Case, context, and culture in spatial research
A conceptual delimitation of key terms

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In almost all spatial disciplines, terms such as *case*, *context*, and *culture* are not simply mentioned casually. Rather, these concepts are used for making and marking key methodological decisions. Methodological decisions are often already implied by the terms themselves. For example, think about *case* studies, *context*ualization, and *cultural* comparisons. Often, when conducting very basic methodical procedures, researchers take these terms for granted. For example, as part of the process of selecting cases, scholars often first define *fields* or *populations*, from which they then randomly or purposefully select cases (Baur/Christmann in this handbook). However, many times it is unclear what exactly these terms mean.

In this paper, we will explore these terms and differentiate between them. We will show that it is not possible to assign one universal definition to the terms. Instead, the research question scholars pose in each individual study ultimately determines what they mean by *case*, *context*, and *culture*. Only during the research process do researchers construct what case, context, and culture mean for their specific investigation, and in doing so, they actively construct and specify their subject area. This involves focusing the research question and setting priorities, which in turn is a prerequisite for being able to do empirical research later on.

1 What is a case?

Almost no methodological tradition can get by without using the term *case*. As part of determining what constitutes a case in a specific research project, it is necessary to reflect on the dimensions and the uniformity of the case and on what constitutes a field, case, and subcase.

1.1 Dimensions of cases

First and foremost, a *case* is an individual singularity. But the term *individual* does not necessarily refer to a person. Rather, in the social sciences, many entities can be cases

(Baur/Lamnek 2005). Cases potentially have four dimensions, and researchers have to consider which of these dimensions they want to focus their analysis on:

- The substantial dimension of cases is in the foreground, if, for example, researchers compare the economy with education, culture, or consumption.
- Situations, events, interventions, social processes, innovations, and decision-making processes stress the temporal dimension of cases.
- Neighborhoods, cities, regions, nations, and world regions bring to the fore the spatial dimension of cases.
- In addition to people, cases can also be entities at a higher action level, for example, social groups such as families or groups of friends, organizations, networks, markets, or supply chains.

Most real cases address all of these dimensions. If, for example, scholars analyze the case of "Germany," they generally refer to the citizens (social group) of the Federal Republic of Germany (spatial territory) since 1949 (temporal) in a certain cultural and institutional system (substantial).

In order to be able to make methodological decisions, especially concerning the research design, it is important both to analytically separate these dimensions and to decide which of these dimensions should be the primary focus for the specific study. This is important for at least two reasons, as illustrated by the example of "Germany":

- Depending on which of the dimensions researchers decide to focus on, their *case* is defined differently (in spatial terms). For example, the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany has changed significantly since 1949 (Baur 2014). Not all German citizens live on the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany, and people who are not German citizens live in German territory. Cultural, institutional, and territorial borders also have different spatial extensions.
- If these dimensions are mixed, it is no longer possible to analyze their interdependencies. However, it is precisely these interdependencies that are the main research interest in many spatial analyses. If, for example, scholars are investigating migration, then the relationship between the resident population and the territory is a key aspect.

1.2   The uniformity of the case

Cases have certain characteristics—in the terminology of quantitative social research, one would say that cases vary along variables and each case manifests as a specific set of categories of these variables. However, as the discussion above indicates, cases are not closed entities (Baur/Lamnek 2005). This becomes clear in particular when one takes into account the history of a case:

Almost all cases begin and end at some point. Social groups such as organizations, communities, and nations are founded, but they can also be dissolved, dismantled, etc. (Abbott 2001: 145–160).

Furthermore, cases can change with regard to key characteristics in the course of their history (Baur/Lamnek 2005), as a case's spatial demarcation exemplifies: The Federal Republic of Germany has changed its borders throughout its history. As a result, not only the size of the territory but also the cultural system and the number of people living in it have changed (Baur 2014).

Often these borders are not at all clear—they are open ("fuzzy") (Abbott 2001: 145 et seqq., 261 et seqq.). For example, if a scholar wants to analyze a "university," it is unclear whether it consists of its buildings, organizational processes, events, employees, students, or even visiting researchers. Depending on who or what is included, the "university" can also be situated at different locations. This example demonstrates that a case does not have to be defined based on territory—for instance, Technische Universität Berlin is not only distributed across different locations throughout the metropolitan area of Berlin (Germany), it also has a campus in El-Gouna (Egypt).

