

# Ethnography of Argumentation

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This paper introduces the ethnography of argumentation as a methodological approach to argumentation. Its central question is: How is it at all possible to take up something as a reason in argumentation? The paper lays out the different strands that feed into this approach, namely the ethnography of communication and the ethnography of knowledge. It concludes by discussing what kind of insights the ethnography of argumentation allows for, and which it shuts out.

KEYWORDS: ethnography of communication, ethnography of knowledge, topos, field, practice

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The guiding question for an ethnography of argumentation is: How is it at all possible to take up something as a reason in argumentation? This question rests on the assumption that validity and reasonableness are not something pre-given, but are accumulated through field-specific practices by the participants. This carries two implications, one methodological, one epistemological.

First, on the methodological side, the question asks for the 'how' of this development and thereby leads to a certain methodological take that focusses on the description and analysis of practices related to argumentation. 'Practice' is one of the central underlying concepts for the following paper. It marks a shift in attention away from de-contextualized notions of communicative action as well as those that put intentionality of strong actors at the center and towards the establishment of social order and social understanding resting on the carrying out of specific, pre-formed and yet actualized ways of doing. Following Deppermann / Feilke / Linke (2015) practices, from a linguistic standpoint, are characterized by eight aspects, that can differ in importance due to the field under consideration (here in an abbreviated fashion): materiality

(body, space, objects), mediality, participation framework, relation to action, routinization, indexicality, relation to context and temporality and historicity (p. 3). These different aspects will feature in the following discussion, especially the notion of routinization, historicity, temporality and materiality. The question of 'how' it is possible to take up something as an argument leads to more, focused questions directed at the specific practices in this process: How does a statement<sup>1</sup> for an argumentative purpose gain validity, how does it lose validity, how does it fail; hence, what kinds of career do statements make when they become arguments? How do arguments develop, how do they travel as seemingly the same argument through different texts, different materialities, different logics? These questions link interests in rhetoric and argumentation studies with those in the sociology of knowledge.

Second, on the epistemological side, participants in discourse negotiate through argumentation what (kind of) statements are granted validity, and which not, thereby actualizing knowledge through the use of certain material as well as formal topoi (see Knoblauch, 2000). The question about the possibility of taking something as a reason relates thereby to the interest in the development of this validity attached to statements.

In this paper I shall propose what could be called an ethnography of argumentation (see Hannken-Illjes, 2018 for a shorter outline in German). It brings together insights from different projects: On argumentation in criminal proceedings (Scheffer, Hannken-Illjes, & Kozin, 2010), in public protest (Hannken-Illjes, 2014), and among pre-school children (Hannken-Illjes & Bose, 2018) and takes pieces of data from these projects as illustrative examples. Hence, the outline of this paper is methodological not empirical. I shall start out by introducing ethnography as a research strategy rather than a fixed methodological approach. I shall then discuss the ethnography of communication and the ethnography of knowledge as two central strands that feed into my understanding of an ethnography of argumentation. The term ethnography of argumentation I borrow from Krummheuer (1995) as well as Prior (2005). Both authors relate interactionist studies to argumentation studies, both with a focus on learning and knowledge production and distribution. At last, I shall specify the concept of an ethnography of argumentation by spelling out the notion of 'field' as well as discussing the unit of analysis in this kind of research strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'statement' is not meant to exclude other-than-verbal means of argumentation. A picture can have a career as an argument, as can a sound or – as will be shown – a tree.

## 2. STARTING POINTS FOR THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF ARGUMENTATION

Ethnography is rather a research strategy underlying a work than a method. The central aspects that characterize an ethnographic approach are the concept of 'being there' and the focus on practices and 'how-questions'. Breidenstein et al. (2013) name four hallmarks of ethnographic research: (1) the subject matter is social praxis, (2) the methods are opportune to the experience in the field and the logic of the field, (3) it demands an ongoing direct experience in the field and (4) is then put into writing (see pp. 31-36). The purpose of an ethnographic study is the description of social practices that both, take up the participants understanding and link it to sociological or other disciplinary theories and questions. As Dellwing and Prus put it: "Ethnografische Forschung will Prozesse kartografieren, in und mit denen Menschen ihre Welt *machen*" (Ethnographic research aims at mapping the processes in and by which people *make* their world. Dwelling/ Prus 2012, 53, translation mine). Hence, ethnography tries to describe in order to develop understandings; it aims at "thick description" (Geertz, 1987).

