

Social Transnationalism: Lifeworlds Beyond The Nation-state

"The Famous Aunt in America" or the Meaning of Transnational Relationships Revisited

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Research on transnationalism has provided several empirical studies that depict social structures beyond national borders. One enriching contribution to this vastly growing literature represents a study by Steffen Mau. In the monograph titled "Social Transnationalism. Life Worlds Beyond The Nation State" published in 2010 Steffen Mau analyzes forms of cross-border mobilities and social interactions from a micro-perspective. By studying the German population, he explores the transnationalization of life worlds on the level of individuals by pointing to the increasing movements and the development of social relations that span geographic, cultural and political borders. Thereby Mau combines theoretical discussions with empirical data from his own "Transnationalization Survey" and from other academic studies. Both Mau's conception of Social Transnationalism and his overview of the wide variety of different cross-border involvements of the German population is a valuable work of great importance for transnational research and highly recognized in transnational studies (Herz/Klein-Zimmer, 2012).

With the following research report we would like to discuss the findings of the "Transnationalization Survey" in more detail. In conceptualizing transnationalism, Mau goes beyond the concept of transmigration and defines it as an overall phenomenon – and not only as a characteristic of migrants or mobile elites – hence studying the social relations and mobility patterns of the German population. With the result of the "Transnationalization Survey" that nearly 50 % of the German population knows at least one person, who is living abroad, he supports his statement of the general "transnationalization of life worlds". In order to assess Mau's strong hypothesis of the prevalence of transnational connections in everyday life, we elaborate the quantitative and qualitative importance of transnational relationships for different groups by referring to data from the ALLBUS 2010 (Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften/German General Social Survey (GESIS 2011)). In contrast to Mau's findings based on the "Transnationalization Survey" our analysis, based on the ALLBUS 2010 data, shows that only 2.9 % of the German population has transnational relationships, with a person one discusses important personal matters with. These huge discrepancy between the results of the two surveys point both to the question how prevalent "life worlds beyond the nation-state" are and how we conceptualize respectively operationalize transnational relationships (as mere contact or as supportive relationship). Or putting it differently: Having an "aunt in America" does not necessarily mean that one gets support from her.

Subsequently we depict results from both studies: the "Transnationalization Survey" and the ALLBUS 2010. Afterwards we discuss the major discrepancies as past shortcoming and future challenge for transnational studies.

¹ German version under the title "Transnationale Vergesellschaftung. Die Entgrenzung sozialer Lebenswelten" released in 2007.

² In the ALLBUS a representative cross section of the population is surveyed using both constant and variable sets of questions every two years since 1980.

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