

How to deal with multicentric social relations?

Researching the social as multidimensionally distributed and interrelated processes of meaning-making. Methodological and methodic approaches.

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In the social sciences and humanities, there is a growing interest in strategies and reflections that not only outline social phenomena as assemblages, figurations, networks, constellations, complexes, entanglements or dispositives, but also study these as formations or nexuses of interrelations that are understood as existing on a single level of analysis or reality. Such approaches seek to overcome localism—i.e. focusses on genuine places and their relevance—that risks providing only "a partial explanation for what is going on" (Nicolini 2017, p. 32) because it fails to consider possible entanglements, mutual dependencies, and interrelations (Kemmis et al. 2014). For example, Nassehi (2011, p. 231, our translation) points out that "it would be inappropriate to describe what happens in an operating room solely using the means available within the operating room itself." From a disciplinary perspective, as well as from a theoretical standpoint, there exists a plethora of debates surrounding conceptualisations and terminology. These discourses are frequently initiated and conducted from within the relevant disciplines. For instance, in the field of theories of social practices, we find concepts such as "constellation" (Schatzki 2019, p. 44), inter-/cross-practice connection/relation, and practice-complex (Shove et al. 2012). In posthumanist contexts, concepts such as "polyphonic assemblages" (Tsing 2018, p. 41) and actor-networks (Latour 2005) are employed. Neomaterialist perspectives include Barad's (2012) agential realism, the literary studies-inspired concept of polyphony, based on Bakhtin (1971), poststructuralist rhizomatics (Deleuze/Guattari 1977); the systems-theoretical concept of polycontextuality (Vogd 2018; Vogd/Harth 2019), relation pattern recognition (Karafillidis 2018), network analysis following Harrison White (2008), or the concept of institutional logics that coexist within organizational processes (Friedland/Alford 2010). Each of these approaches has developed its own theoretical vocabulary.

In some cases, well-elaborated methodological approaches have already been developed to address the multidimensional nature of meaning-making processes. Examples include dispositive analysis following Foucault (Foucault 1978; Jäger 2001), situational analysis according to Clarke (Clarke 2012), which, through situational maps, attempts to methodologically account for the fact that different "social worlds" are simultaneously relevant for the social-scientific reconstruction of the phenomenon under investigation, or contextural analysis, which, following Luhmann, assumes the simultaneity of different system references (Jansen/Vogd 2022). Another approach is the multidimensional typology of the documentary method (Bohnsack 2017), which reconstructs specific experience spaces and genealogies that have taken place at different locations and times and manifest in localized-present actions.

The aim of this special issue is to engage with these existing approaches and bring them into dialogue with multicentric social research— our focus is not only on multicentric studies themselves but, using them as an example, on methodological contributions to aspects of multicentricity.

Against this background, we consider a debate to be essential - one that builds on different theoretical and methodological approaches in order to highlight both similarities and differences in methodology and metatheory (i.e. underlying ontological and epistemological positions) and to encourage further developments.

Building on this, this call for papers seeks contributions that explore concepts and their practical application—that is, the methodological-methodical challenges and possibilities of studying spatially and temporally dispersed and materialized social configurations.

The special issue aims to identify potentials and yet-unused possibilities that, based on the outlined points of reference and beyond, focus on the central theme of "dealing with multicentric social relations.". Contributions from various academic disciplines and methodological approaches are welcome to encourage a broader, interdisciplinary discussion.

Possible Research Questions

Empirical studies analyzing multicentric social relations could address questions such as:

- How are conceptual frameworks and theoretical models empirically applied in research approaches investigating social phenomena in their socio-spatial and temporal distribution? How are theoretical linkages established, and what differentiations and (in)compatibilities emerge? What counterquestions arise for theoretical models through an empirically sharpened perspective?
- What practical research challenges and epistemic opportunities arise for field researchers when dealing with multicentric social relations? What challenges and opportunities emerge for a methodology that tends to define itself ethnographically through intersubjective co-presence at a single location? How are these challenges addressed, and what conclusions are drawn?
- What difficulties and opportunities become visible and debatable in the analysis of empirical data? What consequences does this have for the research approach pursued here?

We welcome both contributions that start from specific empirical questions and then encounter the issue of dealing with the multicentric nature of their research subject, as well as theoretical-methodological contributions that introduce a methodological approach and then illustrate it—for example, through reinterpretation of existing studies.

Timeline: Special Issue 2/2026

- Submission of abstracts (max. 5,000 characters, including spaces) by: March 16, 2025
- Selection of contributions and feedback by: April 15, 2025
- Deadline for full paper submissions (max. 50,000 characters, including spaces, abstract, and references) by: September 15, 2025
- Peer review process/feedback by: November 30, 2025
- Resubmission deadline: February 28, 2026
- Final decision on acceptance by: April 30, 2026

For technical guidelines on manuscript submission, please refer to: [ZQF – Zeitschrift für Qualitative Forschung: Manuscript Preparation Guide 2021](#)

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