At the same time, ethnography is characterized by the lack of a clear set of methods and by a specific openness towards the field, the phenomena and the appropriate methods. "Ethnography cannot be assumed to be something already complete" (Hymes, 1996, p. 4). Similarly Dwelling/ Prus (2012) state "*Die ethnografische Methode als Set von Regeln und Vorgaben existiert nicht, jedenfalls nicht in dem strengen Sinne, in dem der Begriff Methode häufig verstanden wird*" (*The ethnographic method in the sense of a set of rules and requirements does not exist. At least not in a strong sense, in which the term method is commonly used.* 11, translation mine). An ethnographic approach demands to stay open to the logic of the field under consideration and to the field's demands on the researcher. Hirschauer/ Amann (1997) describe the underlying research position as one of "discovery" (p. 8). This discovery needs to be reactive to the phenomena it encounters, therefore the researcher should not enter the field with a pre-determined set of methods but rather stay open to what the field suggests. This leads to a characteristic relation of method and empirical stance: "Dafür setzt die Ethnographie auf einen 'weichen' Methoden-, aber 'harten' Empiriebegriff. Dessen Prämisse ist die Unbekanntheit gerade auch jener Welt die wir bewohnen" (Therefore ethnography rests on a 'weak' notion of method, but a 'hard' notion of empiricism. The latter's premises is that especially the world we live in is unknown to us) (Hirschauer & Amann, 1997, 9). Hence, it is characteristic for the ethnographic endeavor, to be open to the field and focus on where for example argumentation can be found and in what kind of practices it

can be observed. This mirrors the concept of serendipity: Finding things you have not searched for in a narrow sense, but rather found by looking openly into a specific field (see Dellwing & Prus, 2012, p. 74). With a focus on argumentation a first step could be to move into the field and to observe, where argumentation occurs and where not. And what occurs, when there is no argumentation, where the researcher thought it would be?

When I started my fieldwork in the practice of a German defense attorney, my focus was to look at how the attorney builds a case and mobilizes statements as arguments. This preconception came from the English, adversarial system of criminal law. In the field my interest in 'how does the defense build a case' was countered by: we often don't do that, we don't have to, we merely have to weaken the case by the prosecution. Hence, watching arguments make their way to court was (and is) an entirely different matter in the German criminal system compared to the English and US.

When I started my data collection and field work in a kindergarten in order to look at child-child argumentation, I first had to develop an understanding when and where I can encounter child-child conversation. Where can I find children without adults in the kindergarten and in what kind of practices do they then engage in when they are on their own? And do they employ argumentation in these instances?

Almost all approaches to ethnography will place observation and participation at the center. This also includes that the participation has to endure over some period of time in order to get not only snap-shots but be able to follow the development in time, the sequential build-up, and thereby be able to gain an understanding of the field. At the same time the researcher also needs to be aware of the danger of 'going native'. Although an analysis needs to be comprehensive and consider the knowledge in the field by participants, the analysis needs to maintain a notion of the outside. Thus, the fundamental difference between the participants and me as an ethnographer in view of the phenomena should not be erased. Especially when conducting ethnography in the own culture, the ethnographer needs to alienate the field, what Hirschauer/ Amann (1997) call *befremden*. Traditional social anthropology by definition has dealt with the alien, the unknown culture. When doing research in your own, seemingly familiar, culture this alienation needs to be achieved by an explicit will to "making the familiar strange" (Polner & Emerson, 2002, p. 121). This demands an ongoing reflection of the own role and position in the field. With respect to argumentation analysis

Kopperschmidt (1989) has formulated the idea of the virtual participant, to which I shall come back later (3.1).

