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Territorial Dynamics, Cross-border Work and Everyday Life in the Finnish–Swedish Border Area

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Abstract. Borders have become increasingly complex and multifaceted in the contemporary world. In spite of accelerating globalisation, flows of refugees, efforts at lowering the internal borders within the EU and general statements on the disappearance of borders, the state-centric system of territories and their borders still channels, through inclusion and exclusion, the ways in which most human beings recognise national practices and in which their daily lives are patterned at both the individual and the institutional levels. This paper aims at contributing to the on-going debates on European regional dynamics and the shaping of territories and will look critically at the current roles of borders as objects of research. It analyses the history of the Finnish–Swedish border and the co-operation taking place there at present as a contextual example in order to look at whether national practices and meanings still structure the way in which this border is shaped in its new EU context. It will first scrutinise the historical roles of this border, which has been one of the EU internal borders since 1995, and will then look at how local people have led their daily lives in this context. The empirical observations show that, in spite of increasing interaction and co-operation, this national border still structures a certain regionalisation of everyday life and identities and provides a socio-spatial framework for organising and performing daily routines in a national context.

Regional Transformation and the Challenge of the Frontier

The future of the bordered state has been questioned for some time on various, mainly politico-economic grounds (Strange, 1996). Many geopolitical contexts (such as those prevailing in Belgium, Ethiopia, Sudan, Burma and Iraq) have been significant objects of media discourse as examples of the processes of de-bordering and re-bordering that have been occurring as a consequence of political, economic or cultural struggles. In spite of general statements on the disappearance...
Frontier is a *terra incognita* that sometimes takes the form of a market, sometimes appears as civil society, sometimes resembles a legislative chamber, periodically is a crowded town square, occasionally is a battlefield, increasingly is traversed by an information highway, and usually looks like a several ring circus in which all these—and many other—activities are unfolding simultaneously. Given this diversity, it is not so much a single frontier as a host of diverse frontiers ... in which background often becomes foreground ... in which back-ground often becomes foreground, time becomes disjointed, non-linear patterns predominate, organisations bifurcate, societies implode, regions unify, markets overlap, and politics swirl about issues of identity, territoriality, and the interface between long established patterns and emergent orientations (Rosenau, 1997, pp. 6–7).

This article aims at contributing to the ongoing debates on European regional dynamics and territorial re-shaping by looking critically at the current roles of borders. Researchers have for a long time understood borders as exclusive lines between power containers—states. This narrative tends to represent the state as if it were a similar territorial and political entity everywhere. The concept of boundary was reserved earlier for this line-centric interpretation in political geography. There are still some relatively closed boundaries, of course, such as that between the two Koreas, but to an increasing degree borders are not exclusive lines but represent various degrees of openness and transparency. The recent mushrooming in border research shows that the roles of individual state borders can vary a lot (Paasi, 2005) and their functions may also vary, so that in the case of interdependent, integrated border regions (Martinez, 1994), for instance, where the border is no longer an obstacle to movement and communication, there may still be social and cultural barriers and mental borders. These may be based on a long process of ‘Othering’ or enemy images, for example, that may exist even if the tensions between states have diminished and they may engage in prominent interaction (Paasi, 1996a, 2005; van Houtum and van der Velde, 2004). These mental barriers may also be based on inward-looking national identity practices and discourses that feed exclusive, cultural forms of territoriality.

