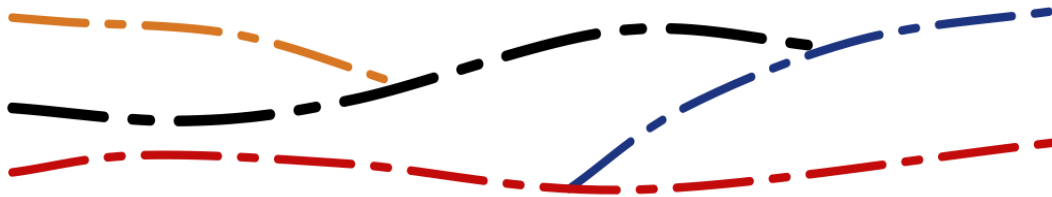


EUBORDERSCAPES



Working Paper 3

Assessing Cultural-Spatial Change in European Border Areas- Theory-based Considerations in Developing an Understanding of Social (Re)Constructions of Space

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based Considerations in Developing an Understanding of Social (Re)Constructions of Space ¹

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical approach to the empirical reconstruction of cultural-spatial change, building on knowledge sociology and social constructivism. A model with visualization is presented based on the assumption that cultural-spatial change in European border areas occurs within a process of interaction and communication between different cultures which have their own specific knowledge systems and related social practices. Border regions in this sense are regarded as 'spaces with opportunities' that – in the context of neighbourhood cooperation and intercultural communication processes – provide particular opportunity structures for different cultures moving towards each other. Such a view means that border spaces thus have the potential to integrate different social interpretations of reality and within this process cultural-spatial change may take place.

Keywords: cultural-spatial change, social construction of border areas, transnational institution building, institutional learning

Kurzfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird versucht, kulturräumliche Veränderungen in Grenzräumen empirisch zu rekonstruieren und kulturräumliche Wandelprozesse anhand theoretischer Ansätze des Sozialkonstruktivismus und der Wissenssoziologie zu erklären. Es wird ein Modell zur empirischen Analyse vorgestellt, das auf der Annahme basiert, dass sich kulturell-räumlicher Wandel durch Interaktions- und Kommunikationsprozesse zwischen verschiedenen Kulturen, mit ihren jeweiligen spezifischen Wissenssystemen und den damit verbundenen sozialen Praktiken vollzieht. Grenzregionen werden damit als ‚Möglichkeitsräume‘ betrachtet, die aufgrund nachbarschaftlicher Nähe die Gelegenheitsstrukturen für kulturelle Annäherungsprozesse bieten. Eine solche Sicht bedeutet, dass diese Räume das Potenzial beinhalten, verschiedene soziale Interpretationen der Wirklichkeit zu integrieren und dass innerhalb dieser Prozesses kulturell-räumliche Veränderungen stattfinden können.

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Schlüsselbegriffe: kulturräumlicher Wandel, soziale Konstruktion von Grenzräumen, transnationale Institutionenbildung, institutionelles Lernen.

Introduction - a Conceptual Approach to the Empirical Reconstruction of Cultural-Spatial Change

This paper presents a means of assessing cultural-spatial changes in European border areas. The assumption is that these processes are empirically observable in adjustments to social practices, routine actions and changes in rule systems and thus they can be comprehended as cultural-spatial changes. Thus we follow (Radaelli 2004: 3), who describes these changes as “processes of construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’, and shared beliefs and norms”. Social interactions in border regions seem to be particularly suitable for an empirical reconstruction of these processes as it is here that different cultures and their respective specific knowledge stocks encounter each other and even clash.

To empirically reconstruct cultural-spatial change in border areas a conceptual approach including a model with visualization has been developed. This model is based on theories of social constructivism and approaches within the sociology of knowledge. It serves as a tool for empirical analysis, with the aim of assessing even small steps of intercultural convergence that occur within cross-border processes but are usually barely perceived. Communication processes are analysed to find out if and under which circumstances actors from different cultures with different systems of rules and different values – thus actors coming from different institutional spaces – develop common interpretations of action situations. Accordingly, research is concerned with processes in which different (space-related) knowledge is brought together and negotiated and, at the same time, new, shared knowledge is created to serve as a basis for joint action based on collectively recognized rules. This allows for insights to intercultural institutional learning that can be generalized in respect of understanding cultural-spatial change from a bottom up perspective.