The ethnographer herself functions as an instrument in the study (see Hymes, 1996, p. 13), an instrumentality that has to be embodied (see Hirschauer & Amann, 1997, p. 25). Hence, the experience accumulated through the 'being there' become part to the description of the field and the phenomenon under study and cannot be separated from it. This is not to be misunderstood to favor an overly subjective position as formulated for example in auto-ethnographic works<sup>2</sup>. One could probably argue that every kind of ethnographic endeavor contains a portion of auto-ethnography as the reflection on the instruments of inquiry, the person of the researcher. However, the purpose differs radically.

In the following I shall lead up to the concept of an ethnography of argumentation by way of two other ethnographic approaches. The study of argumentation has always integrated interactional as well as epistemic approaches to argument, a division that should not be overstretched and that I will use mainly heuristically. This distinction however leads to two strands of ethnographical endeavors, that could (and do) inform the ethnography of argumentation. These are the ethnography of speaking / of communication and the ethnography of knowledge.

### *2.1 Ethnography of communication*

Ethnography has not only been done by anthropologists and sociologist, but has found its way into linguistics quite some time ago (see among others Hymes, 1962, 1996; Tracy, 2005) and also into performance studies and rhetoric (Conquergood, 1992; Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011; Hess, 2011; Simonson, 2014). In the following the linkage between conversation analysis, argumentation analysis, and ethnography will be of special interest.

The ethnography of communication was preceded by what Hymes (1962) as well as Baumann/ Sherzer (1975) called the ethnography of speaking. "The ethnography of speaking is part of linguistic anthropology, arising out of the traditional anthropological concern with the interrelationships among language, culture and society" (Baumann/ Sherzer 1975, 95). Further on they define its subject in the following way:

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<sup>2</sup> Especially in Performance Studies auto-ethnography have become a major methodological strand. In auto-ethnography the subject of discovery and the phenomenon under consideration merge or become the same. This approach has been debated with respect to its academic status (see Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006), especially with respect to the fact, that an alienation of the field is not only not possible but also not wanted. Auto-ethnography should not be confused with the self-reflexive considerations by the researcher that are essential to any participant observation.

“its subject matter is *speaking*, the *use* of language in the conduct of social life.” (96, emphasis in the original). Hence, the interest lay in interactionally situated practices. Whereas this approach has been informed linguistically, Hymes (1964) a little later moved the focus from speaking to communication, with his seminal paper on “The Ethnography of Communication.” Keating (2002) states that this programmatic move has to be viewed as a response to the rise of Chomskian linguistics in the 1960ies, which have focused mainly on language as a system, disenfranchising it from the disciplines of the humanities (285). Hence, for the ethnography of communication, the unit of analysis was not the sentence but rather “the speech event, speech situation and speech community” (288).

The approach of an ethnography of communication has not only been brought forward by sociolinguists but has integrated different scholars interested in the use of language in interaction on a descriptive level, with the goal to be able to describe shared patterns. Keating (2002) points out, that the ethnography of communication program has held strong ties with Goffman’s microsociology and analysis of everyday talk, the performative turn introduced by Austin, Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology and its linguistic sibling, conversation analysis (see 286). Especially Goffman’s ethnographic approach to interactional, micro sociological orderings stand out here (see Goffman, 1989). The linkage between conversation analysis and ethnography is of special interest as they share several methodological assumptions. Both approaches are similar in their strong empirical orientation, at the same time facing the data openly and aiming at understanding, what it is, that is going on there, in the field. At the same time, both approaches are located on different levels of methodological concreteness: Whereas ethnography is a strategy, conversation analysis is a method; a method that can be employed in an ethnographic setting. Some scholars in conversation analysis include ethnographic knowledge, collected via forms of participation, field notes, ethnographic interviews or the like. In this sense Deppermann (2000) points out that conversation analysis can make use of ethnographic knowledge, for example in order to fill in gaps in the interpretation (pp. 108-109). In this sense ethnography or ethnographic knowledge would reside in the background of conversation analysis. When laying out an ethnography of argumentation, the role of ethnography is quite different. It does not provide a source that helps to understand the data under consideration, it restructures the notion of what to look for, when we study and analyze argumentation. This shift in focus is mainly inspired by approaches framed as an ethnography of knowledge.