Borders are simultaneously complicated dynamic processes, social institutions and symbols (Paasi, 2005). Institutions are normally understood as constructed
structures of social practice. Even if there is a relative measure of constraint in institutions, they are always in a certain state of dynamism. A look at the formal operations of border guard organisations or systems of border symbolism—whether these are located in the immediate vicinity of borders or not—does not fully inform us about the functions of these institutions, since they exist within broader institutional fields (see Williams, 1997). Hence we have to look at various practices and discourses by which these institutions become constituents of everyday life. We will agree with comments that borders are not ‘located’ merely in border areas, but everywhere in societies (Paasi, 1996b; Balibar, 1998; Rumford, 2006). We will scrutinise this general argument contextually, however, taking the Finnish–Swedish border as our example. We will do this by studying institutional practices and discourses that have been historically sedimented in the making of the Finnish–Swedish border, which became an internal border within the EU in 1995, and by looking at how local people lead their daily lives in this context. We will start with a conceptual discussion of the persistence of bounded spaces and then move on to look at the shaping of this border, referring to a variety of historical materials and documents. We will then analyse the current meanings of the border and cross-border activity against this historical background by means of interview material and the results of participant observations carried out in the area. Contrary to recent studies that have mapped cross-border co-operation on the Finnish–Swedish border by looking at the twin cities of Tornio–Haparanda, we will focus on a somewhat neglected context, the peripheral rural region of the Tornio Valley (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Tornio Valley on the Finnish–Swedish border.
Borders and the Persistence of Nationalised Forms of Territoriality

While researchers have noted that both the state and sovereignty are historically contingent (Murphy, 1999), it is still the celebrated memories of a violent past that lead the citizens of many states to think that bordered state sovereignties are the fulfilment of a historical destiny. Even though it has been suggested that membership of the EU, for instance, can lead us to give up some of our ‘old’ national sovereignties and exclusive identities, membership has not abolished national practices: we still commemorate independence and national days, erect statues and memorials to national military and cultural heroes and perpetually celebrate these in national practices, the media and school textbooks. Language is also deeply associated with the nation, even though it may be a source of controversy and divide social groups. Language policies are mainly under state control, even in the EU. Also such a key element of social cohesion as social policy has been a field that is organised very much by each state in the EU (Paasi, 2008b).

The persistence of national borders has been based on the fact that they are crucial to the reproduction of territoriality and national identity narratives. Nationalism has taken on historically contingent forms, but as a territorial ideology it is used to construct and reproduce cultural spaces (Anderson, 1988). Berezin (2003, p. 7) suggests that territory has four experiential dimensions that fuel closer attachments than might be suggested by the purely technical components of territoriality (see also Paasi, 2003). Thus, territory is social because people inhabit it collectively; it is political because groups fight to preserve or enlarge their space; it is cultural because it contains collective memories; and, it is cognitive. Hence it has the capacity to subjectify cultural, political and social boundaries, making territory the core of both public and private identity projects. Emotion is thus a crucial, constitutive dimension of territory.

While territorial spaces are often bounded, their borders are not fixed. Neither are they constituted by social relations that remain purely internal to the territories: hence territories stretch in space across borders. Nationalism manifests itself in various institutionalised forms, through which it becomes reproduced: in economic, cultural and social policy, defence policy and the army, border guard systems and nationally grounded education, for example. Political borders and bordering practices take place in previous institutional contexts (Paasi, 1999; Newman and Paasi, 1998). Borders become part of daily life not only at crossing points but also outside border areas, in various forms of ‘banal flagging’ of the nation in daily life (Billig, 1995). Hence it is important to look at mundane everyday practices in order to understand how the reproduction of national identities occurs and how feelings of belonging are created and performed (Edensor, 2006; Jones and Fowler, 2007)—i.e. how a national ‘we’ is created. Indeed, there is not just one territoriality but different territorialities that are in operation simultaneously. As Taylor (1994) suggests, a state will often strive to expand its spatial horizons in terms of economics, while it is often inward-looking in terms of culture or security policy. The various borders of a state may differ radically from each other in the sense that active ‘border-work’ may deconstruct established and existing forms and codes of national socialisation in some locations.

On these grounds, we argue that the currently popular (Balibar, 1998; Rumford, 2006) ‘borders are everywhere’ (BAE) thesis actually means two things that are historically and spatially contingent (Paasi, 2008a). Balibar (1998) suggests that
borders have become so diffuse that they have transformed whole countries into borderlands. Surveillance technologies associated with increasing border control—for example, to prevent terrorism—may exist everywhere, even beyond the borders proper: at airports, in shopping precincts, in streets, etc. This may in fact strengthen bordering in a society (Rumford, 2006) and be constitutive of social, cultural and political distinctions. On the other hand, borders are also crucial to what can be called the discursive landscape of social power. This is a construct that has developed in the long term and manifests itself in material landscapes, ideologies and nationalist performances all over a territory (Paasi, 1996b). Think, for example, how much emotional bordering is loaded in national flag days, military parades, national landscapes and other elements of national iconographies. In this sense, the key ‘location’ of a national border lies not in the concrete line but in the manifestations of the perpetual nation-building process and nationalist practices, and the roots of the manifestations have to be traced from the histories of these national practices and iconographies (Paasi, 1996a).