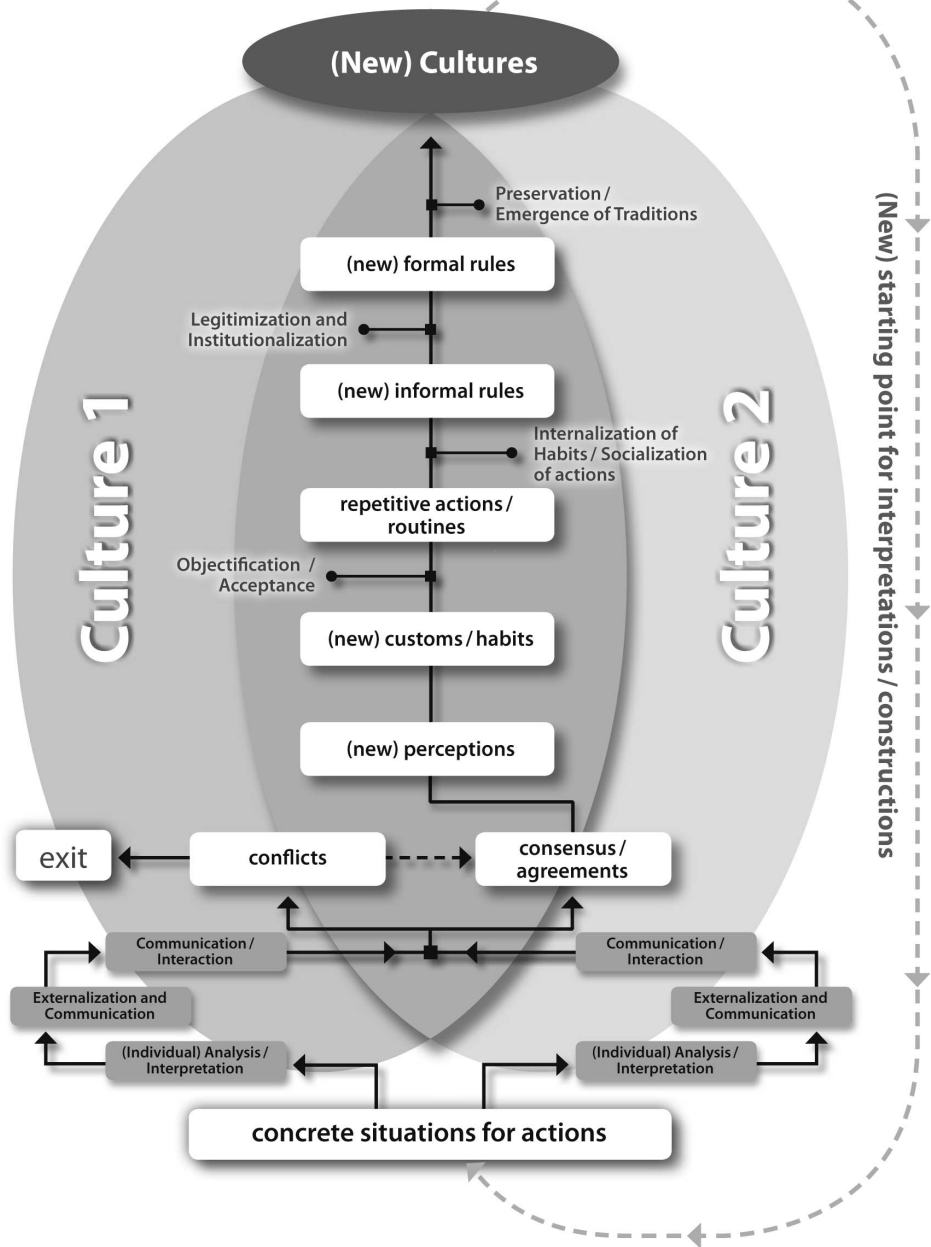
The paper begins by introducing the conceptual approach and explaining the visualization through a model for empirical analysis. The practicability of this model will be exemplified with empirical illustrations in the field of cross border cooperation in higher education. The aim here is to demonstrate how processes of everyday cross-border interaction may be assessed in their contribution towards cultural-spatial change. In order to explain the conceptual approach, the article reflects on possible linkages between various elements of the theory of social constructivism. The intention is to throw light on the underlying rationale of cultural-spatial change. Thus an attempt is made to connect elements of culture and space by considering the role of social practices and

their interrelations with knowledge and institutional learning. They are regarded here as constitutive building blocks for cultural-spatial change. This research on cultural-spatial change thus involves a departure from the traditional concepts of culture by both bringing together different theoretical approaches and by trying to visualize such a process and verify it empirically.

