

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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Multi-Locality Studies: Recent Insights and Future Pathways. Introduction to the Special Issue

Multi-locality: a brief outline of the phenomenon and related research

Mobility can be considered a central dimension in the contemporary world, profoundly impacting and rapidly altering collective and individual lives. As a product of the increasing availability of ever-more instantaneous means of transportation and communication, which allow activities to expand across time and space, the spatial dispersion of everyday life has become one of the defining characteristics of late modern societies (Bonß & Kesselring, 2001; Beck, 2000). Concerning the dynamics of personal relationships, this has resulted in, among other things, persistently high divorce rates as well as the geographic dispersion and recurrent mobility of family members (Nobles & Merla, 2022; Schier, 2016). As a consequence of increasing demands for mobility in the workplace, living arrangements are being spread across a number of different locations, which can be visited for short or long periods (Schmidt-Kallert & Franke, 2012; Schneider & Collet, 2010). Multi-locality is one of the outcomes of social and economic policies and a strategy used to adapt to these conditions across different domains of society: family and social relations, work and labour markets, and territorial interventions. As effectively described by Rolshoven (2006, p. 181; *our translation*)² “Multi-locality means *vita activa* in several places: the activity of everyday life in its entirety is spread over different places, each visited for varying durations and utilised with a greater or lesser degree of functional diversity”.

Although multi-locality is far from a new phenomenon exclusive to contemporary societies (Duchêne-Lacroix & Ködel, 2022; Hilti, 2016), its research is relatively recent, having started mainly in the 2000s. *Multi-locality studies* is still a developing field encompassing various disciplinary backgrounds such as sociology, social geography, housing studies, as well as planning and transportation sciences (Danielzyk & Dittrich-Wesbuer, 2020; Rolshoven, 2009). In the wake of a general *mobility turn* in the social sciences (Sheller & Urry, 2006), it seeks to understand how and why people pursue lives in different places at once, either simultaneously or sequentially (Wood *et al.*, 2015, p. 364). Researchers in the field of multi-locality studies have sought to explain how the mobility of people, goods, images, and information all contribute to the continuous transformation of relations, institutions and places. While some authors have emphasized de-territorialization and the fluidity of space as crucial features (or even drivers) of current social transformations (Bauman, 2000), others such as Sheller and Urry (2006, p. 210) claimed that research on various forms of physical and non-physical mobilities should not lead to a “freedom or liberation from space and place”. Accordingly, studies on multi-locality are interested in the social implications of spatial mobility and of living in multiple places. Scholars are just beginning to fully understand its tremendous impact on cities, neighbourhoods, and communities. Multi-locals are “constituting their own spaces (...) through a very wide range of social practices, contributing to the transformation of the territories they cross on a daily basis, redefining (...) the society they come from” (Bergamaschi & Piro, 2018, pp. 8-11; *our translation*)³. Focusing on and interrogating multi-locality allows us to understand social life in its complexity, taking into account not only

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 - 2 “Multilokalität bedeutet *Vita activa* an mehreren Orten: Der tägliche Lebensalltag in seiner Gesamtheit verteilt sich auf verschiedene Orte, die in mehr oder weniger großen Zeiträumen aufgesucht und mit einer mehr oder weniger großen Funktionsteiligkeit genutzt werden.” (Rolshoven, 2006, p. 181).
 - 3 “costituendo propri spazi e pratiche [...] attraverso una serie molto ampia di pratiche sociali, contribuiscono a trasformare i territori che quotidianamente attraverso, ridefinendo [...] la società di provenienza” (Bergamaschi & Piro, 2018, pp. 8-11).

the temporality and socio-historical context in which social actors are embedded, but also their structural constraints and capacities of agency in a condition of systemic interdependence of the social dimensions (Alberio, 2020; Carpentier & White, 2013). As Greinke and Lange (2022) have noticed, multi-locality leads to temporary presences and absences with complex consequences for affected places, impacts on people's civic engagement, and entails ecological consequences that are not yet fully understood.

