

## **Thinking through Sociality**



# THINKING THROUGH SOCIALITY

An Anthropological Interrogation of Key Concepts



*Edited by*  
Vered Amit



berghahn  
NEW YORK • OXFORD  
[www.berghahnbooks.com](http://www.berghahnbooks.com)

Published in 2015 by  
Berghahn Books  
www.berghahnbooks.com

© 2015 Vered Amit

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without written permission of the publisher.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Amit, Vered, 1955-

Thinking through sociality : an anthropological interrogation of key concepts / edited by Vered Amit.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-78238-585-1 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-78238-586-8 (ebook)

1. Ethnology. 2. Social interaction. 3. Anthropology. I. Title.

GN325.A44 2015

302–dc23

2014033522

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78238-585-1 (hardback)

ISBN 978-1-78238-586-8 (ebook)

# Contents



Acknowledgements	vi
<b>Introduction</b> Thinking through Sociality: The Importance of Mid-level Concepts <i>Vered Amit with Sally Anderson, Virginia Caputo, John Postill, Deborah Reed-Danahay and Gabriela Vargas-Cetina</i>	1
<b>1</b> Disjuncture: The Creativity of, and Breaks in, Everyday Associations and Routines <i>Vered Amit</i>	21
<b>2</b> Fields: Dynamic Configurations of Practices, Games and Socialities <i>John Postill</i>	47
<b>3</b> Social Space: Distance, Proximity and Thresholds of Affinity <i>Deborah Reed-Danahay</i>	69
<b>4</b> Sociability: The Art of Form <i>Sally Anderson</i>	97
<b>5</b> Organizations: From Corporations to Ephemeral Associations <i>Gabriela Vargas-Cetina</i>	128
<b>6</b> Network: The Possibilities and Mobilizations of Connections <i>Vered Amit and Virginia Caputo</i>	156
<b>Epilogue</b> Sociality and Uncertainty: Between Avowing and Disavowing Concepts in Anthropology <i>Nigel Rapport</i>	181
Notes on Contributors	201
Index	205

# Acknowledgements



This book is the product of numerous conversations and exchanges between the contributors, which took place over a number of years. I would like to thank all of the contributors for their unwavering commitment to this ongoing dialogue and to the fulfilment of this volume. Over the course of our exchanges over the years, we also benefited from the participation and contributions of a number of other scholars. I would therefore like to thank Philip Moore, Steffan Igor Ayora Diaz, Noel Dyck, Christine Jourdan and Sarah Pink for their insights and encouragement. The development of this book was also greatly enabled by two opportunities to come together as a group in extended face-to-face meetings, the first taking place in October 2009 at the University at Buffalo, the second taking place in October 2011 at Concordia University (Montreal). I would therefore like to acknowledge the support of the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy in the University at Buffalo Law School, which sponsored our 2009 meeting and to thank Deborah Reed-Danahay for organizing this event. I would also like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for providing a grant, which enabled us to meet again in 2011. Finally but by no means least, I would like to thank the Concordia Department of Sociology & Anthropology for providing us with a venue for the 2011 meeting.

Vered Amit

*Introduction*

# **Thinking through Sociality**

## **The Importance of Mid-level Concepts**

**Vered Amit with Sally Anderson, Virginia Caputo, John Postill, Deborah Reed-Danahay and Gabriela Vargas-Cetina**



### **PART 1: THE MANDATE OF THE VOLUME**

*Vered Amit*

#### **Moving Away from Meta Concepts**

The history of scholarly efforts to conceptualize the social has been replete with successive enthusiasms for certain meta or master concepts. Some of these concepts – for example, culture, society, community – have been part of the lexicon of social theory from the outset for disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. Others – for instance, practice, network or identity – have been more recent introductions. Some were wide-ranging from their earliest use; others began their scholarly career with fairly modest applications, and became sweeping as they grew more popular. Sooner or later, however, the success of concepts such as these has also been the source of greater or lesser dissatisfaction with them. ‘Too vague or too general’ to be of analytical utility is a genre of complaint that has, at one point or another, been lodged against one and all of these concepts. And with the complaints have often come calls for some kind of theoretical ‘reboot’, ranging from jettisoning the concept altogether to providing a more precise definition, and to reinventing it by affixing a new descriptive qualifier. So community may get a new conceptual life as ‘imagined community’, network as ‘actor-network’ theory and so on.

But these premises for conceptual reboots usually do not resolve the sources of dissatisfaction, or at least not for long. After all, jettisoning a concept is not the simple prerogative of the academy, let alone any one discipline within it. Many of these concepts have a discursive life beyond the academy. Indeed, it is the pervasiveness of the use of a concept in popular discourse that may often serve as a catalyst for frustration with it. Thus, as Ulf Hannerz noted, anthropologists became increasingly sceptical and frustrated with ‘culture’ just at the point when it seemed to be ‘everywhere’ (Hannerz 1996: 30). And the waning of interest within one discipline is not necessarily echoed in sister disciplines. So when anthropological interest in ‘network’ markedly faded away during the 1980s and 1990s, this was in marked contrast to its continued salience in disciplines such as sociology and geography (Amit 2007: 55). Finally, concepts usually become ubiquitous for a reason, most often because they signal, even if very loosely and imperfectly, concerns or ideas that have some broader purchase. So key concepts selected for theoretical banishment rarely disappear. They usually linger on, available for eventual resurrection. Hence Robert Redfield once wondered whether ‘whatever is thoroughly repudiated by one generation of anthropologists is not likely to reappear in the next generation’ (Redfield 1962: 439).