## 2.2 Ethnography of knowledge

Besides the ethnography of communication, the ethnography of argumentation can relate to the ethnography of knowledge, as argumentation has essential epistemic relevance. Works in this realm ask, how knowledge is being produced, through which practices, through which ensembles of different materialities and human participants. Taking argumentation itself as a way to produce, test and actualize knowledge, this approach is central to the concept of an ethnography of argumentation.

Two major strands in this area are of specific relevance: The micro sociological, ethnographic study of laboratory work by Knorr Cetina and the work done from an actor-network-theoretical position by Latour. Both fall under the heading of Science and Technology Studies that investigate how, through which practices, knowledge is produced in different fields.

Knorr Cetina (1984), in her seminal essay on the fabrication of scientific facts, explicated the concept of knowledge leading her work. "(...)Knowledge is understood in terms of the social process of production which leads to knowledge claims, a process which can be empirically analyzed and specified"(p. 225). The term 'fabrication' should not be viewed pejoratively; it does not imply, that what we take as knowledge is a scam but rather, that knowledge and facts do not reveal themselves but are intertwined in procedures and practices that can be described and analyzed. The interest of the ethnographic work is how practices feed into the construction of something, that can later be treated as knowledge. Knorr Cetina points out that selection processes are at the core of these procedures, "chains of decisions and negotiations through which their outcomes are derived" (p. 227). Knorr Cetina's focus in her ethnographic work has been on laboratory studies, her major empirical studies took place in the CERN laboratory in Switzerland and a laboratory working in molecular biology (see Knorr Cetina, 2002).<sup>3</sup>

A related approach to Knorr Cetina's is Latour's (1987) analysis of science in action and the concept of black boxing. Starting from the same assumption that seemingly objective procedures contain interpretative and constructive portions, Latour suggests, to follow the career or history of the products of these procedures: knowledge. This allows for a description of the interactions of different factors (human and non-human) in these procedures. The central term in this approach is that of black boxing. It refers to the fact that scientific knowledge is usually cut from its history of production. "...[N]o matter how controversial their

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<sup>3</sup> Also her more recent work on the spatial distribution and temporal fluidity of social situations in light of modern media under the heading of 'synthetic situation' are highly relevant for argumentation studies (see Knorr Cetina, 2009), although they do not relate as closely to an ethnography of knowledge.

history, how complex their inner workings, how large the commercial or academic networks that hold them in place, only their input and output count" (Latour, 1987, p. 3). The aim of an ethnography of knowledge could be – following Latour – to reconstruct or follow the process of black boxing, thereby also gaining an insight into those paths that did not lead to success, to a stable fact (see Hannken-Illjes, Holden, Kozin, & Scheffer, 2007). Latour's (1987, 2002) take differs insofar from other approaches, as it works from the assumption, that material objects can acquire agency as well as humans and that the notion of humans as actors and non-humans as non-actors is not relevant for this kind of analysis. Thereby the objects in a process of generating knowledge, their affordances, and the practices around them become of central importance.

Culminating in 2010, the German town of Stuttgart witnessed an unprecedented wave of protest against the remodeling of its train station. Known as 'Stuttgart 21', the construction work demanded the cutting of 250 trees in the Schlossgarten, bordering the main station. During the protest, these trees became central as arguments against the remodeling as well as a place of protest itself. Early in 2012, 250 trees in the Schlossgarten were cut down. The felling left a void that could not be used anymore by the protestors. In the follow-up of the felling I was astonished to see that some of the cut trees, lying in a forest very close to the city, drew protestors. The trees were decorated, candles burning on them: the entire scene was very much reminiscent of a public viewing. I was surprised to see these – to me in the beginning rather obscure – practices and became curious: What was the role of the trees in the protest movement? How did they – as things, in their materiality, open to experience – participate? Were they even participants?