Visualizing the Processes of Cultural-Spatial Change

Drawing on approaches within social constructivism (see Berger und Luckmann 2004), and extending this to include communicative actions (see Knoblauch 1995; Knoblauch und Schnettler 2004; Knoblauch 2005, 2013; Luckmann 2002), the process of cultural-spatial change – as an ideal type – can be reconstructed and graphically depicted with help of the following model (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Cultural-spatial change



Source: author's own work (Fichter-Wolf 2010)

This representation of cultural-spatial change captures two European cultural (border)spaces characterized by different institutions and traditions. The areas denoted by culture 1 and 2 are to be understood as ideal-types – in reality there are no European spaces consisting of 'pure' national cultures. Especially European borderlands often represent spaces of mixed cultures, such as hybrids of different customs, norms, languages and dialects that have their roots in different (national) cultures. Thus, and this is the point of the model, the central area of the figure relates to the border region, where the processes of intercultural encounters occur. It is here that a mixture of different cultures may evolve; one that may also have the potential for cultural-spatial transformation because the immediate, neighbourhood-inspired spatial contact, cross-border cooperation provides special conditions for the social construction of cultural-spatial change. Through such direct encounters between different cultures new cultural hybrids develop. Via communication, argumentation and negotiation a mutual understanding may evolve based on processes of learning.

This model aims to empirically reconstruct those processes of cultural-spatial change that can be traced back to collective processes in everyday life in these border areas. Thus, the attempt is made to assess small steps of intercultural convergence within everyday actions that are often hardly noticed at all and therefore can hardly be evaluated in terms of their importance to processes of Europeanisation. 'Europeanisation' in this context is used as a heuristic term, one that doesn't define a distinct stage of integration, degree of mergence or hybridisation of different cultures. Here Europeanisation is used to refer to the evolutionary process of cultural rapprochement, understanding and mutual intercultural learning. However, these processes of cultural rapprochement are not linear developments and deadlocks and setbacks are frequent. The model aims to capture these developments as well.

Figure 1 describes– from bottom to top – these processes as follows: at the beginning there is a situation of concrete action, which in the context of bi- or intercultural cooperation may be interpreted and judged in completely different ways by the actors involved, i. e. according to their respective social and cultural knowledge. In the course of the communication process, the interpretations of individual actors are externalized and must be made subject to negotiation. As these individual interpretations gain common consent, they may be combined to become a collective interpretation. In the case of bi- or intercultural interaction processes in cross-border cooperation, different

ways of interpreting an action situation often confront each other. Typically, this may result in intercultural misunderstandings because the parties involved do not understand the respective interpretations of the other side and judge the situation according to their own stock of cultural knowledge. Not infrequently this results in conflict and the risk that one partner may choose the exit option and leave the negotiation process. However, if the partners are interested in further cooperation or are obliged to continue negotiations because of a higher treaty of cooperation (according to Scharpf the 'shadow of hierarchy'), then mutual understanding of the other side's point of view may develop in the course of subsequent processes. This may even bring the positions of the parties closer together, common interpretations may emerge or a consensus may be found on how the problem could be resolved. This process may result in common or shared views, from which new action patterns may arise in subsequent contact. According to theoretical approaches on the social and communicative construction of culture, new views develop as 'intersubjective patterns of interpretation', i. e. individual interpretations are no longer connected only to the individual actors involved in the process, as they are also recognized by others, thus becoming a common and 'objectified' knowledge stock. As a result, new practices may develop as common action patterns and become "a typical process which obliges several actors in the same way ..., the use of which relieves [the actors] from the burden of experimenting and deciding themselves ... [thus becoming] objective elements of reality" (Knoblauch 1995: 27).

As illustrated in the model, new action patterns may develop as a result of new shared views. As a result of repeated actions new routines develop that are internalized by the respective participants and work as collective action patterns. Then, by way of habituations and routines, it may well be that new – informal/formal – systems of rules (institutions) develop as defined action structures.