But we cannot afford to be complacent about this kind of conceptual perseverance. What goes around may come around, but not necessarily without incurring some important costs along the way. First, the repeated tendency to reinvent the wheel that Redfield identified over a half century ago means that we can lose important opportunities to build upon earlier debates and reflections. The reappearance of a concept – or a particular iteration of it – is all too often treated as if it was utterly new, with little acknowledgement let alone review of earlier reflections on the term. There is a familiar complaint among some anthropologists that their students or colleagues refuse to review any literature with a publication date of more than five to ten years ago. If to a degree this is a cliché, it is one that still contains an uncomfortable grain of truth.

Secondly, this kind of theoretical faddishness tends to produce the very conditions for dissatisfaction that arise when we try to make concepts do too much. Hence the invocation of network variously as a descriptor for ‘our age’ (O’Brien 2003: 1), a globalizing type of contemporary society (Castells 2000) and part of a theory that involves a radical ‘recasting of the central hopes of social science’ (Latour 2005: 40) are far cries from the modest pragmatism with which the term was introduced into anthropology during the 1960 and 1970s as a call to avoid ‘presuppositions of closure and equilibrium’ (Mitchell 1969: 47) in tracing social links. The development of network into a master narrative has not been a particularly anthropological enterprise,



although anthropologists have also contributed to its extension. But for an ethnographically grounded discipline such as anthropology, the very sweep and successive dominance of these kinds of meta-concepts is likely, sooner or later, to prove analytically frustrating. It is therefore not surprising that John Postill (2008) found the paradigmatic dominance of community and network in internet studies constraining rather than helpful for opening up the study of electronically mediated socialities. In expressing his frustration, Postill was not making a statement about the general status or scope of community and network as theoretical concepts so much as noting that their 'paradigmatic dominance blinkers our view of the ongoing adoption of internet technologies by local authorities, companies and residents around the globe' (ibid.: 417).

The aim of this volume is therefore not to champion a few paradigmatic concepts of sociality or a new comprehensive theory of sociality. Our exploration of the history of ideas and the ethnographic grounding of several concepts is intended as one small volley in a broader enterprise of opening up and/or refining the repertoire of analytical questions anthropologists, and their colleagues in sister disciplines, can pose about sociality. We could just as reasonably have chosen any number of other useful concepts; in other works we have, indeed, used other notions. For example, elsewhere I have argued that community can be 'good to think with' (Amit and Rapport 2012). And so too are the concepts that we have included in this volume. They are all 'good to think with' because they are neither too narrowly defined nor too sweeping. They can be used to think through ethnographic situations, but they are not particular to one kind of ethnographic circumstance. They are, in short, of the 'not too hot, not too cold' version of conceptual articulation. This kind of mid-range conceptualization is something that anthropologists, wary of abstractions that soar too far from the ground they are trying to explain, have usually been good at.

### **Working with Ambiguity**

In their introduction to a recent volume on sociality, Nicholas Long and Henrietta Moore (2013) note the extraordinary variety of ways in which the concept of sociality has been employed across a broad swathe of scholarly disciplines, including but also extending far beyond anthropology. Rather than dismissing the term as lacking substance because of this variability, Long and Moore argue that this 'definitional haziness' can be more constructively viewed as 'evidence of human sociality's capacity to take many forms' (ibid.: 2). The strength of this term, for Long and Moore, lies in its open-ended invocation of process, in contrast to the emphasis on bounded and static social entities which is associated with terms such as 'society' or

in a view of the social as a product of social interaction or relations (*ibid.*). Accordingly, they suggest that sociality should be conceptualized ‘as a dynamic relational matrix within which subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, and continually plastic and malleable’ (*ibid.*: 4).

Within the terms of this kind of open conceptualization, sociality cannot be a domain of investigation, Christina Toren points out, because it ‘pervades literally every aspect of being human. Or put it another way, sociality is not part of what we are, but rather the sum total of human being – its entirety’ (Toren 2013: 46). Sociality in other words cannot be separated out as a distinct analytical category; rather, it is the ontological ground for a wide range of domains that can be investigated. ‘It follows that a social analysis may take sociality for granted as the fundamental condition of human being, but how sociality evinces itself in personhood and other structuring ideas and practices – kinship, political economy, ritual and so on and so on – remains, always, to be found out’ (*ibid.*: 48).

The chapters in the present volume are oriented towards the kind of mid range of conceptualization identified by Toren. Together, the chapters interrogate several key concepts in terms of their scope and effectiveness in eliciting and framing questions about various instantiations of sociality. As I noted earlier, these are not intended to serve as master concepts; both singly and collectively these are deliberately partial conceptions. This orientation is very much in keeping with Bruce Knauft’s contention that contemporary anthropological work increasingly eschews master narratives in favour of pursuing mid-level connections that link ‘individual facets of large-scale theories, topics and methods to particular but not entirely local objects of study’ (Knauft 2006: 411).