Previous studies on multi-locality have shown a great variety of theoretical and methodological approaches addressing different analytical levels (Weichhart, 2015). At the micro level, for instance, studies have focussed on *doing multi-local family* after separation, divorce, or due to job-related reasons (Merla & Nobels, 2021; Toppel, 2020; Halatcheva-Trapp *et al.*, 2019). In addition, multi-locality has been studied as a chosen arrangement and solution for managing long-distance relationships (LAT) (Döbler, 2020). At the macro level, scholars have examined multi-locality in relation to socio-economic inequalities and its implications for spatial planning (Danielzyk & Dittrich-Wesbuer *et al.*, 2020; Scheiner, 2020). In recent years, the focus has broadened from analyzing multi-local life and practices to the examination of potential policies able to address the needs of multi-locals, communities, and infrastructures. New housing, work and care solutions are being studied and proposed, which aim to help the growing number of affected people and to inform policymakers. Studies have also provided insights into changes affecting the labour market, as Garde and Greinke (2022) highlight. In line with other researchers in the field, they emphasize the accelerating flexibilization of the labour market, as well as societal and demographic changes that would eventually lead greater numbers of people to live in multiple places for work-related reasons. Job-related multi-locality is therefore an emerging topic for researchers and planners that requires more detailed investigation (Skora *et al.*, 2012; Schneider & Collet, 2010). In addition, studies in multi-locality increasingly point to the impact of second home ownership on the economic structure, social cohesion, and civic engagement of vacation destinations - a phenomenon particularly linked to rural areas (Greinke & Lange, 2022; Pikner *et al.*, 2022; Perlik, 2020). As well, issues related to the sustainability of multi-local living arrangements have thus far received only limited attention, despite the fact that multi-locality contributes to increased traffic and environmental pollution, as argued by Greinke and Lange (2022). This special issue includes contributions that emphasize multi-localism as a component of contemporary working conditions (cfr. the contribution by Lisa Garde and Cornelia Toppel), as a facilitator of current work arrangements, and a product of specific professions (cfr. Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay & Anne Gilet), as well as a tool of inquiry (cfr. Lena Greinke's contribution to this special issue).

Decisions regarding location are often driven by work-related constraints that must be balanced with family-related constraints, an issue that is being strongly reshaped by contemporary changes in corporate arrangements, technological developments, and new mobility opportunities and practices. These dynamics of change have been unfolding through new arrangements made possible by the connectivity, ubiquity, and reversibility of recent developments in mobility (Kaufmann, 2002). Multiple and more accessible means of transportation allow flexibility in terms of territory and space, offering potential solutions to the need to manage presence in absence under the condition of multi-locality. In this volume, Garde and Toppel aim to analyze "the dilemmas arising from multi-local employees' strong corporate ties on the one hand and their personal and as well as their partners' or families' needs on the other". The ambivalence of balancing the productive and reproductive spheres of life on the one hand, and an employee's commitment to a company and its ability to support its employees on the other, is the focus of their study. While mobility can enable or even promote certain work arrangements, it can also be a distinct feature of a profession itself, as Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay and Anne Gillet show in their research on flight attendants. In addition to the impact of workload, the transnational work schedule of this particular group of employees places a significant burden on work-life balance. This is particularly evident with regard to childcare, where the challenges of working away

from home without family support are compounded by time differences due to their crossing of multiple time zones, exhibited as jet lag (cfr. Tremblay & Gillet). This is a vivid example of the interplay between certain socio-technical conditions imposed by a professional field and the subsequent everyday life challenges of multi-localism.