Regarding the social construction of cultural-spatial change the development of (new) institutions – as socially recognized rules of the game (North 1990, 1991) – is highly significant. This takes place in a dialectic process "which so to speak happens between the I and society" (Knoblauch 1995: 23). The essential steps for this are externalization as a process, in the course of which subjective meaning is constituted and communicated towards the outside; objectification as a process, through which several subjects recognize subjective interpretations as reality; followed by a process of institutionalization and legitimation. The social process of legitimation is considered the most important step within the process of institutionalization: "Legitimations are the meaningful, objectified ways in which action structures are communicated, or better: they are the communicatively demonstrated dimension of meaning of the respective actions" (Knoblauch 1995: 28). Furthermore, cultural-spatial change requires a continuation of these new or changed action-guiding regulations (institutions); they must be internalized and develop into traditions.

Assessing the Significance of Empirical Findings

With the help of the above model of analysis it is possible to identify the levels of social and cultural changes which have been reached through collective cultural practices resulting from everyday cross-border activities. At the same time, it is possible to assess the likely significance of even preliminary results regarding communicative processes towards the socio-cultural (re)construction of European cultural spaces. In the following this may be illustrated with empirical findings from research on cross-border collaboration in higher education in European border areas.

The following situation occurred in German-Danish borderland cooperation in higher education. It rests on different university traditions and procedures concerning the assessment of student exams. In the Danish university it is traditional to carry out assessments of student exams in partnership with external examiners (censors) from other institutions of higher learning or from practice. While the Danish teachers appreciate the exchange with external professionals, using the feedback to help them in their marking, the German perception is quite different. Especially in the early years of the joint programmes German lecturers regarded this practice as interference and a threat to their scientific autonomy in teaching, suspecting a lack of trust in their assessment skills. The different university cultures and traditions in the Danish and German higher education systems thus led to very different interpretations of the situation. Lecturers from the German education system, with its tradition of Humboldt's ideal of freedom of research and teaching, evaluated this situation in completely different terms to their Danish colleagues, who regard higher education more in terms of services provided to the students. However, within the processes of negotiation and long-standing disputes in the cross-border communication, changing opinions are becoming apparent. Some of the German teachers now also recognize this method as a means of quality assurance and welcome the participation of external experts as a supporting practice.

Based on the analytical model (Fig. 1), this process can be thought of in the following terms: At first, each individual involved in the process had their own subjective perception of the situation based on their cultural tradition. These individual interpretations were communicated to other teachers as well as in the bicultural bodies and were thus also externalized. As illustrated in Figure 1, the following processes and outcomes are conceivable. The difference in interpretation may cause conflicts and an incompatibility of positions may even lead to an exit from negotiations. However, within processes of further communication and interaction mutual understanding may develop, resulting in a convergence of positions, the emergence of common interpretations of

meaning. Thus, even consensus can emerge. It seems such a process has occurred in German-Danish university cooperation. Although the Danish tradition, namely the inclusion of external censors in the examination process, at first caused confusion and misunderstanding amongst the German lecturers, in further (long-term) communication and negotiation processes tentative moves towards the position of the Danish side occurred. German academics are now increasingly recognizing the support of external examiners as well. Thus new joint perceptions and commonly agreed practice and habit have evolved, and the process may continue with regard to routines and jointly accepted rules.

The second example is from the joint German-Polish university, the Collegium Polonicum at the border between Frankfurt/Odra - Słubice. Rules ensuring the use of both languages – as hybrid arrangements – were introduced to overcome the dominance of the German language and thus existing asymmetry in the negotiating processes in the bi-national bodies. A bi-national management strategy was agreed allowing everybody to talk in their first language - the Germans talk German, the Poles speak Polish. This bilingual language practice aimed to ensure that everyone involved in the intercultural communication process could make themselves clearly understood, as using one's own language also includes non-verbal communication through gestures and facial expressions. Thus, an at least passive knowledge of the other language was required. They also contemplated the introduction of this form of bilingualism as a rule in the joint study programmes.

Referring back to the model, it appears that in this example the level of objectification/acceptance has been achieved. New or altered perspectives lead to a new pattern of action – namely, the recognition that the dominance of the German language and this asymmetry should be reduced in cross-border cooperation. Initially the bilingual form of communication was introduced in the joint German-Polish university committees as a personal commitment and thus as an informal rule. However, to achieve the aim of implementing this form of bilingualism in the joint German-Polish study programmes and make it a part of the study regulations, new formal rules as codified institutions would arise. However, a significant step in the institutionalization process will also be the social process of legitimation.

