styles and so unconsciously reproduce heterosexual hegemony.” (Valentine 1993: 410)

Berlant/Warner add how in everyday practices the heteronormative order is reproduced. They underline that these practices often are less associated as a part of a sexual culture, such as “paying taxes, being disgusted, philandering, bequeathing, celebrating a holiday, investing for the future, teaching, disposing a corpse, carrying wallet photos, buying economy size, being nepotistic, running for president, divorcing, or owning anything ‘His’ and ‘Hers’” (Berlant/Warner 2002: 195). These examples show how heteronormative concepts are woven into virtually all everyday actions.

Valentine (1993) considers that lesbian and gay people do not only “violate norms about sexual behaviour and family structure” (Valentine 1993: 396). They also deviate from the norm of masculine and feminine behaviours that are considered as natural. She admits that these norms change over space and time, which means that sexuality is “not defined merely by sexual acts but exists as a process of power relations” (ibid.).

„Like housing and the workplace, therefore, most social spaces are organised to reflect and express heterosexual sociosexual relations. In particular, hotels and restaurants are environments of intimacy associated with heterosexual romance, dating, and sex; and pubs and clubs are environments where women receive and are expected to be receptive to male sexual advances. Lesbians can therefore feel put of place because of the orientation of these places towards heterosexual couples, or they are made feel out of place by the hostility of others who identify them as outsiders through their dress, body language, and disinterest in men.“ (Valentine 1993: 406)

This means that public spaces like streets and squares, but also shops, cafés and restaurants, are not asexual (Valentine 1996: 146; 155). Rather the heterosexing of space is a performative act which is naturalized through repetition and regulation. In this context, David Bell and Gill Valentine speak of the hegemony of heterosexual social relations in everyday environments (Bell/Valentine 1995: 7).

Most authors in queer geography do not consider the binary gender order as being the *primary* problem of the heteronormative structure (here Valentine is an exception when she mentions gender confusions and deviant gender behaviour as a substantial aspect of queer scenes). This means that most of the analyses of queer spaces and queer production of space focus on lesbian and gay spaces. This shows that the analysis of the lesbian and gay production of space is concentrated on *sexual* deviance from the norm. The majority of the so-called queer spaces implicate a stable basis of the binary gender order.

A broader concept of queer and a different perspective on queer spaces is found in the work of Petra Doan (2007). Doan is interested in transgendered perceptions of urban spaces and the relations of transgender and queer spaces in US-American cities. She shows that lesbian and gay spaces are always implicitly shaped by a dichotomous view of gender. As most people have quite clear concepts of the appropriate gender behaviour, this may often exclude transgender. Doan’s argues that “many lesbian and gay activists wished to present themselves as normal except for their selection of partners” (Doan 2007: 62) longing to normalize their lives and to fit in a broad social context. They therefore put a greater emphasis on gender normality. Lisa Duggan (2002) agrees with Doan when she assumes that gays and lesbians adopt more and more the heteronormative ideals of the couple and of a privatized intimacy. This new normalization has the consequence of new abjections and exclusions, which she names in the concept of homonormativity.

Following these analyses, my research is interested in the interruptions of the obviously omnipresent norm and in the opportunities of possible other spaces.

Drag king and transgender productions of space

I will present now some findings of my research that show *how* persons who do not fit in the heteronormative gender order produce their own spaces – in public and counter-public spheres. As already mentioned, my research has been focused on the production of space of the subcultural scene of drag kings and transgender in Germany. In their community, a part of people’s social practice consists in the reflection of the social construction of gender and sexuality. My study *Andere Räume [Other Spaces]* (Schuster 2010) discusses the mutual constitution of space and gender (which interferes with other categories of social

classification as class, ethnicity and age) – in interactions and social practices, in the interconnection of persons with the urban quarter and with material things as well as in the negotiations of norms and exclusions. I will show now some examples for the production of space at special places in the scene and discuss the importance of norms in this process.