Thus the BAE thesis has in fact two contexts that may work in the same direction, in spite of their different backgrounds, to strengthen the national bordered community. In national(ist) contexts borders are part of the discursive landscapes of social power that are based on forms of symbolic and physical violence that lean on spatial socialisation: we come to know borders because we learn through education and the media that they are, on historical grounds, the territorial borders of ‘our community’ or ‘us’, and we also learn what are the national meanings of these borders. These can be labelled as emotional landscapes of control. On the other hand, in the current context of increasing flows of people and goods, and of the fear of terrorism, borders have become part of new control and surveillance infrastructures that may be labelled as technical landscapes of control (Paasi, 2008a). Emotional landscapes of control exist in all national states and technical landscapes of control are also gaining in strength. How these exist in various societies is a context-bound feature, however. We will now look at how these landscapes have been constructed at the Finnish–Swedish border.

Territorial Dynamics on the Finnish–Swedish Border

Borders do not exist merely in space but also in time. Contextual forms of development, often linked with distant houses of power, are sedimented in long trajectories through which borders have become what they are. The structures and forms of practice and ideologies that have developed historically may crucially shape the existing patterns of co-operation and attitudes. We can talk here of a historical path-dependence, which is one background to the unique character of borders.

The Finnish–Swedish border, which is currently one of the EU’s 33 internal land borders (Figure 1), has a history dating back 200 years to the Napoleonic Wars, in which the Kingdom of Sweden (of which Finland was then part) became involved. The Russian troops invaded and conquered Finland, and Sweden ceded this territory to Russia under the Treaty of Hamina (1809). Up to that time, the Finnish area had been the easternmost part of Sweden for more than 600 years and the Tornio Valley had been an economically and culturally integrated region. Parishes and the lands belonging to local farmers were located on both sides of the river, which served as a means of communication between villages and also as the
most important route to the Arctic Ocean. The new border transformed the forms of trade, transport, land use and the built environment (Hederyd and Alamäki, 1991). Also, a large Finnish-speaking population remained on the Swedish side, forming a national minority.

Following the strengthening of nationalistic ideology and the building of a modern state from the late 18th century onwards, peripheral border regions and their inhabitants were typically integrated more tightly into the state (Hobsbawm, 1990). Thus in Sweden and Finland, too, the expansion of state governance integrated the northern border regions more tightly with the southern centres and placed restrictions on the traditional communication across the border river.

National integration in the Swedish Tornio Valley was based on the romantic ideology of a homogeneous nation and on the exploitation of the rich natural resources of northern Fennoscandia. This led, from the end of the 19th to the mid 20th century, to efforts to assimilate the Finnish-speaking minority culturally and linguistically. Close relations with the Finnish-speaking population beyond the border were seen as a threat to the national security of Sweden (Klockare, 1982; Elenius, 2001). This fear was nourished by Finnish nationalists after Finland declared itself independent (1917) as a consequence of the Russian revolution, when they showed an interest in the Tornio Valley border region and in their Finnish-speaking ‘kinsmen’ (Nygård, 1984; Elenius, 2001, pp. 248–256). This gave rise to a counter-reaction among the Finnish-speaking population on the Swedish side, who wanted to distinguish themselves from the people on the Finnish side (Winsa, 1997). These disputes created the seeds of the mental borders that still exist between Finnish and Swedish citizens.