These examples from university cooperation serve as an illustration of how institutional learning processes may develop: through negotiations based on communicative processes of understanding solutions are developed – at first in the form of informal regulations – which are then accepted and practiced by the participants without any codified rules. As these empirical findings illustrate, new action patterns are created based on new perceptions that evolve due to agreement and mutual understanding between the participating cultures. With the help of the analytical model it is possible to

identify the levels of social and cultural change which have been reached by individual cultural practices resulting from everyday cross-border action. At the same time, it is also possible to illustrate the probable significance of (preliminary) results of communicative processes for the social (re)construction of European cultural spaces.

However, it should be stressed that institutionalization processes do not follow, set, straight lines, as suggested in the model. Social reality is much more complex, and processes in the social (re)construction of cultural spaces involve both standstills as well as backward movements. In the case of the Collegium Polonicum the bilingual language regime is not really in operation because Polish partners usually have a far better knowledge of the German language than vice versa. As a result, the negotiations are still mainly conducted in German. Thus, the social construction of European cultural spaces through new cultural practices and rules is by no means a linear process.

Constitutive Building Blocks for Cultural-Spatial Change: Considerations from Social Constructivism

In the following section the theoretical basis for the above described assessment of cultural-spatial change is introduced. Various elements of the theory of social constructivism and approaches from knowledge sociology, and ways they can be linked to together, are discussed in order to develop a better understanding of cultural-spatial change.

On Understanding the Concept of Culture and its Relevance for the Creation of Space

To better understand the process of cultural-spatial change the concept of culture has to be elaborated. In accordance with social constructivism (Berger und Luckmann 2004) culture is considered as specific orderings within respective arrangements of knowledge, which thus “develop[s] against the background of symbolic orders, of specific ways of interpreting the world ... [and] are reproduced by systems of meaning and cultural codes” (Reckwitz 2005: 96). In this article culture is not reduced to the cognitive phenomena of meaning and mental structures; rather cultures are also interpreted and understood “as know-how dependent everyday routines, as collectively intelligible social practices” (ibid. p. 97). In this view a culture’s knowledge arrangement also includes practical knowledge, such as “the practice of bureaucratic administration, of physical hygiene or of risky enterprise, [the] complex of the practices of scientific research, of middle class marriage or of the reception of pop music etc” (ibid. p. 98). Culture in this understanding is expressed in habitual practices, competencies and routines that are to

a great extent related to the existing shared knowledge base of a society. It is collective knowledge that shapes social practices and patterns of action. This knowledge can be explicit but is often implicit, stored in the shared values, norms and traditions of a society. Thus, the social world is created through meaningful knowledge of procedures and such social practices make obvious how everyday life is structured through 'cultural codes' as collective forms of understanding and meaning; in the broadest sense by symbolic orders (Reckwitz 2003: 287ff., 2004). By this means, practices and action patterns reveal people's perception of reality and together with other practices transform or stabilize their world view. "Regular practices of action follow implicitly cultural patterns and unfold in habitual interpretations, meanings and social actions" (Hörning 2001: 165). Regular common action patterns evolve into collective patterns of action and thus the main features of human interaction are socially acceptable. It is assumed that most human actions are not an intentional act but follow internalized collective social practices (ibid.). Thus, social practices maintain the shared social knowledge that is often implicit and has been settled through experience and continuous action. "Social practices are thus in a sense, the medium of social relevance and appropriateness" (ibid. p. 162f.).

Consequently, from a social constructivist perspective cultural theories are strongly interconnected with the concepts of social practice. But – as Reckwitz points out – it is the importance of materiality / physicality that distinguish theories of practice. In particular, it differs from those cultural theories and forms of social constructivism that refer mainly to images and world views and thus try to understand their mental and cognitive structures through an analysis of texts and discourses. Theories of practice conceive the collective knowledge systems of a culture neither as purely cognitive schemata of observation nor as codes within communication and discourse but as a practical conglomerate of everyday techniques. They are based on a practical understanding of behavioural norms that express themselves in the form of routine relationships between subjects and their use of material artefacts (Reckwitz 2003).

However, material-technical objects and processes do not themselves possess any functional and cultural significance per se. This is only acquired in the processes of appropriation and use: "... the homes, the landscapes, the cities ..., the tools and machines, the technical infrastructure, telecommunications networks, in which we are involved, our modes of experience and the cognitive-symbolic processing effect of our social practices. Particularly they open up new possibilities for action and communication ..." (Hörning 2001: 167). In this way material artefacts (buildings, technologies, etc.) influence our experiences and practical knowledge and this may explain how new knowledge and new technologies constantly offer new ways of interpreting and understanding the world.