1.3   Field – case – subcase

Cases are often part of a *field* (also referred to as a *population*) and are themselves made up of *subcases* (also referred to as *subunits*)—therefore, they have multiple levels (Akremi 2022). For example, nations are often composed of different regions and cities, which are composed of neighborhoods, which are composed of houses, which are composed of multiple rooms. Neighborhoods consist of stakeholders, residents, networks, events, activities, media coverage, etc.

Defining what a *field*, *case*, and *subfield* are in the specific research project is therefore a priority. Researchers have to decide *how* they set these priorities in their specific investigation (for more, see Baur/Christmann in this handbook):

- Most methodological procedures for data selection and generalization are based on the principle that researchers select cases from a population. They use these cases as examples for investigating the phenomenon in question and then extrapolate the findings from these cases to the general population.
- Often it is not possible to analyze the cases of interest empirically. Instead only subcases are assessed. Or it is necessary to take a multilevel approach. Differentiating between units of data collection and units of analysis is helpful in this regard. For example, you could interview people (unit of data collection) about their family (unit of analysis).

Furthermore, in spatial research, it is important to know which cases are found where: Where are cases located in physical space and what type of social phenomena do they represent? These questions cannot be answered without referring to context.

2   What is a context?

As a rule, cases are embedded in contexts, and a context does not necessarily originate from the field or the population (which is a large group of cases, methodologically speak-

ing). In order to analyze the relationship between case and context, it is first necessary to delimit the case from its context. This is never fully possible since the case is entangled with and interacts with its context. At the same time, this calls into question the notion of the quantitative paradigm that delineated populations exist that consist of a set of clearly defined cases (Baur/Lamnek 2005).

2.1   Dimensions of contexts

Among other things, case's (e.g., the city "Frankfurt") context includes the following elements (Stake 1994: 238):

- The case's historical development (for example, Frankfurt evolved as a trade center in the Middle Ages and reproduced this role in the course of its history)
- The case's spatial references (such as its location, size, physical structure, surroundings, transport infrastructures in which it is embedded)
- The case's general economic, political, legal, and cultural conditions
- Other cases that are associated with the case (such as the national framework in which the city is embedded or other cities with which it competes, etc.)
- Any people, organizations, and institutions involved in the case (such as residents, politicians, key businesses, media, etc.)

2.2   Context and culture

The question of how the term *culture* relates to the terms *context* and *case* is relatively easy to answer. Provided a case does not comprise an entire culture (in which case, case analysis is simultaneously cultural analysis), the following holds true: A specific culture can be part of a case's context. We also refer to this as the case's *cultural context*.

Because a case's specific context usually exhibits specific features, including ones that can influence the case, it is important to understand the context and its features in order to better understand the case. This also applies to the case's *cultural* context. However, cultural aspects are not relevant aspects of the context in every study. As long as the topics of investigation and the research design of the study do not rely on *cultural* contexts, these do not have to be assessed.

It is important to emphasize that the terms *context* and *culture* do not denote the same thing. Culture must be understood as a *subset of the wider context*. The following example is intended to illustrate the differences:

Let us assume that a study sets out to understand the development of certain neighborhoods. In this case, the neighborhoods are conceived as cases. The description of the specific case's *context* could contain, for example, the cities in which the selected neighborhoods are located (large city, medium city, small city; Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg), how large the neighborhoods are (area, population), where they are situated in the city (downtown, central, periphery), their geographic features (on the river, on the lake, on a hill), information about the social structure, economic structure, transport infrastructure, and shops in the neighborhoods, and/or the nature of the political relationships in the city district. In contrast, the description of the *cultural context* of the

neighborhoods could include the following topics: the neighborhoods' cultural diversity, their dominant cultures or minority cultures, their distant or recent history that is relevant for local stakeholders (e.g., former working-class neighborhoods, tourist hotspots, or art neighborhoods), collective identities that can be observed in the neighborhoods and that represent the pride or sorrow of the local stakeholders.