Among the connections that we are pursuing in this volume are earlier scholarly efforts oriented towards related conceptual terrains. If we accept an expansive treatment of sociality as the ‘fundamental condition of human being’ (Toren 2013: 48), then it stands to reason that whether they were using this term or not, social theorists of other eras would have had a lot to say about this ground. And indeed a primary assumption that has guided the choice and treatment of the concepts highlighted in our volume is that earlier theories can be usefully enlisted in a dialogue with contemporary processual concerns. Put baldly, there is no need to start from scratch in reviewing sets of issues and concerns that have been squarely at the heart of disciplines such as anthropology and sociology from their inception. Thus underpinning our approach in this volume is the premise that all of the concepts on which we are focusing – disjuncture, social field, social space, organization, sociability, network – can be productively dealt with as enmeshed in an ongoing if uneven history of debates and reflections.

But this kind of historical review suggests that the orientation towards mid-level conceptualization that Knauff attributes to contemporary work, in fact, has a much more venerable standing in anthropological analysis. Thus senior members of the Manchester School of social anthropology (lasting roughly from the 1940s to the 1970s), such as Max Gluckman and Clyde Mitchell, cautioned that key terms associated with their work, such as network and equilibrium, were not intended to serve as overarching concepts. Gluckman argued that, as a heuristic device, his concept of equilibrium constituted a method rather than a theory per se, and that it was 'only *one method* ... [O]ur field of study is so complex that there are necessarily many different approaches to analysis, each fruitful in its own way; if I argue the merits of one method, this is not to deny that others have advantages' (Gluckman 1968: 219; original emphasis).

In his overview of the various usages of social networks, Mitchell argued that, while there was no network theory in the sense of a set of 'basic assumptions together with a set of derived propositions which are interlinked and capable of being tested' (Kapferer 1973: 84, quoted in Mitchell 1974: 283), 'there are few theories in social anthropology of this kind at all' (Mitchell 1974: 283). Anthropologists have employed a variety of concepts at different levels of abstraction in order to deal with different kinds of analytical problems. In short, here was an earlier assessment of anthropological analysis that would not be too far adrift from Knauff's depiction of the pragmatism of contemporary Anglo-American anthropology.

One could argue, therefore, that within anthropology, perhaps rather more so than in some sister disciplines, there is and has been a pragmatic orientation towards conceptualization that has often evaluated the effectiveness of concepts in terms of their utility for the investigation of certain issues or research domains. Many concepts are judged in terms of whether or not they are 'good to think with' as a framework for investigation, rather than as a set of general propositions that seek to provide comprehensive explanations. In other words, concepts are good to think with when they open up rather than cap off inquiry. Hence the question is less one of method versus theory than what level of abstraction works most effectively to deal with different kinds of questions or domains.

But if social concepts are treated too narrowly, as singular definitions rather than as terms able to encompass a class of phenomena, then they are not likely to be useful to think with except in the most particular of circumstances. So on the one hand, a term that is too close to a particular empirical ground may not be more generally useful because it cannot be applied to any other instance. On the other hand, if concepts are so broad that they could be said to mean almost anything, they run the risk either of being dismissed

as empty – as has repeatedly happened for concepts such as culture – or of not ‘indicating [effective] ways into the comparative investigation of what it is to be human’ (Toren 2013: 46). Hence the attraction towards mid-range levels of conceptualization is comprehensible, especially for an empirically grounded and comparative discipline such as anthropology.

Yet any concept that moves beyond one case necessarily incorporates a measure of ambiguity. As Kenneth Burke noted, ‘Since no two things or acts or situations are exactly alike, you cannot apply the same term to both of them without thereby introducing a certain margin of ambiguity, an ambiguity as great as the difference between the two subjects that are given the identical title’ (Burke 1955: xiii). Burke argued that it is in these areas of ambiguity that important transformations can take place and distinctions arise. And these transformations arise from – to use Knauff’s terms – the variety of connections that are being linked empirically and hence conceptually. Hence ambiguity is not in and of itself a conceptual deficit but a potentially useful heuristic vehicle. Of course, not all ambiguity is equally effective. Thus Burke argues that rather than avoiding ambiguity, what the analyst needs are ‘terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise’ (*ibid.*).

So the ‘right’ kind of conceptual ambiguity can provide sufficient flexibility to accommodate complexity and variability, while also serving to train our attention on the critical junctures upon and the resources through which transformations and differentiation can occur. At this point, it may be useful to draw in Rodney Needham’s notion of polythetic concepts. A polythetic classification groups organisms or phenomena that share common features but in which no one feature is shared by all constituents of the category, nor is any one feature sufficient to define membership in this category (Needham 1975: 356). In outlining the principles and utilities of polythetic as opposed to monothetic classification, Needham drew on a variety of historical as well as interdisciplinary influences. For L.S. Vygotsky, the formation of classes through a principle of ‘chain complex’ meant that the ‘definitive attribute keeps changing from one link to the next; there is no consistency in the type of bonds, and the variable meaning is carried over from one item in a class to the next’ (*ibid.*: 350). During the same period, Ludwig Wittgenstein invoked the metaphor of a rope to denote this kind of concept: ‘the rope consists of fibres, but it does not get its strength from any fibre that runs through it from one end to another, but from the fact that there is a vast number of fibres overlapping’ (Wittgenstein 1958: 87, quoted in Needham 1975: 350). These overlapping but sporadic similarities, Wittgenstein referred to as ‘family resemblances’ (*ibid.*). Needham argued that these conceptions – ‘chain complex’, ‘family

resemblances' – represented a radical shift in classification; one could no longer assume substitutability between members of the same class since 'it was no longer true that what was known of one member of a class was thereby known of the other members' (Needham 1975: 350). This 'conceptual revolution', however, was not new or unique to social anthropology. Indeed, Needham discovered that polythetic concepts had a venerable history in natural sciences such as botany.