### 3. ETHNOGRAPHY OF ARGUMENTATION

The label 'ethnography of argumentation' has been around at least since the 1990ies. Two papers, both belonging to the field of pedagogy, explicitly take up the term. In 2005 Prior, in response to Andrew's (2005) claim that in pedagogy the available models to chart argumentation should be tried out in ethnographic studies in the classroom, proposed in his paper to "give the diagrams a bit of a rest and consider seriously the implications of seeing argumentation as sociohistorical practice, to ask how pedagogies can help attune students to the work of appropriating situated knowledge practices, to open up the ethnography of argumentation (EOA) as a branch of the larger ethnography of communication" (p. 133). Prior argues for an ethnography of argumentation by referring to two different fields of study: the



interactional study of argument(ation) and laboratory studies as a form of ethnography of argumentation. The commonality of these two fields is their focus on practices: practices of arguing and practices of producing and preparing claim for argumentation.

Interestingly enough the other publication that explicitly talks about an ethnography of argumentation by Krummheuer (1995) is from the didactics of mathematics. He studies how children argue when solving mathematical problems and relates these argumentative practices to epistemological practices. He names 'establishing validity' as a central feature in argumentation (see p. 232). "If one or several participants accomplish an assertion like ' $4 \times 10 = 10 \times 4$ ' they do not only produce a sentence; rather they make a declaration inasmuch as they claim such a statement to be valid. By proposing it they are not only indicating that they try to act rationally, but also that they could establish this claim in more detail, if desired. Usually, these techniques or methods of establishing the claim or statement are called an *argumentation*." (232, emphasis in the original). It is these practices ethnographers of argumentation would be interested in: What is done in a certain field in order to make a premise available. In the examples Krummheuer (1995) offers, these are not only discursive, but also material practices. When trying to solve mathematical problems, the children often refer to something outside of talk, as for example to their fingers. The epistemic function of argumentation is clearly in focus here, argumentation becomes a means to establish knowledge.

Although Prior and Krummheuer seem to be the two authors who use the label 'ethnography of argumentation' most prominently, there is also a lot of work done on the boarder of argumentation and rhetoric that takes up an ethnographic strategy. Tracy (2005) for example has put forward studies from different fields, concentrating on the mundane practices of rhetorical discourse and argumentation. Endres and Sanda-Cook (2011) stress the relevance of space and materiality as affordances for public discourse (and argumentation).

In order to render the strategy of an ethnography of argumentation more concrete I shall introduce two concepts / aspects that are at its core: The concept of 'field' and the unit of analysis. Here I shall argue that the notion of statements traveling through discourse and taken up through different field-dependent practices might fit best, although this notion of 'statement' will need to be refined with respect to the field under investigation. In this sense I will introduce Marcus' methodological take of a multisited ethnography (Lauser, 2005; Marcus, 1995).

### 3.1 Field

As for the concept of field, this term is part of ethnography and argumentation studies alike (next to other disciplines, see Hannken-Illjes, 2006). But what is a field? And where and how is it to be found?

For ethnographic work, the being there in the field is the most crucial feature. Different from other social science approaches, ethnography is not striving for an account that is as objective as possible (and thereby as distanced from the phenomenon under study than possible), but rather aims at an understanding of the field in order to achieve a position from which this understanding can be countered with disciplinary understandings. This notion of intersubjectivity can also be found in Kopperschmidt's (1989) take on the scholar conducting argumentation analysis as a virtual participant. In this concept the analyst is not an external, objective and objectifying instance, but someone who threads into the argumentation, while she is absolved from the commitments the actual participants have to make. As Kopperschmidt puts it, the analyst is not different from the actual participants through her knowledge or ability to critically assess arguments but through putting the reflexive potential to extensive use, a potential that is already part of argumentation (pp. 81-82).

Gaining access to a field is one of the most crucial and often times one of the most complicated actions. Access depends on trust, oftentimes trust delivered via gate keepers, and it takes time. In our study on the ethnography of criminal procedures I found myself having gained access to a lawyer's practice, but not to the data. Gaining access is an ongoing process, that needs to be renegotiated continually (see Kozin, Hannken-Illjes, & Scheffer, 2009 for the following excerpts).

