Frames of Belonging: Crossing Local, National and Transnational Spaces

In the previous chapter we focused on the voices of and about the neighbourhood, emphasizing the strategies which our informants were using to relate to their ‘neighbours’ across the river. This showed that, positively or negatively, on national borders people often invoked national categories as a reference point for placing the others: we/you the Germans vs we/you the Poles. By contrast, people on either side of the Saale river, which ceased to be a national border in 1990, nevertheless retained categories of otherness. No longer couched in national terms – since everyone was now a (re-united) German – other terms of reference replaced the national as key identifier: the federal state, the region, the town/village, or newly coined terms for easterners or westerners (Ossis vs Wessies; new/old federal staters).

In this chapter we will investigate the ways in which people self-identify within and across the available spaces of public identification, drawing in turn on discourses of the local, the regional, the national or the transnational. We will introduce various models for conceptualizing the interaction between these layers, by differentiating between those which are embedding layers in complementary ways (the Russian doll model), or those which are more conflictual in nature. Continuing the arguments developed in Chapter 3, we will also point to the flexible and often paradoxical nature of these layered or overlapping identification discourses of individual informants.
Researching cultural identity in Europe

For post-1990 Eastern Germany, and for Poland in anticipation of, and in the aftermath of, May 2004, the European Union in particular has been, and is offering, a new transnational collective identity on a Western model, a new ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983) which could resolve the traumatic divisions of the twentieth century caused by wars and cold wars. It could herald a dissolution of deep historical divisions such as those between Western European and Eastern European nations, including a weakening of ethnic identity markers with long and often problematic traditions such as, for example, ‘Germanic’ or ‘Slavonic’. But is this vision of a shared transnational space of identity taken up by those citizens who live along the fault-line of this division, in our case the border between Poland and Germany?

Since there is widespread agreement in the social sciences that people hold multiple identities (the multi-disciplinary authors in Herrmann, Risse and Brewer, 2004 all share that assumption), there is in principle no reason why a European identity could not be one of several socio-political layers of identification. A person from Guben might construct her identity as a citizen from Guben, the new Federal State of Brandenburg, Germany, and the European Union, without experiencing these as conflictual, just as citizens from Gubin could construct their identities in relation to their respective local, regional, and national Polish and European layers. In that sense, they would be adopting a ‘Russian doll’ model of identity, where each small doll in turn is encircled by a larger one, with the largest doll – the European – offering a shared home for all the different dolls inside. Remaining with the metaphor of the Russian doll, they may, of course, miss out on one or more of the possible figurines – by ignoring one or another layer altogether. People may not identify with the federal state or the region, but nevertheless hold a strong local identity attached to their city (see, for example, Galasińska, Rollo and Meinhof, 2002); or they may bypass the national altogether and jump from the region to the supra-national. This may be caused by indifference to any one of the potential layers, but in principle missing out one layer does not disturb the consensual nesting of multiple identities.

However, people may also experience some of the layers as inherently conflictual. Using the metaphor of an avalanche or an earthquake,