If, as Burke noted, ambiguity is inherent to any form of classification, polythetic concepts make this element an explicit constituent feature. They overlap, they cannot rest on a single defining criterion, and borderline cases are essential rather than exceptional. But they can also accommodate a variety of variables and be used for many different purposes. In other words, their ambiguity imparts a measure of flexibility that allows them to be adapted to new information and situations as these arise. These are features that seem well suited to an ongoing discussion about various expressions of a ground as expansive as sociality.

Accordingly, the concepts on which we have chosen to focus our attention in this volume are all polythetic in nature. Each is 'good to think with' across a wide range of social situations and issues. But the circumstances being considered through each of these conceptual frames in turn are not reducible to one or even a small set of features, nor can one situation be substituted for another. Invoking a concept to consider particular expressions or workings of sociality should not be taken as offering a definition of a type of instantiation or matrix of relations. Rather, the concept is useful to the extent that it encourages us to focus our attention on the similarities, transformations and discrepancies arising amongst a diverse range of more or less overlapping situations or issues.

But a notion of family resemblances can also be usefully employed to denote a set of related or overlapping concepts. Thus as Vered Amit points out in this volume a concept like disjuncture can more usefully be viewed as one of a family of related concepts such as dissociation and disengagement. Gabriela Vargas-Cetina considers organization among a set of related concepts that also include such notions as cooperative, corporate and ephemeral associations. But we can also extend the notion of a family of concepts to the broader range of concepts through which manifestations of sociality may be considered. Hence the six concepts explored in this volume could usefully be regarded as part of a family of related concepts.

There are several implications arising from this characterization. First, it means that we should not be surprised to find overlaps between these concepts since they are related efforts to explore the same broad terrain. Second, it means that each of these concepts is not intended, in and of itself, to

serve as a master theoretical framework or overriding classification. Indeed, as one among an inventory of related concepts, each of these ideas is necessarily and self-consciously partial. As mid-range abstractions, each concept is good to think with for some issues and situations, but it is not intended to cover all or even most of the ways through which sociality is revealed. Even taken together, the domains covered by the six concepts interrogated in this volume are necessarily selective and partial. But given the reach of issues, relationships and situations that could reasonably be viewed as manifestations of sociality, it is difficult to imagine any plausibly useful set of concepts that could cover this ground comprehensively.

So why then this particular set of concepts? This collection of essays arises out of a longstanding conversation among the contributors to this volume. What was initially intended as one meeting led, over the course of several years, to numerous meetings and exchanges in which on occasion other more intermittent participants also joined us. Our discussions were animated by the view that, as the issues and circumstances being investigated by anthropologists have become ever more diverse, there has been a corresponding need to further develop a conceptual repertoire that can be drawn on to explore expressions of sociality in contemporary situations of mobility, urbanity, transnational connections, individuation, media and capital flows.

If in responding to these situations we did not wish simply to resort to pro forma invocations of overly familiar concepts such as ‘community’ or ‘society’, neither did we want unnecessarily to ‘reinvent the wheel’. As the chapters in this volume illustrate, there is a rich history of reflection on many of the issues or terms that have also proven useful in more recent analyses. This volume therefore endeavours to interrogate concepts of sociality by combining a review of older, classical theories with more recent theoretical innovations across a wide range of issues, locales, situations and domains.

Our reflections on the concepts that we have chosen to highlight in this volume arose through our respective ethnographic studies. That is to say, they have proven useful as frameworks of analyses for our respective inquiries. But as Long and Moore argue, conceptions of sociality that are too closely tied with efforts to account for particular ethnographic cases run the risk of converting ‘an ethnographically interesting gloss, which needs to be accounted for, into an analytic gloss to be taken up within social theory, and in doing so, they cut the very phenomenon they are seeking to describe off from other important sources of insight’ (Long and Moore 2013: 8). Hence, while the concepts on which we are focusing have already proven useful in framing examinations of specific empirical cases, their inclusion in this volume is a reflection of their broader analytical effectiveness. These concepts

do not, by any means, exhaust the inventory of ideas through which anthropologists can think about manifestations of sociality. But each of these concepts is good to think with across a wide range of issues, locales, situations and domains and that makes them very useful.