Following Marcus' (1995) proposal of a multi-sited ethnography, the exploration of multi-locality requires a certain degree of mobility itself and a set of corresponding empirical methods (Hein *et al.*, 2019; Schier *et al.*, 2015). The article by Lena Greinke in this special issue contributes to this body of literature by providing an overview of recent applications of *reflexive photography* in combination with established qualitative approaches, relating it to the field of emotionally-related personal and social dynamics of multi-local experiences. She emphasizes that visual methods are well-suited to address spatial issues, as it allows access to spaces through their visual representation as produced by the interviewee. This is possible because "the photos offer the possibility to quickly and technically easily capture visible information" (cfr. Greinke). Photographs trigger emotional moments in interviews, she argues; they encourage interviewees to reflect otherwise unconscious everyday life practices. In addition to these three papers, this special issue collects reviews of three books published in recent years that approach multi-locality from different angles. In 2020, addressing space and enabling factors for multi-local lifestyles in Italy, Bruna Vendemmia published with Routledge *Spaces for highly mobile people: emerging practices of mobility in Italy*, which provides insights into dynamics that produce "the (re-)design of spaces which support or enable intensive, above-average mobility and are reflected in the planning of cities and transportation", as Marie-Kristin Döbler points out in her review of the book. Vendemmia's work offers an analysis of the ways in which people appropriate spaces and territories in the context of current economic, social and technological processes of acceleration, digitalization and flexibilization. Reversibility, simultaneity, and mobility contribute to the compression and redefinition of the meaning of space and time, producing new social profiles, expressing ideal types of highly mobile subjects. The book's qualitative interview material allows for a better understanding of the experiences of multi-local travellers and contributes to current debates on mobility and its meaning for people and territories in several fields: from geographical research on transport and mobility to urban studies and planning.

The 2022 book *Deux maisons un chez-soi? Expérience de vie de jeunes en hébergement égalitaire* ('Two houses, one home? Experience of young people in shared residence arrangements'), published by Editions Academia-EME and authored by Belgian sociologists Bérengère Nobles and Laura Merla, was reviewed by Daniela Moisa. It focuses on the everyday life and identity of young Belgian teenagers living in shared residence arrangements after parental dissolution. It critically analyzes the specific conditions of multi-local arrangements after separation and divorce, highlighting how "multiple homes can potentially be a resource rather than a handicap for identity construction" (Nobles & Merla, 2022, p. 18; *our translation*⁴). By studying teenagers' relationships with objects, spaces, and homes, the authors were able to understand how the teenagers de/reconstruct family under conditions of multi-locality and related mobilities. Johanna Hiitola, Kati Turtiainen, Sabine Gruber, and Marja Tiilikainen introduce a macro-sociological perspective on family relations in their 2020 book entitled *Family Life in Transition. Borders, Transnational Mobility, and Welfare Society in Nordic Countries*, published by Routledge. As reviewer Brunella Fiore highlights, this work offers a rich interdisciplinary perspective, incorporating family sociology, migration studies, and social policy to understand the family life and parenting practices of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, as well as indigenous Sámi parents, in the context of changing welfare systems in the Northern European countries of Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The authors comprehensively discuss parenthood, motherhood, separations, cultural transmission, and cross-border commuting as they are affected by national migration regimes. As these societies have been challenged by recent economic and social transformations, analy-

4 "disposer de plusieurs espaces de vie peut potentiellement constituer une ressource, plutôt qu'un handicap, pour la construction de l'identité" (Nobles & Merla, 2022, p. 18)

zing the complexity of family lives through the lens of welfare state policies adds another layer of insight to the research on multilocality collected in this special issue.

Finally, this special issue concludes with an interview on recent developments in multi-locality studies and its potential future paths with family researcher Laura Merla. Recognized as one of the most prolific scholars in the field, her work is rooted in the sociology of transnational family studies, but has expanded into social geography, sociology of space and the field of multi-locality studies. She highlights that "one of the central questions posed by multi-locality concerns the ability to 'make do' with multiple territorial anchors and to create stability and continuity in this context". Space, in her understanding, gets multiplied, re-shaped, is always in transformation, is reduced in terms of 'factor of friction' or extended in terms of object of experience. Accordingly, she stresses the relevance of time, continuous processes of synchronization and de-synchronization in order to create "stability and continuity" and "presence in absence". This is an oxymoronic condition, in constant mutation, and of increasing relevance in the contemporary world, where social entropy is growing, and new arrangements appear. Multi-locality studies aim to contribute to a better understanding of current trends at the intersection of housing and mobility. Considering the growing significance of multi-locality, seen in its multiple dimensions, and not solely within Western societies, the existing literature is still relatively limited and there are numerous questions to be addressed in future research.

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