On the Role of Institutions and Institutional Learning in Cultural-Spatial Change

With respect to the above section on the concept of culture, the role of institutions has to be emphasized in the process of cultural-spatial change. Institutions are regarded as shared concepts used by humans in repetitive situations; they are organized by rules, norms and strategies (Ostrom 2005, 1999). North has stated that institutions are ‘the rules of the game in a society’, that they are “the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interactions [consisting of] informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)” (North 1991: 97). In social science, institutions are usually treated as particular rule systems which occur in sets, e.g. constitutional rule systems for society, collective rules governing different kinds of organisations and operational rules for routine actions.

In any society and its respective cultural setting there is a need for a set of behavioural norms to define acceptable actions for members of society. All human activity requires certain regularising conventions that facilitate social processes. Institutions guide and restrict human behaviour and they form a framework of appropriate and accepted actions. Institutions generate a common orientation for members of a society and thus reduce uncertainty about the behaviour of individual actors (Göhler 1997). Institutions can therefore be equated with collective knowledge systems and are thus closely linked to culture. In such an understanding of collective, practical and interpretive knowledge guiding social practice (Reckwitz 2001), each culture is strongly distinguished by its institutions. However, institutions ‘as rules of the game in a society’ (North 1990) are also shaped within and by the culture they exist in. Thus institutions on the one hand enable and constrain social interaction, but on the other hand they are created by human actors (Mayntz und Scharpf 1995). The twin face of institutions has to be considered when analysing socio-cultural and spatial changes.

How institutions change and how new institutions evolve is an ongoing debate in social science research. Institutional rules sometimes change at a stroke, sometimes they are subject to incremental change. Göhler distinguishes a revolutionary path (institutional decline; drastic and immediate institutional changes like German unification) from an evolutionary path (adaptation to changing social conditions) regarding institutional change. Most common in everyday social processes are incremental evolutionary changes to institutions (Göhler 1997). This can also be assumed for socio-cultural and spatial changes.

Following Djelic and Quack (2002) institution building and institutional changes in the transnational sphere, or rather intercultural context, are seen as an evolutionary and

multilayered process. This consists of many institutional innovations in every day routines, social behaviour, established practices and rules that regulate the relations and interactions between the actors and groups of actors that are involved. Accordingly, institutional transformations emerge in a process of “succession and combination, over a long period of time, of a series of incremental transformations [which] can lead in the end to consequential and significant change. Each single one of these incremental transformations may appear quite marginal. ... However, the succession and combination of multiple and multilevel transformations ultimately and with a longer term view of the process adds to the significance and heightens the impact of each single transformation” (ibid. p. 11). The alteration of institutions that follow an evolutionary path is seen as a very slow process whereby change is always associated with resistance and persistence (ibid.).

With the aim of identifying patterns of cultural spatial transformation the question of how institutions change is of great interest. Djelic and Quack assume that transnational and cross-border institutional alterations often emerge as a recombination of existing national institutions. They propose “the focus of analysis has to shift away from the present concern with national configurations towards attempts at understanding transnational recombination ... [and] reinterpret globalisation as multilayered processes of transnational institution building and recombination” (ibid. p.23).

As institution building and changes to institutions in an intercultural context involves actors or groups of actors with mental and action maps originating from quite different cultures and institutional contexts. Thus the actors, as well as the cultures, which prevail and the institutional fragments which emerge are key areas of research. Earlier studies on organizational and institutional learning (Argyris 1964; Argyris and Schön 1974, 1978) may offer a rewarding approach to explaining such a process. These studies are concerned with the interrelation between individual and collective learning and they focus on the relationship between knowledge, social practices and institution building. Here it is argued (Argyris und Schön 1978, 1996) that people have mental maps with regards to how they should act in situations, and these include methods of planning, implementing and reviewing their actions. They assert that such actions rely more on these mental maps than on the theory of action they espouse. Therefore they propose a distinction between a ‘theory in use’ and an ‘espoused’ theory. However, a theory in use is implicit and the related tacit knowledge has been acquired in the processes of socialization. Thus, this approach can be related to cultural understanding as the shared knowledge stock of a culture. Learning for Argyris and Schön (1978: 2) involves the detection and correction of errors in order to avoid future failure. They make a distinction between different modes of learning. Single-loop learning describes a simple adaptation of behaviour without changing their underlying values. This learning process can also be called instrumental learning as any changes to an action strategy do not jeopardize the

existing institutional framework. More advanced is double-loop learning. This combines changes in values along with their connected knowledge bases and is therefore related to changes in collective behaviour and changes in organisational and institutional structures. The process of double-loop learning includes feedback loops regarding both action strategies as well as the underlying theories of action. Through reflection and modifications of the methodology in line with alterations to action strategies it offers a greater range of possible responses to changing conditions.