## PART II: THE CONCEPTS

### **Disjuncture**

*Vered Amit*

Rather than just one concept, disjuncture is best apprehended as comprising a family of ideas or terms such as disassociation and disengagement that have historically been both omnipresent and undeveloped in social theory. This is because disjuncture has rarely featured as a concept in its own right. More commonly it has served as a foil for converse concepts such as community, association and engagement. One of the effects of this ordering of ideas has been to treat association and engagement as the norm against which disjuncture acts as an extra-ordinary derogation. In this kind of conceptual ordering, therefore, disjuncture always comes after, as a development affecting existing social affiliations or links. This kind of interpretation has run the gamut over a wide range of circumstances including, for example, social boundaries – those ensconcing ethnic groups or localized communities – ritual liminality as well as historical shifts. But when it is rendered as an exceptional development, disjuncture often draws more sociological attention than the status quo it is seen as influencing. Ironically, therefore, while as an abstraction disjuncture may be delineated as a conceptual offshoot of the dominant idea of social association, when it is treated as an unusual or extraordinary development it often appropriates the analytical spotlight. As a result, the more mundane disjunctures that are integral to the generation of everyday social routines, interactions and engagements can be obscured. Equally, the tendency to take social affiliation and collectivity for granted as the expected norm obscures the efforts that it takes to form and sustain social associations.

But there is another more recent genre of work that has sought to shift this conceptual ordering by training a spotlight on the agents and processes that have to be catalysed to extend or fix association and innovation over time and space. In this version, stability or endurance itself has to be explained rather than assumed as the status quo. While productively shifting the ground for the conceptualization of the relationship between continuity, on the one hand, and innovation or association, on the other, examples

of this approach that I examine in the chapter on disjuncture – namely, Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (Latour 2005) and Karin Barber’s discussion of cultural creativity (Barber 2007) – still tend to focus on dramatic or ‘noisy’ instances. For an inclusion of the small acts of creativity involved in quieter and more humble forms of quotidian disjuncture, I turn to Michel de Certeau’s notion of the ‘art of the weak’ (de Certeau 1984). Often comprised of ordinary, daily practices, this art is tactical in nature, exercised in the absence of power to set the broader strategic conditions in which it is employed. It is about the capacity to discern in the slippages and gaps of institutional arrangements opportunities for winning space, which are then quietly grasped. In the anonymity of obscure daily practice there abound limitations on agency, but also opportunities for creativity.

Given the association of disjuncture with winning space, it is hardly surprising that it can also be actively desired rather than feared or endured. In my own research the desire for disjuncture has featured in the aspirations of a variety of travellers, desiring a break from routines, commitments and obligations. But the desire for respite or distance even from highly valued relationships and involvements is by no means associated only with mobility. It can also feature in the pursuit of local places or activities that offer alternative means of engagement or association. Or it can figure in efforts to effect more permanent transformations in the range or nature of one’s social involvements. If these quests for disjuncture do not necessarily transform the world around us, they still count as personal, intimate endeavours that are critical to the way in which people seek to fashion their associations. So fully granting attention to ordinary as much as to extraordinary disjuncture can serve as an important starting point from which to consider the dynamics of sociality.

## **Social Field**

*John Postill*

As defined in Chapter 2, a social field is an organized, internally differentiated domain of practice or action in which unequally positioned social agents compete and cooperate over the same rewards. Commonly associated with the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the concept of field is, in fact, of diverse ancestry. Any comprehensive account of its history must consider at least three other lineages. This concept deserves inclusion in a volume devoted to sociality for the following four reasons.

First, because it broaches a central problem in social theory since Durkheim and Weber, namely the growing complexity and differentiation of



modern societies into specialist domains such as politics, law, journalism or sport (Benson and Neveu 2005). Moreover, in contrast to differentiation theory concepts such as Luhmann's societal 'sub-systems', the notion of field does not make the deterministic assumption that modern fields will always tend towards greater differentiation; in some cases, the opposite is true, for instance, when a field like academia becomes less autonomous from the field of government (Hallin 2005). In addition, human agency and sociality are integral to the concept of field; they are not erased, as occurs in Luhmann's highly abstract systems theory (Gershon 2005).

Second, while notions such as community or network skirt around the question of power, the concept of field is based on a relational account of power. In other words, different agents bring to the field uneven amounts of economic, social and cultural capital, and this makes them relatively dominant or dominated in relation to other field agents.

Third, the concept of field invites us to explore the distinction between social action and social practice, two notions that are often conflated in the literature. In its well-known Bourdieuan variant, a field is an enduring domain of habitual practice. By contrast, in the tradition of the Manchester School of anthropology, fields are often volatile, rapidly changing domains of action, for example, following a leadership crisis in a 1950s rural African setting (Turner 1957). In other words, the concept of field suggests a potentially fruitful ideal-type distinction between sustainable fields of practice (such as art, sociology, charity) and unsustainable fields of action (such as protest, war, disaster relief) as two poles in a practice–action continuum.

Finally, unlike community, network or public sphere, the notion of field is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Field is an inherently neutral term with in-built resistance to the kind of normativity that has rendered emotive notions such as community or nation practically unusable as theoretical concepts (Postill 2008). That is to say, it is a concept that sheds light on the way things are, not the way things ought to be within a specific domain of human life. This allows us to investigate the empirical actualities of a given social process or phenomenon with an open mind, without imposing on it our communitarianism, networked horizontalism or critical rationalism. In short, there are no signs of 'fieldism' on the horizon.