#### The files

My first entry point to the criminal case work was through the file and the lawyer's brief introduction of it. There are basically two different types of files the lawyer uses: the *Gerichtsakte* or *Ermittlungsakte* (the discovery file) and the *Handakte* (the lawyer's file). The selection of a case was often done by the lawyer who would say "I have something for you" and place a file right in front of me. His way of picking cases for me was led by basically two considerations: first, does the case have an interesting twist to it and second, to help me to cover as many different offences as possible. Although I mentioned several times that the kind of the offence is not that important to me, he stuck to this criterion, maybe following the logic that an intern or law student should see as many different cases as possible.

#### The lawyer's file – to write or not to write

The lawyer's file opened the view on the case development from the perspective of the defense. They usually started with the name and address of the client and with information on

relatives who could or should be contacted. It also contained the correspondence between the lawyer and the client. However, my access to these files was restricted to some cases – with Mr. Gabriel's cases some lawyer's files were off limit. Once we talked about preparation, Mr. Gabriel stated that in criminal law as little should be put down in writing as possible. A new rather conceptual challenge emerged. How do you follow something that is consciously omitted but informs the argumentative strategy exactly through this omission? How do you experience, witness and describe omission?

Up to now I have treated 'field' as a somewhat unproblematic concept. But, the notion of 'field' is everything but unproblematic, at least not when field is used to mean more than site. For an outline of an ethnography of argumentation, I will discuss the concept of field from two directions: Toulmins (1958) concept of field and its development in argumentation studies and the anthropological-ethnographical discussion, focusing on Marcus (1995) suggestions for a multisited ethnography.

For argumentation studies the concept of 'field' has been one of the most fuzzy and productive at the same time. Toulmin (1958) introduced the concept to account for the fact, that although arguments might be structurally sound they can at the same time lack relevance for a certain discourse, hence, the form of arguments is field-independent whereas their relevance is field-dependent. This concept has been understood to relate to different disciplines (see Wenzel, 1982) and Toulmin's own conception could be read that way, when he refers to fields as different "logical types" (104). This stresses the epistemic relevance of fields. At the same time fields seem to be stable, pre-given entities. In contrast to this understanding, Willard (1983) formulates an understanding of the argumentation field that corresponds to the concept of field as formulated by Bourdieu (1998), as a social structure that is constituted through practices: that fields "exist in and through the ongoing defining activities of their actors" (Willard, 1983, p. 439). This concept stresses the notion of practice that, although encompassing stability through routinization, at the same time points at the fluidity of the field, as practices need to be performed.

In 1995 Marcus distinguished between the common, traditional ethnographic approach to study a single site and an approach that reflects macro theoretical assumptions about the change of cultural forms that can be properly understood only if one goes beyond the concentration on a single site. "The other, much less common mode of ethnographic research self-consciously embedded in a world system, now often associated with the wave of intellectual capital labeled postmodern, moves out from the single sites and local situations of

conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space. This mode defines for itself an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation." (96). Marcus calls this strategy a 'multi-sited-ethnography'. "Strategies of quite literally following connections, associations, and putative relationships are thus at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnographic research" (97). The modes of construction of these kinds of ethnographies are characterized by a methodological take to follow something through different sites, different situations. Marcus (1995) provides a list, including exemplary studies of what could be followed: Follow the People, Follow the Thing, Follow the Metaphor, Follow the Plot, Story, or Allegory, Follow the Life or Biography and Follow the Conflict (see 105ff.). This approach has been criticized for falling into a holistic fallacy and aiming at a comprehensive coverage that is impossible to achieve. Also the question of how spatially dispersed an ethnography must be to count as multi-sited (for a summary of the critique see Falzon, 2009, p. 13) plays a role in the criticism. Maybe this 'following' should be thought of not only spatially but also temporally, in the sense of writing the histories, the careers of certain phenomena, with their pasts, presents and futures.

Marcus' perspective includes two important aspects. For one, it takes a unit of analysis – just let it be an argument or a premise – as something that stays the same (otherwise it could not be followed) and is still changing, due to its employment in different social situations. This oscillating between the stable and the changing is not to be viewed as a problem (although it might prove problematic in practical research) but as the aspect that renders new insights into phenomena: First, how an argument is used, then taken up again in a different situation tells you something about the way arguments and therewith validity is produced. The question of when participants in the field treat something as 'the same argument' or 'a different argument' can shed light on the field-related distinctions with respect to the relevant topoi in the field. Second, the focus shifts to how an argument, a premise is taken up, by whom, with what means and how this affects the form of the argument. The approach is interested in how the take up of the argument in different situations aligns those. "Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography." (Marcus 1998, 90 in Lauser 2005, 12).