This advanced mode is crucial for institutional changes through learning because it tackles the deeper structures of internalized knowledge. Additionally, the approach of Sabatier (1993) is the most appropriate for further explanation of such processes. His work centres on the idea of different levels of belief, which are characterized at each of the various levels by different knowledge bases. The lowest level consists of deep core beliefs and contains fundamental core beliefs. This is characterized by normative and ontological axioms. The middle level of secondary core beliefs refers to fundamental beliefs about action orientations and strategies. The outermost layer concerns convictions regarding instrumental action as well as, for example, specific rules about the process of decision making. In the hierarchy of these elements there is a decreasing resistance to change. The tertiary aspects (choice of instruments, measures) will be most accessible, while the cores of the normative beliefs and fundamental positions are very resistant to change.

Referring to these different layers of institutional learning social-cultural change requires changes to deep core beliefs and can therefore only be achieved by double-loop learning. This raises the question of how double-loop learning in organizations can be fostered. While single-loop learning is mostly driven by unilateral defensive strategies in order to protect oneself and others, double-loop learning is based on a process of dialogue that encourages open communication. Underlying governing values play a role in the design and implementation of actions, emphasising common goals and mutual influence, and publicly testing assumptions and beliefs (Argyris and Schön 1996). Transferred to intercultural communication contexts, for example in cross-border cooperation, this means appreciating the views and experiences of others rather than just seeking to impose your own view of a situation. In this way each side's naturalized practices, with their underlying mind maps, are being tested and this encourages mutual learning. Therefore, it can be assumed that any new knowledge gained in intercultural interactions and negotiations within cross-border cooperation will change the existing knowledge base on both sides of the border. Furthermore, this may enhance the capabilities of individuals and organizations to act under changing conditions.

Accordingly, institutional learning is understood here as a crucial process whereby new solutions enhance the collective knowledge stock. Answers emerge from long, complex

search processes. This knowledge exists as new institutional arrangements detached from the members who were involved in the 'first' complex search process. However, the crucial question of institutional learning still remains how the transfer of individual knowledge to the collective knowledge base of an organization or society takes place. According to Berger and Luckmann it is the process of internalisation of knowledge that explains the interconnection between the individual and society. They introduce a sequential model consisting of three stages of institution building: 1. The pre-institutionalisation stage, where the actors involved in recurrent and regular interactions develop patterns of common behaviour according to shared meanings and conduct. Repeated actions reduce the strain and uncertainty of human behaviour and open new spaces for creative ideas and innovation. 2. In the process of objectification, behavioural patterns and their associated meanings reach a pre-stabilized stage. Thus, the consensus achieved may go hand in hand with the emergence of preliminary structures and (informal) rules. However, they still remain fragile at this semi-institutionalised stage. 3. In the process of legitimation, institutionalization takes place and the new patterns of behaviour become generalised beyond the specific context in which they emerged. They are perpetuated in the continuing structures and develop a reality of their own (Berger und Luckmann 2004: 56ff.).

Understanding Space and Cultural-Spatial Change in Border Areas

"The border is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact with geographical impact" (Simmel 1908, 1992).

Following strictly the social constructivist approach it is not only culture and institutions but also 'space' that is understood as being socially constructed. Simmel stated that spaces – and thus also border areas – are manifestations of social processes: "not the states, not the land, not the municipality and the rural-district limit each other; but the residents or owners who exert the reciprocal effect of limiting" (Simmel 1908, 1992: 35). According to such an understanding of space, geographical boundaries and border areas are social constructs; whether a border serves as a dividing line or as a contact zone and builds a connective space, depends on human interactions (social and political practices). Thus it is the human capacity for synthesis that also constitutes cultural space.