## **Social Space**

*Deborah Reed-Danahay*

Social space is a concept with a long history in anthropological thought that has renewed potential for understanding many aspects of contemporary life

related to displacements, emplacements, boundaries and border zones. It provides a way to think about people and places that does not depend upon assuming fixed or rigid boundaries of groups of people or of the geographic territories in which they dwell, but, rather, leaves open for investigation the content, forms taken and experiences of affiliation. That ideas about social space are intrinsic to sociality is evidenced by the numerous spatial metaphors used to express it, such as those invoking social proximity or distance. The recent 'spatial turn' in the humanities and social sciences has provided new interest in applying ideas about social space to understandings of sociality.

Social space is useful for thinking about the ways in which it is increasingly evident in contemporary social life that you can be close to someone socially but distant in physical space, or close in physical space but distant socially. This is a feature of virtual communication, where people who are quite distant geographically can feel close to those with whom they connect through cyberspace – even when they have never met in person. In another example, immigrants and other travellers can also feel socially close to family members and friends who are far away in geographic space, but at the same time feel socially distant from people with whom they are in close physical proximity in their new surroundings. In everyday life, we are frequently in physical proximity to people with whom we do not associate or feel close to socially, yet we can also feel socially close to people who are not geographically close to us. Whereas these metaphors of social distance or proximity may be most apt at the individual level, there is also a group component to social space: the problem of the existence and visibility of social groups as an ongoing project of group-making. For immigrants, particularly in the realm of political mobilization and civic engagement, becoming visible as a group and being able to have some control over the image and meaning of that group in social space is an important component of inclusion and participation.

Social space is connected to physical and geographic places, but there are also ways in which social space can be understood as a more abstract realm in which social relationships are imagined and enacted. There have been several approaches in anthropological traditions of research that focus on spatiality and cultural constructions of space in their approaches to the study of society. Classic theorists who have written about social space include Durkheim, Simmel, Bachelard, Sorokin, Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Goffman, Barth, Lefebvre and de Certeau. It is a central concept in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, although less recognized as such than his notion of field.

Contemporary theory in anthropology has been concerned less with issues of social morphology that preoccupied anthropologists in the mid-twen-

tieth century and more with those of movement, process and the effects of globalization. The question of how to understand the relationship between territorial or geographic space and social space continues, however, to be a theoretical problem in contemporary work. One approach to social space in sociology and anthropology has been to consider how much the physical environment, geographic space, should (or can) be analytically separated from the more abstract idea of one's position in an imagined social space that has to do with moral values, status, prestige, affinity, identity and so on. There are three overlapping areas of inquiry to which ideas of social space contribute: the relationship between territory and social group; thresholds, boundaries, and borders; and social distance and proximity.

Like social field, social space is a theoretical construct that attempts to capture the spatiality inherent in sociality, and provide tools for understanding social interactions and connections as well as their absence. The most useful way to distinguish between these concepts is to consider how they articulate physical or geographic place and sociality. The term field (see Postill, this volume) is most often used to describe forms of social action or interaction in which geographic space is less important than social action, and given more or less attention depending on the analyst. Social space, in contrast, is a concept for which the question of the relationship between social and physical or geographic space is central. I suggest that the lens of social space provides perspectives on the landscape of possibilities, world-views and values in which fields may emerge with more or less permanency and autonomy. Social space also engages with concepts of spatiality as understood, enacted and perceived by ethnographic research participants.

## **Sociability**

*Sally Anderson*

Including sociability as a key concept for interrogating sociality is perhaps obvious, not least because of their similar etymological origins. Yet embarking on this collaborative work, I was not convinced that sociability merited inclusion. Why not choose interaction, with its long theoretical history and established seat in behavioural and social theory? Why select instead an undertheorized, intuitive concept with Anglophone undertones of social morality, cocktail-party convention, and leisure, pleasure or posturing, depending upon one's point of view. I was not convinced of the analytical purchase to be gained by interrogating this intuitive sister concept. Although not exactly twins, sociability and sociality are often used interchangeably and without reflection, indicating that the conceptual space between them is muddled.

Speaking for inclusion, on the other hand, was Simmel's strong conviction that sociability is a very particular play-form of sociation, meriting a whole chapter in his book on foundational sociological questions (Simmel 1950). This was oddly in accord with my Danish informants' insistence on distinguishing between ordinary *samvær* (being together or sociality) and *socialt samvær* (being together socially or sociability), and their moral claims that the former was not enough for proper associational life, as if Simmel's ideas had been internalized in Danish notions of proper civil society (Anderson 2008).

My awareness that anthropologists frown on a priori dismissal of empirical distinctions, coupled with the theoretical challenge of exploring sociability as a key concept, have convinced me of its merit. Given that the aim of this volume is not to arrive at a rigid definition of sociality, but to explore a set of related concepts, sociability – with its double edge of conceptual muddle and empirical distinction – is a prime candidate. As I argue in Chapter 4, sociability's value, both as a concept and as abstracted performative form, lies in this labile combination of blurring and distinction. Sociability is not the same as sociality, but the distinction is often unclear. Sociability is more than sociality, but how exactly? What drives our own and others' sense of distinctness, and the sense that sociability is 'more' than sociality? How might these two concepts divide in China, Amazonia or Libya? Where do people draw empirical lines, what ends up on which side of the line, and importantly, who decides? What conceptual, political and social work does the division do? And with what emotional intensity and tone do people engage, both as players and linesmen?