In criminal proceedings: follow the theme through the file, the lawyer-client interview, the brief talk in the hallway, the trial with witness testimony, the protocol of the trial, the appeal...  
In the Stuttgart 21 protest: follow the trees and the theme of the tree in different narratives and as the trees themselves...  
In the kindergarten: follow the children, follow the single child, follow a theme through different situations...

For argumentation not only the program of the multisited ethnography is relevant but even more so the concept of transsequentiality by Scheffer (2019). Informed by analytic ethnography and conversation analysis, Scheffer developed a methodology that links the here-and-now with the different temporalities made relevant by the participants and by the procedures the phenomena travel through. When participants act *in situ*, these actions are not only rooted in the situation, but have a history as pre-formed formulas (like *topoi*) or have been solidified prior to this situation through circulation and reiteration (see also Latour, 1987, pp. 31-44).

What is the unit of analysis in an ethnography of argumentation, if it is not the argument itself, but rather the becoming of an argument, the career an argument makes? What is the temporalized form of an argument?

### 3.2 Unit of analysis

As the ethnography of argumentation does not focus on the argument but on the becoming of an argument, the unit of analysis is rather the statement, utterance, note that can potentially be taken up argumentatively and the development of this ... this what?

When linking the ethnography of argumentation with the ethnography of knowledge one could assume that the unit of analysis is the *topos* as an epistemic resource and the ways in which it is being actualized and mobilized. At the same time this would overstretch the concept of *topos* radically.

When a young man, confronted with charges of robbery, responds to the question of where he lives, that he lives with his grandmother, and when he uses the same phrase in a second interview as a reason why he would never rob elderly women, and when this gets independently used as a reason why a witness cannot imagine him to be doing something like that, and when these statements get highlighted by the defense attorney, and when in a first briefing when introducing the case the attorney tells the researcher, that he does not think that the defendant is really guilty because he lives with his grandmother, and when the grandmother herself says that he is a good boy who would not do something like. What is it that

is travelling here? And what can the travelling tell about the practices necessary to make an argument fit for the court room? And is this really one argument travelling or rather several which are just so similar on the surface that they oscillate between the same and the different, and very functionally so?

Knoblauch (2000) in his paper on a communicative topic, suggested to take a topos in interaction as a “thematic routine” (p. 659, my translation) that can have different levels of specification and that can be put to an argumentative use. At the same time, he stresses the importance to these thematic routines for the management of what we consider to be valid, the common sense if you will. Thus, a theme, in the sense of a situated, case-specific topos could be viewed as one possible unit of analysis: What is the theme, how is it being dealt with – verbally as well as in other modalities – and in what way does it relate to argumentation? At the same time, the researcher should be open to the field, not fixing her notion of what to find to early. Methodological openness and being there remain at the core of the endeavor.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In July 2014, in his keynote-address delivered to the ISSA-Conference, Frans van Eemeren urged argumentation studies to turn more towards empirical studies, and not only quantitative but also qualitative approaches. An ethnographic approach can be one response to this challenge.

An ethnography of argumentation allows for insights into argumentation that are crucial in order to understand argumentation as a situated practice that is not divided from other interactional practices. It can also show the specifics of different (argumentation) fields: What material affordances are taken up in order to mobilize a becoming argument, a theme, a topos? Thereby this kind of work can allow insights into the ways in which a field establishes knowledge, tests knowledge, at what stages knowledge production can fail. At the same time, an ethnographic approach will only allow for case-specific, situated descriptions and readings, not inviting generalization (although also not shutting out generalization altogether).

As an ethnographic approach is not a method but asks for an open view of the field and a development of the methods in contact and in response to the field, this kind of work could also advance argumentation theory by starting from participant categorizations of argumentative practices or practices that feed into argumentation, thereby refining the notions of argumentation we have.

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