In the course of my research, I considered the drag king and transgender scene more and more to be a *heterotopy* (Foucault 2001) as there is an explicit discussion about social realities and their social construction. On the basis of special norms and practices a heterotopy has the function to mirror, discuss and challenge social reality. Heterotopias possess utopian elements and function as spaces of compensation and illusion for those who deviate from the norm. Many participants of the scene are occupied with the topic of the social construction of gender ascription. Through their practices they create spaces for these processes of debate where they experiment and change their gender incorporation, often playfully and sometimes with the help of fiction (on stage, at the drag workshop and at parties). By producing new spaces and creating new subject positions, they confront the implicitness and the unquestioned norms of social reality.

The stage

Drag king and transgender spaces sometimes have to be considered as counter public and sometimes are placed in public spheres of streets and squares. On stages, at parties of the scene and within other subcultural contexts such as drag workshops, public discussions and meetings at bars drag kings and transgender reflect the heteronormative order and try to transgress category boundaries. The stage is a special place for the denaturalization of social categories and their boundaries. Its specific arrangement allows the enactment of the material and interactional construction of unambiguous gender as well as its irritation. Performers expose the processes of the acquirement of gender which, in theories on the social construction of gender, are considered to be part of the socialization process. The importance of the show is that it is at first an individual consideration. But the stage enables a collective exchange in which changes of the habitus (Bourdieu) are collectively reflected and enjoyed and the practices of everyday construction of gender are challenged.

Practices of many social actors show that they consciously deal with the social construction of gender and sexuality. While transgressing the binary gender order and heterosexual norms the social actors often also cross other social ascriptions, as for example their age appearance and their aspect of belonging to class and ethnicity. Concerning the social status, individuals who perform on stage often choose a social status which is considered as lower compared with their everyday status. Especially for the incorporation of masculinity this is quite often the case. Another observation is that, in the process of gender crossing, sexual identity is nearly always included and confused as well.

The styling corner

A special arrangement at drag king and transgender parties and workshops is the “styling corner”. This is a equipped with lots of styling material such as mastics glue for building beards, scissors, mirrors, hair wax, lipstick, mascara and material for breast binding etc. Some styling corners also provide wigs and clothes. At the styling corner gender transformations take place, people do themselves and others up, dress and do their make up.

Within the setting of a party, the styling corner often is situated near the entrance, at a doorway or near the cloakroom. Its placing points to its function. Being a part of the entrance of the heterotope space, it helps the guests of a party to transgress from everyday spaces to the

heterotopy. It is quite remarkable that dressing and doing up is done in public – if only the public of the party. The fact that dressing and doing up can be done in public deviates from the norm of hiding these procedures in more intimate places – at home, at closed dressing rooms and collective changing rooms which are separated between the supposed two genders. This gives a hint to the heterotope character of the party which is offering a space where some social conventions are suspended. The use of the styling corner at the party also implies that everyone is allowed to incorporate the gender s_he wants and even to change gender during the party without being asked for reasons or her_his “real” gender.

The creative act of dressing and doing up for many participants represents a significant part within the heterotope arrangement. It enables them to fit in the “other” norms of the heterotopy, especially by undoing the gender binary while incorporating an ambiguous gender. Workshops and parties frame the explicit occupation with the physical build of the gendered body. The question is why people dress and make up at parties and not at home. There are two possible answers to that. First, those practices show that participants mark a clear separation between everyday and heterotope incorporations. A reason for this may be that on the way to the party people are quite anxious to “pass” (with their actual gender incorporation). If they do not achieve to pass, this can have violent and harassing consequences. Transgender as well as lesbian and gay people still experience a lot of violence and harassment and, therefore, know quite well the often dangerous faces of heteronormative shaped everyday life (Namaste 1996, O’Brien 2008). According to this, door politics of queer spaces are concerned with the fear of discrimination and violence. Second, the practicing of dressing and doing up at the party shows the fear to meet with not so close friends in the streets or in public transport which can always lead to unwanted effects. People who know one’s everyday incorporated gender may unmask the divergence between the gender incorporated at the moment and everyday gender. As a result of such meetings also sanctions in everyday life have to be faced, e.g. at the workplace or in the neighbourhood.