Sociability compels us to consider the necessity of playing to conventions of form – to stabilize a relational genre and be recognized as a legitimate player. It also pushes us to consider the 'as if' reality of any abstracted form thus jointly improvised, and the question of how people make any form of sociation 'real' through joint acts of purification (Anderson 2011). This points to the relative instability of all abstracted social form, and specifically the heightened lability of forms of sociation, which in foregrounding moral and aesthetic acts of relating make evaluating how well participants play to and on conventions of form intrinsic to the situation. This raises questions of where, when and to whom such aesthetics are significant, as well as on what legitimacy and whose authority they are judged.

Finally, sociability affords a particular window on ongoing political interest in monitoring, shaping and controlling the sociality of subjects and citizens. If – as Simmel posited – sociability is a form of sociation in which people feel compelled to act as if associated, the concept opens a whole set of questions regarding the character and understanding of acts and feelings

of 'association'. It also allows us to engage with the instrumentality and involuntariness of much sociality. What motives and desired outcomes drive forceful policies and pedagogies promoting and enforcing particular social forms, and how are these engaged with and contested? In conclusion, the significance of including sociability is that it allows us to interrogate and move between scales of deeply personal and strongly political concerns with human sociality.

## **Organizations**

*Gabriela Vargas-Cetina*

Organizing and organizations are direct results of sociality, and most human action relies on them. There is perhaps a utopian tint to the study of local organizations and cooperatives: the idea that people coming together will be stronger, more powerful and will accomplish more than a single individual could on their own. They are key ways in which individuals find the strength, the resources and the resolve to face and to participate in contemporary life. Organizations, however, can also carry the seed of authoritarianism, since in them the rules of the collective become obligatory in spite of the particular wishes or interests of the individual member. They might attempt to dictate individual will and thought, as occurred in Germany during the Nazi Third Reich. There is also the danger that organizations might act as individuals that harm persons and groups, and destroy other organizations.

The nation-state, a specific form of organization, relies in turn on certain organizations as its particular tools, to exert control, collect taxes, create and distribute services, and regulate, as much as possible, conflicts between individuals and between groups. Today's multinational corporations, which are organizations too, have the means and the power to impose their rule and their conditions around the world, and force even nation-states into accepting this new state of affairs. Multinational corporations, however, also have the ability to effect world change in positive ways, if they choose to do so. The ways in which their shareholders and stakeholders may influence their direction in one sense or another might ultimately rest on available forms of sociality and responsibility.

Many anthropologists are currently working in circumstances where the actions of multinational corporations are producing critical effects on people and environments. In different settings, certain common threads have included rapidly shifting local contexts that are responding to international, national and regional pressures; and large political and economic transfor-

mations that have become ever more present in local life because of the augmentation of communications technology. In a very real sense, anthropology today has to be what Rabinow (2009) calls the anthropology of the contemporary: the study of the most recent past, the present and the immediate future. In Chapter 5 I look at the ways in which anthropology has approached organizations through several interrelated concepts: organization, corporation, cooperative and association. I close the chapter by looking at ephemeral associations. As recently embodied by the ‘disorganized’ movements that swept the world between 2010 and 2012, ephemeral associations seem to run against the grain of organizational processes as we used to know them. What now seem disorganized forms of action are changing, if not the world itself, at least our perceptions about the world, about organizations and about the place of locality in an increasingly global, inter-connected social universe. New forms of sociality are also emerging from these movements. Organizations as a key theme in anthropology could not have been absent from a volume such as this.

## **Networks**

*Vered Amit and Virginia Caputo*

Network is a term whose very familiarity – perhaps overfamiliarity – can detract from the particularity and utility of its application. Indeed, network has a long history, both in scholarly and popular discourses, as a metaphor for social relations. The ubiquity of contemporary invocations of network as a general metaphor for connectedness has in turn contributed to growing dissatisfaction with it as an analytical concept in some scholarly quarters. But this apparent ubiquity has obscured the emergence of far more specific scholarly conceptualizations of the term. In our discussion of this term, we argue that the notion of connectedness associated with network has been marshalled to broach two very different avenues of inquiry, one using network to identify and interrogate systems or organizational forms, and the other seeking to trace the reach and impact of personal social links.

In anthropology, the latter concept of network is best known from its association with the Manchester School of the 1960s and 1970s. For scholars such as J. Clyde Mitchell and A.L. Epstein, the open-ended nature of network made it useful as a heuristic device that complemented rather than replaced other categorical or structural analyses. This open-ended quality derived from the acknowledgement that, since the range of links making up a personal network always extends beyond any one observable interaction, this interaction may well be influenced by relationships with people who

are not present as well as with those who are. As a result, one can use the concept of network to trace links that cut across different situations and institutions.

The Manchester School's emphasis on tracing the reach and influence of personal networks, while never altogether disappearing, has been overtaken by other approaches. More recent conceptualizations of network ranging from 'actor-network' theory to 'network society' to the notion of network as a new institutional form vary substantially from each other as well. But, they all share a tendency to treat networks as systems or cultural forms rather than as personal linkages. In moving away from network as a personal assembly of relationships, these conceptualizations tend to displace the individual as the focus of analysis as well as to sidestep the question of agency. As a result, in this rendering, individuals seem more likely to inhabit these kinds of networks than to assemble them.