Movement and transport across the border have been relatively unrestricted with the exception of the First (1914–1918) and Second (1939–1945) World Wars. The Nordic countries gave up requiring a passport in 1957 but, even so, this open border—now an internal border within the EU—still divides people. Recent studies have shown that, regardless of close relations and institutionalised forms of cross-border co-operation, the mental distance between the Finnish and Swedish citizens is significant (Jukarainen, 2001; Zalamans, 2001). Indeed, the size of the Finnish-speaking population on the Swedish side has decreased, because the younger generations use Swedish as their home language (Jaakkola, 1969). On the other hand, the historical connection with Sweden seems to be still present on the Finnish side: Finland is bilingual and 6 per cent of the Finnish population, living mostly in the coastal areas, are Swedish-speaking.

As we saw earlier, state borders are often instrumental in spatial socialisation, that is in the process through which people are socialised as members of state territories. Spatial socialisation typically draws on history and shapes and mobilises nationalised memories and emotions that are constitutive of national identity discourses (Paasi, 1996a). This takes place very much through the media and education (Shotter, 1993). Identity narratives and enemy images leaning on an inside–outside divide are often used in national socialisation and publicity. The Soviet Union was depicted in negative terms in Finnish school geography books, for example, and the Finnish–Soviet/Russian border has been crucial in the construction of exclusive national identity narratives. Sweden and Norway have been depicted much more favourably (Paasi, 1996a).

Due to the fact that both countries are part of the EU and the Schengen area, the old landscape with its technical infrastructure still exists at all five official crossing-points, but an active border control and inspections have been removed.
Only two customs posts (at Tornio and Muonio) are in operation on a daily basis but, rather than conducting systematic inspections, they are mostly concerned with helping ordinary people and monitoring ‘suspicious’ movements (traffic in drugs, arms, organic waste, etc.). The border river nevertheless manifests itself in everyday life and in the meanings attached to the local cultural environment, traditions, social habits and emotions (Prokkola, 2005). Implying the power of spatial socialisation, most people on both sides of the border identify themselves with their own nation and the people respectively become ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Winsa, 1997). This national orientation is not exceptional in the context of open borderlands where national identifications exist alongside local identities (Kaplan, 2000). A survey of the identification of the Swedish and Danish people with the emerging Öresund cross-border region shows that the Swedes see this new regional entity in a more positive light than the Danes, but both groups expressed a high degree of attachment to the nation-state (Bucken-Knapp, 2002). A similar observation has been made in the context of the Dutch–German border (Strüver, 2002).

Historically, national identification and the relatively porous character of border guarding did not prohibit local co-operation or ‘border business’, such as smuggling. A common culture based on the Finnish language, cross-border marriages and later a specific religious movement (Laestadianism) helped to maintain close contacts and social networks across the border. This promoted the rise of a common borderland culture and trade—both legal and illegal. Various forms of ‘subversive economy’ (Donnan and Wilson, 1999) were based on the relative openness of the border, from which the smugglers tried to benefit. Illegal trade is a fitting example of the fact that, whenever economic and politico-administrative changes influence local border areas, local people adjust themselves to the new circumstances and try to find new tactics for coping with the restrictions (cf. De Certeau, 1984). After the second World War, for example, the shortage of goods in Finland and the economic gap between the two countries formed a fertile ground for smuggling. Sweden was more prosperous and many daily products were available that people could not buy in Finland. Smugglers often knew the local circumstances and environment better than the customs officials and border restrictions were thus evaded. Indeed, smuggling was not regarded as a crime by all the local people: it was common practice, often involving several family members. During that time cross-border marriages (poikkinainti in local parlance) were also common in the Tornio valley. By tradition, it was the Finnish women who married Swedish men—thereby achieving a higher standard of living (Winsa, 1997).