This understanding of 'space' as a social construct is consistent with recent work in the social sciences on space. According to this perspective space therefore exists primarily as a human attribution of meaning (see e.g. Eigmüller 2010; Eigmüller and Vobruba 2006; Miggelbrink 2009; Werlen 2009, 2000, 1997; Christmann 2010. Thus, cultural space is understood to be the result of human actions. For space is always a social

space, and “space as an object is ... tied to discourse and communication, to acting and practical work or practices” (Miggelbrink 2009: 71). That is why “all human ideas of space ... are experience- and perception-based constructions of structural relations between elements” (Pries 2007: 132).

However, adopting such an understanding is not to deny the material conditions in processes of social construction, for “at the same time we must assume that social-cultural and physical-material aspects may always work both as means and as constraints of social acting” (Werlen 2009: 100). This perspective is thus consistent with the approach of theories of practice – as described above – that place the social in a spatial-material relationship with bodies and artefacts. The significance of materiality in the processes of constituting spaces is also supported empirically by surveys of previous Europeanisation processes that indicate the significance of material preconditions; e. g. through procedures that guide the processes of constituting spaces (Deger 2007: 161). Accordingly, it is often the European Union that creates such preconditions by changing the material conditions of cross-border interactions. However, the focus of this action-oriented discussion is the acting subjects, and from this perspective the effectivity of a spatial boundary, as a dividing line or as a contact zone or a connecting space, depends on human behaviour (social and political interactions).

Accordingly, the concern of research is human behaviour and relationships. In this understanding the creation of a European space is strongly connected with communication, knowledge exchange and the social practices of human interactions. Following Knoblauch, “even on a fundamental theoretical level ... [it is] communication which brings together action and knowledge” (Knoblauch 2005: 175, 2013). It is within communication processes that exchanges of meaning and knowledge transfers take place and common interpretations of action situations may be generated. Relating to changed attitudes and views new ways of acting and regulating may develop that constitute a new shared knowledge base that includes specific notions and ideas about spatiality. “Only by way of communicative exchange is it possible to develop and communicate commonly shared knowledge” (Christmann 2010: 27). It is assumed here that this new shared knowledge – referred to as spatial knowledge – serves as an important component for the creation of a joint European space.

However, it is not a solitary process driven by individuals but it rather a social construction: “Spatial interpretations, here also called ‘spatial knowledge’, must be agreed on by the subjects, must be communalised and last but not least made a matter of society” (ibid.). For a cultural space includes “what we may call societal knowledge, but at the same time it includes processes which make this knowledge circulate – which is the only way a common culture is constituted” (Knoblauch 2005: 175). Further, it is through these processes that – and this supports the overall argument – cultural-spatial

change in European border areas is socially constructed. But, in accordance with Koschmal it has to be remembered that such a process can never be finalised, neither thematically nor in its spatial dimensions, and thus will “always [remain] a task ... always [be] an incomplete concept” (Koschmal 2006: 17).

Conclusion

This article presents an outline of a theoretical approach to the empirical reconstruction of cultural-spatial change, building on knowledge sociology and social constructivism. The model presented is based on the assumption that cultural-spatial change in European border areas happens within a process of interaction and communication between different cultures. These have their own specific knowledge systems and related social practices in their various social fields. In this sense border regions are regarded as ‘spaces with opportunities’ that – in the context of neighbourhood cooperation and intercultural communication processes – provide particular opportunity structures for different cultures moving towards each other. Such a view means that border spaces thus have the potential to integrate different social interpretations of reality. Thus processes of cultural-spatial change can take place within them.

According to the concept of culture presented here the process of cultural-spatial change in European border areas occurs through changes in a society’s knowledge stocks which are preserved by institutions. This means a (new) European cultural space emerges with a changed knowledge arrangement, which again serves as a (new) starting point for interpreting the action situations of its members. It is especially within cross-border cooperation that the actors involved may learn how to deal with diversity. They have access to ‘foreign’ knowledge arrangements, and they learn to understand the other side’s interpretations. In the course of the subsequent communication process new action routines may develop that have the potential to shape new cultural practices with new guiding rule systems.

The ideal-typical course of such a communication process has been described above and visualized through the model. The aim of this research is to identify levels of social and cultural change and to assess the possible significance of even preliminary steps towards the socio-cultural (re)construction of European cultural spaces, reached through collective cultural practices and resulting from everyday cross-border activities. However, it has been emphasized that institutionalization processes are not linear, as the model suggests. Social reality is much more complex, and processes in the social (re)construction of cultural spaces involve both deadlock as well as backward steps.

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