In looking back on the history of network analysis in anthropology and related disciplines, we are suggesting that a reconsideration of earlier historical applications of the concept may prove to be as useful – if in quite different ways – for understanding social relations as other conceptualizations that have gained in prominence more recently. Rather than dismiss network as a facile metaphor for contemporary connectedness, reviewing some of its earlier applications within anthropology can serve as a useful reminder of two key points. First, as Mitchell noted, there is a difference between the use of network as a metaphor and as an analytical concept (Mitchell 1969: 2). Second, the different conceptualizations of network are not really arguments over how to frame the same field of inquiry so much as suggestions for pursuing rather different sets of questions. The earlier avenue for inquiry, which has been recently eclipsed, encourages an exploration of the ways particular situations may be shaped by social linkages extending well beyond them. It thus allows us to probe the workings of association without overly presuming, *a priori*, the nature of these links. And it also reminds us to consider the nature, extent and intentionality of the efforts individuals invest in forming, mobilizing, sustaining or limiting these social links. This poses a set of questions, a focus on agency and an open-ended approach to social relations that seem just as relevant and perhaps even more pertinent to contemporary circumstances of mobility, globalization and mediated communication as they were to the urban, migrant contexts being probed by the Manchester School some forty years ago. It therefore bears reminding ourselves of the connotations and utility of an earlier concept of network for contemporary anthropological enquiry before the term is entirely effaced by contemporary commercial banalities or overshadowed by an altogether different scholarly orientation.

## REFERENCES

- Amit, V. 2007. 'Globalization through "Weak Ties": A Study of Transnational Networks among Mobile Professionals', in V. Amit (ed.), *Going First Class? New Approaches to Privileged Travel and Movement*. Oxford: Berghahn, pp.53–71.
- Amit, V., and N. Rapport. 2012. *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality*. London: Pluto Press.
- Anderson, S. 2008. *Civil Sociality: Children, Sport, and Cultural Policy in Denmark*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Press.
- . 2011. 'Going through the Motions of Ritual: Exploring the As If Quality of Religious Sociality in Faith-based Schools', in S.B. Ridgley (ed.), *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook*. New York: New York University Press, pp.139–156.
- Barber, K. 2007. 'Improvisation and the Art of Making Things Stick', in E. Hallam and T. Ingold (eds), *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Oxford: Berg, pp.25–41.
- Benson, R., and E. Neveu. 2005. 'Introduction: Field Theory as a Work in Progress', in R. Benson and E. Neveu (eds), *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp.1–25.
- Burke, K. 1955. *A Grammar of Motives*. New York: George Braziller.
- Castells, M. 2000. 'Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society', *British Journal of Sociology* 51(1): 5–24.
- de Certeau, M. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gershon, I. 2005. 'Seeing Like a System: Luhmann for Anthropologists', *Anthropological Theory* 5(2): 99–116.
- Gluckman, M. 1968. 'The Utility of the Equilibrium Model in the Study of Social Change', *American Anthropologist* 70: 219–237.
- Hallin, D.C. 2005. 'Field Theory, Differentiation Theory and Comparative Media Research', in R. Benson and E. Neveu (eds), *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge: Polity, pp.224–243.
- Hannerz, U. 1996. *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*. London: Routledge.
- Kapferer, B. 1973. 'Social Network and Conjugal Role in Urban Zambia: Toward a Reformulation of the Bott Hypothesis', in J. Boissevain and J.C. Mitchell (eds), *Network Analysis: Studies in Human Interaction*. The Hague: Mouton, pp.83–110.
- Knauff, B.M. 2006. 'Anthropology in the Middle', *Anthropological Theory* 6: 407–430.
- Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Long, N.J., and H.L. Moore. 2013. 'Introduction', in N.J. Long and H.L. Moore (eds), *Sociality: New Directions*. Oxford: Berghahn, pp.1–24.
- Mitchell, J.C. 1969. 'The Concept and Use of Social Networks', in J.C. Mitchell (ed.), *Social Networks in Urban Situations: Analyses of Personal Relationships in Central African Towns*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp.1–50.
- . 1974. 'Social Networks', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 3: 279–299.



- Needham, R. 1975. 'Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences', *Man* 10: 349–369.
- O'Brien, R. 2003. 'The Global Network Knowledge Gap', *Global Networks* 3(1): 1–7.
- Postill, J. 2008. 'Localizing the Internet beyond Communities and Networks', *New Media and Society* 10: 413–431.
- Rabinow, P. 2009. *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Redfield, R. 1962. *Human Nature and the Study of Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, G. 1950. 'Sociability: An Example of Pure, or Formal, Sociology', in *The Sociology of George Simmel*, trans. and ed. K.H. Wolff. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, pp.41–57.
- Toren, C. 2013. 'Imagining the World that Warrants Our Imagination: The Revelation of Ontogeny', in N.J. Long and H.L. Moore (eds), *Sociality: New Directions*. Oxford: Berghahn, pp.43–59.
- Turner, V. 1957. *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Blackwell.

