

Review of Kathrin Kemmler's BA thesis "Identity and self-representation processes of contemporary transnational and diasporic youth"

David Verbuč

Kathrin Kemmler's study of transnational diasporic youth individuals as related to concepts of space and identity offers a particularly rich and relevant analysis of the processes of identity construction and strategic self-representation, with a particular attention given to complexities and contradictions underscoring such contemporary phenomena. In my evaluation, I identify several strengths of this work, while I also provide some points of critique

First, the conceptual framing of the topic, which emerged inductively from student's data, appears quite relevant from the perspective of contemporary scholarship on identity and representation, as it brings to the foreground little-researched topics and perspectives on complexities and contradictions of transnational youth identity-formations, specifically highlighting fluidity, situationality, and multi-dimensionality of such processes. This includes the consideration of multiplicity of spaces, identifications, and factors that are part of, or shape these processes, as well as the acknowledgement of various strategies of identification and self-representation, and thus also individual agency, that transnational youth individuals employ in a variety of settings and situations.

Second, student's methodological focus on the study of select individuals (Ploy and Eric) is particularly useful in relation to the larger goals of this work, as it enables an almost microscopic insight into the richly and complexly layered processes of individual identity-formation and self-representation. Moreover, such approach also reveals a complex range of interrelated processes of individuation, which include personal emotions, doubts, confusions, anxieties, and resistances. Furthermore, methodological incorporation of "compassionate research" (a method and concept borrowed from Carolyn Ellis), with its focus on dialogic techniques, and ethical considerations, as well student's decision to use her own positionality as a research tool, for example, by capitalizing on shared friendship and experiences with informants, contribute to a particularly nuanced and illuminating narrativization. This otherwise very original and effective methodology suffers slightly from the lack of more extensive and critical discussion of pros and cons of such research in the methodology section (e.g., limits of research, its general value and applicability), as well as from a more comprehensive methodological triangulation (and from an unbalanced overemphasis on what people say in interviews vs what people do in their lives). While the student actually incorporates some very interesting additional methodological solutions (e.g., Ploy's class assignment, Eric's job application, and some analysis of social media posts), more such approaches, and especially some ethnographic research, would considerably raise the value of this work. However, as the student explains in the thesis, this was also prevented to some extent by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Third, the student also managed to capture in her writing relatively successfully the above-mentioned complexities that govern the processes of individual identity-construction and self-representation in transnational and diasporic contexts. The student in this way presents a particularly thick description of these processes, which she attempts to interpret through a range of pertinent theoretical concepts. However, while some theories are explained and incorporated into the thesis in a very clear and astute manner (those by Levitt & Jaworsky on fluidity and multiplicity, Reynolds and Zontini on transnational youth, SPivak on strategic

essentialism, Hesse-Swein on Isaan stereotypes, NurMuhammad et al on the role of social media in youth identification, and Mason/Said on “contrapuntal” diasporic identities), some others are either not sufficiently explained (Genova on nested and cosmopolitan identities, Hall on the idea of roots vs routes, Muñoz on disidentification), or not particularly successfully applied (Lipsitz’ strategic anti-essentialism). In addition, some more concrete theoretical grounding of the concept of identity construction would be welcome in the introductory chapter, as well as some theorization of the notions of hybrid and/or transnational identities (for which the student mainly uses the substitute term “international”). Nevertheless, in spite of these smaller theoretical drawbacks, the work, I would argue, in general carries sufficient amount of clear and convincing theorization, and even to some extent adds some relevant accents to the scholarship on transnational youth identities with some original findings and interpretations.

Finally, there are also some other drawbacks of the work, mainly some minor problems with language and grammar, and some other minor confusions or mistakes (e.g., no citation for Elliot’s claim on “reinvention”, on page 28, or an inconsistency in the use of the concept of polytonality on page 41, between lines 8/9 and 12 of the quote, which is probably due to a mistake made by an informant).

In conclusion, I evaluate Kathrin Kemmler’s thesis as a well-researched and well-written study, which also incorporates some original theoretical and methodological solutions. Moreover, the student also demonstrates a particularly-pronounced understanding of some of socio-cultural anthropology’s central tenets, which aim to overcome simplistic reductionism, and instead work toward elucidation of nuanced particularities, complexities, and contradictions that constitute social and cultural phenomena. In spite of some minor deficiencies that can also be spotted throughout the work, and due to all of the above-mentioned strengths, I recommend grade 1 for the thesis.