This example illustrates that statistical information and simple descriptions of relevant characteristics can be sufficient for characterizing a context. In contrast, descriptions of cultural aspects tend to be much more complicated. In this case, shared attributions and constructions of meaning have to be taken into account, along with any typical behaviors of the relevant actors.

3 What is culture?

As *culture* can be part of the context, it is often impossible to avoid dealing with cultural contexts in socio-spatial research. In a globalized world, spatial processes are closely intertwined with complex socio-cultural frameworks. Therefore, in order to better understand and explain changes in spatial thinking and action, as well as developments of spatial units in global contexts, it is essential for us to take into account the cultural aspects of these phenomena, too. But what exactly does the term *culture* mean?

3.1 Classic concepts of culture

Culture is not an easy concept as there is no universally accepted definition of culture. The various definitions are mostly characterized by respective key modes of thinking in the underlying disciplines and theories. Accordingly, as early as the 1950s, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952: 181) were able to identify more than 170 different concepts. Based on these concepts, they attempted to propose a general definition combing the three *key dimensions of culture*:

- A system of knowledge, meaning, symbols, and values shared by a certain social group
- The traditional behaviors and lifestyles associated with that group
- Any related material artifacts

Since then, the number of definitions has increased even further. Reckwitz (2000: 64) proposed a *typology* that divides existing "classic" concepts of culture into four categories:

- Normative concepts of culture define culture as the improvement and refinement of human education and customs since the Age of Enlightenment in Europe (Herder 1985).
- Concepts of culture based on differentiation theory—which are often found in sociology of culture—conceptualize culture exclusively as the social field of cultural production and consumption (Alexander et al. 2012).

- Meaning- and knowledge-based concepts of culture focus on ascribed meanings, symbols, values, and knowledge systems shared by social groups. Max Weber's definition should be highlighted here as an example. Weber (1973: 223) describes culture as a "finite extract of sense and meaning derived from the senseless infiniteness of world affairs" and as a collection of specific "concepts of value." Therefore, a certain culture exists only due to the specific attributions of meaning provided by subjects who are divided into social groups. However, Weber (1973: 223) points out that the subjects can "have a (positive or negative) opinion" of the specific concepts of value. This indicates that Weber in no way wishes to perceive culture as an intrinsically coherent and consistent system.
- In contrast, totality-oriented concepts of culture are characterized by the fact that they require a comprehensive definition of culture, such as that of a nation. A nation is understood as a coherent culture because it shares a certain territory (that is to say, a certain spatial unit) and is unified by a common history. In addition, it is assumed that the members of this culture share key characteristics.

Especially the last category is problematic in that it rolls *culture*, *space*, and *individual* into one based on essentialist presuppositions and considers them a totality. In order to resolve this issue, theorists have since developed alternative concepts of space and culture.

3.2 More recent concepts of the relationship between space and culture

From a theoretical and conceptual perspective, *spaces* have no longer been thought of as "absolute," objective, and uniform for some time now. Scholars recognized that viewing spaces as separate entities independent of material objects (e.g., bodies) was a conceptual dead-end. Spaces are also no longer conceived as entities that enclose objects like "containers." In contrast, modern spatial theory postulates that spaces are constructed *relationally* by means of intersections between objects. This centers around an idea that is especially well developed in Löw's relational spatial theory (2016: 141 et seqq.). According to Löw,

- Spaces are actively constructed by people in processes of *spacing*.
- Humans create spaces by placing and arranging objects, living entities, and/or goods and putting them in relation to each other.
- Humans then *synthetize* this arrangement of objects, entities, and goods and thus create a holistic idea of a specific space.
- As a result, spaces are in constant motion and can *change*.

Consequently, spaces must be understood as *social constructs* that are created, negotiated, and potentially contested in the minds *and* (inter)actions of social groups and societies (Christmann 2016). If this theoretical perspective is taken seriously, spaces must be conceived as relational frameworks of spatio-cultural elements that are constantly changing and being exchanged and whose elements can conflict with one another. Research designs for empirical studies have to take this into account.

A great deal of empirical evidence also advocates adopting this conception of spaces. Since the sixteenth century at the latest, the modern age has been characterized by a territorially based, centralist, and hierarchically structured "figuration of spaces," which has not disappeared entirely even today. However, since the 1960s, spatial and cultural frameworks are being completely rearranged in the wake of globalization, mediatization, and increasing translocation of the circulation for people and goods. Knoblauch und Löw (2020) conceptualize these social processes as a large-scale "refiguration of spaces," which overlay the modern concepts of spaces with other principles of organization, such as deterritorialized, flat, and decentralized structures.