In addition to daily shopping practices and family visits, exploitation of the border river also gave rise to contacts and common economic interests centred around activities such as log floating and salmon fishing. Official co-operation across the border began in late 1950s, when the political climate of the Cold War period was more favourable. There has been official collaboration in transport (such as the building of bridges across the river and the organising of bus services between Tornio and Haparanda) and in public services (education, leisure facilities, sport clubs, health care, refuse disposal) since the 1960s. Fishing rights and environmental protection with respect to the border river have also required reciprocal agreements on institutional regulations and a Finnish–Swedish Border River Commission was established in 1971. Institutional cross-border co-operation between local authorities on the Finnish and Swedish sides was
Co-operation in an EU Context

Cross-border co-operation has become highly significant in the EU and about 150 ‘unusual regions’ have been established that exist in different forms and in different scales (Deas and Lord, 2006). Alongside national and Nordic sources of finance, the EU instruments have provided a new source of funding for the border activities which have been promoted by the gradual removal of legislative restrictions on the Finnish–Swedish border. Even though this is an open Schengen border, both national and now also EU-related border symbolisms have a distinctive role in the landscape (Figure 2).

Recent collaboration initiatives in the Tornio Valley have been motivated by the idea that co-operation and a search for synergy across national and local borders are necessary to enable peripheral municipalities to maintain their services in the increasingly dire financial situation of the public sector. The strengthening of regional consciousness and the increasing number of social and cultural activities in this multilingual region (Winsa, 2005) have also directed the interest of local actors towards cross-border partnership. This goes hand-in-hand with the INTERREG programme standards, for regional identity building was one of the objectives of the North Calotte sub-programme, in addition to the aims of increasing cross-border commuting and networks, flows of information, cross-border infrastructure and the regional culture (INTERREG IIIA, 2004). This has, of course, been one general background for cross-border initiatives in the Europe of regions (Paasi, 2008b).

Figure 2. Border symbolism in the context of the EU: the Finnish–Swedish Border. Photo: Anssi Paasi.
Cross-border co-operation, which is now recognised positively in border regions, is connected with the EU’s integration policy and is also gaining financial support. Indeed, a border is now understood as a resource in regional development and not an obstacle. Co-operation in border municipalities is not motivated only by local interdependence but also by the national and international attention that has been paid to innovative cross-border projects. There are several novel cross-border initiatives along the Tornio Valley, such as the building of the twin cities of Tornio and Haparanda (Kosonen and Loikkanen, 2005)¹ and joint schools in Tornio–Haparanda and in the two villages of Pello employing a common language. The tourist industry has witnessed attempts to commercialise the border in order to attract tourists and other visitors from abroad, and cross-border co-operation has given rise to joint tourist information centres, the landscaping of crossing-points and the construction of congruent road signs (Prokkola, 2007). These are just a few examples, since altogether 76 projects have been established during the 2000–06 programme period (Interreg IIIA Nord, 2007). Besides the official tourism development projects, voluntary work has also taken place in this sector. When Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995, several new temporary crossing-points (ice roads) were built by the local village communities and local village associations have since organised various events at these crossing-points, such as New Year’s celebrations, skiing competitions and ice fishing. Institutional regional and state-based arrangements and voluntary activities emerging from the local civil society have thus become partly fused.

Place-making in a Cross-border Context

The rest of this paper will look beyond general, state-centric narratives on borders, employing a perspective that stresses the contextual approach (Paasi, 2008a). Regional dynamics and transformation are always context-bound processes, even though regional actors—including those dealing with borders—can rarely operate nowadays without taking broader, often international networks and connections into consideration, whether they operate in politics, culture, economics or governance. We will reflect on the complex relations between a border and territoriality by shaping different modalities of a border—i.e. tracing how a border literally ‘takes place’ within broader bordering and de-bordering practices.

Co-operation is often looked at from an economic or political perspective in the border literature and cultural and social viewpoints are neglected (but see Anderson et al., 2003; Strüver, 2004). To fill this gap, we will examine how the Finnish–Swedish border is negotiated during what we call ‘co-operative place-making’—that is, how local actors make sense of the cross-border co-operation they are involved in. We will look at the operation and meaning of this border negotiation through a body of material collected from interviews conducted in the rural municipalities of the Tornio Valley.²