Norms and exclusions

Norms play a crucial role in the process of the production of space. As Foucault (1983) has shown, normalization is a powerful social process which leads to special norms (of behaviour) in different kinds of spaces. All social spaces are shaped by *the* norm while it may be actualized in quite different, sometimes also subversive ways depending on the spatial context. In each social context there may be some differences concerning the norms which are considered as adequate. But only a few spaces question basic norms as the norm of heteronormativity.

In consequence, the production of specific spaces brings its own norms with it. Contesting hegemonic social norms of sex, gender and sexual desires, the scene creates its own norms, sometimes distancing from hegemonic norms, sometimes confirming them. The norms of the scene do not have the same normalization power as hegemonic norms. Rather these values and norms and the related practices mark a subversive positioning against hegemonic values and norms. They are based on specific value orientations which emerge when hegemonic norms are contested. Thus, it is difficult to clearly separate hegemonic from specific norms of the scene. They confirm and stabilize and depend on each other (Butler 1993).

So, which are the norms that characterize the scene? Due to their abstract character it is not easy to observe values in everyday life. Therefore, the range of values has to be deduced and interpreted from social actions in social situations. Especially when a certain action is not carried out as it had been expected in a social setting, the irritation which is caused makes visible the values and norms referred to in the setting. If this produces confusion, it is obvious

that the persons who are part of the setting need to discuss the norms of behaviour or the values behind it.

An important value in the scene is the already mentioned critique of the heteronormative regime which prescribes a dichotomous view of gender as well as an exclusive sexual attraction to the opposite gender. This basic critique has the impact of a value orientation and enables discussions on and experiments with alternative concepts. Moreover, for those not knowing the debates it is difficult to include and orientate in the scene. A second value orientation is to be seen in the scene's positioning within a range of other scenes which oppose racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and antisemitism. These values are pursued by means of more or less strict arrangements which include also the booting out of people who do not behave adequately at a party, in a bar or another place of the scene. A third specific kind of value orientation is associated with the belonging to the non-identity *queer* and according practices. This identification is a key criterion for the belonging to the scene, and a basis for the understanding of the prevailing norms. As queer is a non-identity concept, this may sound confusing. But someone with clear categorical ascriptions will have difficulties to familiarize in the scene.

As in many social contexts norms manifest in codes and symbols which sometimes influence on clothing and personal or collective styles of decoration as well as on language norms, habitualized norms shaped by age, social status and ethnicity, and practices in the scene (e.g. the acknowledgement which is given to an engagement in the scene and the devaluation of a consumer orientation in the scene). Also in the process of definition of the scene and its limits norms are of great importance. As the drag king and transgender scene does not possess its own places and has to lend rooms from other groups, there are many debates on the norms valid for each space. In these discussions, the participants construct a distance from other scenes defining the very special rules of their spaces which includes the use of sanctions if values and norms are corrupted. This shows also that drag king and transgender spaces unfold at the crossroads of different existing social and material spaces.

Conclusions

Let me finish with some conclusions concerning the general possibilities of an ethnographic approach for the social research on spatial phenomena. If we focus on social practices some aspects of social life become obvious which often have stayed out of view. The concerned aspects may be especially characterized as materialities and practicalities. Notably a research on processes of the production of space hardly can be accomplished without the perspective on these aspects. And where else is it possible to experience materiality and social practices, if not in the field itself?

The ethnographic perspective also enables a process of learning for the researchers. Observational methods and the identification with new perspectives bring with them an understanding of the functioning of social worlds and, as a whole, of social restrictions and constraints and the explicit or implicit irritations and debates on them.

Against the critique of ethnography as being too subjective I would argue with Stefan Hirschauer and Klaus Amann (1997). They state that the researcher is a quite sensitive instrument of observation. Even if being a member of the same society, a researcher can develop an "alienated view" (*befremdeter Blick*) on what is happening, focusing on irritations and considering the leading social principles and situations. The observed everyday settings, than, have to lead to an interpretation which includes the macro-social frames of social processes together with the structures of power and dominance which are woven into them.

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