Consequently, since the last third of the twentieth century, many new globally structured conceptions of physical, social, and cultural spaces have been identified. Rapidly expanding, globally distributed economic relationships and social relationships have been observed. An increase in migration across nations and continents is also a typical occurrence (Giddens 1990: 64). As a result of rapid developments in transport technology, there has also been an inrush of tourists around the world. Global cultural industries and a "global information culture" have emerged in the media, permeating all areas of human life (Winter 2008: 205, own translation).

Furthermore, digitialization and the internet make it possible for actors to be "present" at multiple locations and to act translocally (Löw/Knoblauch 2020). Consequently, local attributions of meaning, elements of knowledge, and cultural interpretations have become detached from their original cultural contexts, crossing territorial borders and circulating around the globe. This has resulted in the worldwide circulation of knowledge, cultural elements (Winter 2008: 219), and even cultural practices and objects. These circulations no longer create a homogeneous culture but rather engender "diversity, plurality, and hybridity" (Winter 2008: 219, own translation). Processes of "hybridization" and "deterritorialization" ensue (Pieterse 1994: 161 et seqq.) at the same time as processes of reterritorialization, in which cultures are constantly being reconstituted (Winter 2008: 219).

Therefore, cultural anthropologists have renounced traditional concepts of separate, homogeneous cultures, proposing instead a "non-essentialist understanding of culture" (Bachmann-Medick 2008: 96, own translation). The *postcolonial concept* of space developed by Bhabha (1994) in particular should be emphasized as it focuses on the *analysis of differences within and between cultures*. It inquires into which conflicting meanings are present, how symbols are contested, or which disputes over values exist. In addition, it investigates the overlapping and mixing of different cultures, or cultural hybridity: for example, in the form of syncretism or creolization.

Appadurai (1996), another proponent of postcolonial approaches toward space, proposes the creation of "ethnoscapes," especially cultural contact zones, spaces, or border zones, as the starting point for cultural analyses. From a methodological perspective, purely mono-sited, location-based ethnographies are no longer pursued but rather ethnographic designs that are conceived as "*cosmopolitan ethnographies*" or "*macro-ethnographies*" and that are able to capture phenomena related to cultural exchange, as well as separation (Appadurai 1996: 52).

4 Methodological implications of defining case, context, and culture

In order to reflect the above-mentioned changes in the relationship between territoriality and culture better in empirical research, there is an urgent need for new methodological approaches (Beck/Grande 2010: 8 et seqq.). Although the number of new methodological approaches remains limited, initial attempts have already been made to address the challenges of comparative cultural analyses. The attempts by Welz (1998), Osterhammel (1996), and Heimann (2020) described below illustrate that different solutions are required depending on which type of *culture* is being observed and what the guiding questions are.

4.1 Comparative cultural analysis of ethnicities or nations

Welz (1998: 6 et seqq.) refers to four *traps researchers must avoid* when comparing cultures based on ethnicities or nations.

1. *Fragmenting large cultural units (e.g., nation or ethnicity)*: Researchers often divide frameworks into smaller, seemingly comparable units. From the large quantity of phenomena that account for the characteristics of the culture, researcher select several elements that they believe will allow for a comparison. However, it is important to keep in mind that the selected elements of comparison cannot be observed separately because they are entangled with the other elements and often what constitutes a culture can only be perceived when analyzing this entanglement as a whole.
2. *Treating cultures as discrete and separate units*: Researchers often assume that cultural frameworks can be clearly differentiated from one another. This is the typical approach in quantitative research, where researchers define a population from which they randomly sample cases which in turn are used for the purpose of generalization (Baur/Christmann in this handbook). Note that according to the current state of research, quantitative research cannot avoid this trap as the logic of generalization in quantitative research requires researchers to demarcate populations substantially, temporally, and spatially—although this is virtually impossible empirically. It is a challenge for future research to find ways of avoiding this trap in quantitative research. Instead of creating cultures as discrete and separate units, researchers should analyze possible connecting lines and potential influences between cultures .
3. *Observing restricted timescales:* If cultures are synchronized for the sake of comparison, one loses sight of their specific historicity and the culture-specific historical transformation of their respective framework. Therefore, scholars must avoid categorizing the complex developmental processes of the cultures they are comparing into easy-to-compare periodized blocks of time. Rather, the individual character of each specific historical developmental process must be preserved during analysis.
4. *Lack of reflexivity regarding the role of the subject being studied*: Researchers are often perceived as "objective" observers standing "above" or "apart from" the cultures. However, researchers using comparative methods must reflect on how they can really analyze a culture to which they themselves belong or do not belong and how their subjectivity influences the research process with regard to their perspectives, bias, and ability to

understand (Baur 2021). It can be equally problematic if the culture is too "foreign" to the researchers (because then they cannot adopt an internal perspective and truly understand the culture) and if the researchers are too "close" to a culture (because then they are "blind" and cannot adopt an external perspective). During this process of reflection, techniques from reflexive methodology and empirical philosophy of science can be helpful (Knoblauch 2021).

4.2   Transcultural and intercultural comparisons

Given the fact that there are no clearly differentiated, distinct, and coherent cultures, Osterhammel (1996: 299), too, advises against comparing seemingly distinct cultures (e.g., in the form of nations) with one another as a whole. Instead, he proposes what are called transcultural or intercultural comparisons (Osterhammel 1997: 277):

- Transcultural comparisons focus on a specific phenomenon (such as certain political power relations, economic relations of production, or social symbols) and compare that phenomenon across (multiple) different cultural contexts. It is also possible to analyze a selected phenomenon (e.g., political power relations) in terms of its connections to other selected phenomena (e.g., social symbols).
- In intercultural comparisons by contrast, specific series of characteristics from (usually only) two profiled cultural frameworks are juxtaposed and compared with one another.

4.3   Cultures as shared constructs of knowledge

Heimann (2020) understands cultures as common constructs of knowledge shared by actors with regard to a certain phenomenon (e.g., climate change). At the same time, he assumes that actors are able to share a specific construct of knowledge (e.g., with regard to climate change) across territorial borders (Heimann 2020: 43). As such, some actors could be foreign to other actors in their *own* territory concerning climate change but relate closely to actors in a *different* territory in this regard. This gives rise to shared cultural spaces—extending beyond territorial borders—which Heimann refers to as *relational cultural spaces*. In conceptual terms, these spaces are characterized by the fact that they separate culture and territory analytically: Relational cultural spaces are not conceived as territorial but rather as social spaces because the carriers of knowledge ("Wissensträger") are social actors who are distributed translocally (Heimann 2020: 44).

In order to grasp relational cultural spaces methodologically, exploratory analytical methods like cluster analysis are used to assess the cultural relevance of the territory (Backhaus et al. 2008). Data are analyzed in order to determine empirically which actors share common knowledge and therefore can be grouped together as a cultural group beyond territorial borders (Heimann 2020: 44). More specifically, actors' characteristics are depicted as geometric points in a multidimensional variable space. Then cluster analysis is used to describe their distances (Heimann 2020: 44; Backhaus et al. 2008: 389 et seqq.).

Although this approach solves one problem, it can potentially give rise to another: It overlooks power structures and instances of social exclusion. We know from method-

ological research on techniques such as snowball sampling or discourse analysis that when scholars reconstruct social networks based on social relationships, they are essentially reconstructing the power relations in the field. That is to say, every field contains "noisier" or more dominant actors who make their voices heard and those who are excluded and thus remain "invisible."

5 Open questions

In general, we can conclude that although *case*, *context*, and *culture* are necessary concepts for spatial research, it is often not very easy to define them for specific research processes. Overall, one thing is essential for future spatial research: taking a closer look at which characteristics especially complex cases have and how they correlate to contexts and cultures.

This involves overcoming the seemingly natural connection between the subject area, the action level, and the temporal and spatial dimensions of cases and instead asking exactly which subject areas and action levels have which spatial characteristics and when—and how can this relationship be analyzed methodologically. In particular, we must ask how to generalize in complex cases, how to carry out (cross-cultural) comparisons, and how to call into question our presuppositions.

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