The analysis of actors’ narratives will focus on the spatial practices of co-operation. We will look at how the national border influences the practices of daily life, examine the social norms that structure local cross-border co-operation and see how national and local forms of identification are linked with the border. Cross-border co-operation is examined here in the context of locally implemented cross-border projects in which both Finnish and Swedish citizens have participated. The focus is on new modes of co-operation which have been established since Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995. The principles for the selection
of the projects were: co-operation should be currently taking place or should have occurred during the past few years; it should be of long duration; and, it should have created new ways and new spaces of action in the local border environment. Thus altogether four projects carried out in the border municipalities of Ylitornio (Finland), Pello (Finland) and Övertorneå (Matarengi in local Meänkieli) (Sweden) were selected as case studies (see Figure 1). Three of them had received funding from the European Regional Development Fund (INTERREG) and one was based on local voluntary work (‘cross-border villages’). These projects and voluntary work were connected with education, tourism development, local infrastructures (ice roads) and leisure-time activities.

At the institutional level, border-work is often regarded as transnational co-operation between two or more states that aims at removing the hindrances caused by political borders and at establishing common rules. Co-operation of this kind may support the idea of the removal of borders, but in everyday practice the situation is more complicated. A closer look at the co-operation on the Finnish–Swedish border shows that it is often organised in ways that actually adapt to the existence of the national border rather than contesting it. The practices of local actors and their understanding of border-work show that various invisible borders manifest themselves in daily practice and help people to organise space and to create and maintain social norms and identifications in co-operation. Accordingly, the border objects that are visible in the landscape are not inevitably relevant in themselves. In this sense, a border is part of the organising of daily life rather than a separate material element. What matters are “the objectification processes of bounded spaces” which provide information about the practices adopted by people (van Houtum et al., 2005, p. 3).

The interviews show that, although it is easy for a person to cross the actual border in the new spirit of co-operation, the border largely defines the spatial understanding of the local context. The actors’ narratives indicate that in most cases the national territorial order to which people have become socialised guides their perception of space. The cross-border villages of Juoksenki (Finland) and Juoksengi (Sweden) are a case in point. Their similar names date back to the time before the border was drawn, when a reallocation of land took place across the river. The people of these villages have been organising joint events and festivals since the 1980s. The largest of these takes place regularly at New Year, when hundreds of visitors from abroad participate, together with local citizens. The event is organised on the ice of the river, where a small area without border signs or buildings is set up, with appropriate decorations and facilities (see Figure 3). The idea of this festival is that both tourists and local people can pass freely back and forth across the national border, as well as the Arctic Circle and, most importantly, the time zone, thus playing with the borders and moving repeatedly between the Old and the New Year. The interviews carried out in this context show how people organise the local border space both in practice and also mentally in relation to the national border. The description given by one Swedish man is illustrative

There is the shore [of the Tornio River] and on the Swedish side we have this kind of order [draws the area on a piece of paper]. Here we have an orchestra and here we had the outdoor bar last year. Here we have a sauna and here a hole in the ice for winter swimming … This stretch [between Finland and Sweden] is also marked with lights. We mark
everything with lights, the border too. It is very nice in the evening when it is dark. And this is our side, the Swedish side, and the Finns will build up their side just as they like. Their order is the same, but the orchestra was only on the Swedish side.

Local citizens’ spatial practices and orderings can be understood as examples of everyday regionalisation, in which the national border is indeed a social norm that steers the people’s actions (see Werlen, 2005). It is not necessary to organise the festival area to follow the line of the national border, but this is simply the habitual way in which local actors want to order this space. It helps the people on both sides of the border to act in a conventional manner in both their institutional and non-institutional co-operation. The order created by the national border is understood as embodying a natural, highly practical medium for co-operative place-making.

It is not only the practice of organising various events that is viewed in relation to the border but also the social norms informing the implementation of border-work. In each project, both Finnish and Swedish facilities and services were used for the arranging of meetings, rehearsals, celebrations or daily practices such as ordinary school days, and for the maintenance of infrastructure. The shared use of resources and equal numbers of actors from both countries in the organisations and groups is an accepted social norm in this co-operation. Another important principle for the local people is impartiality and mutual benefit (see Jamal and Getz, 1995). The suspicion that this might not be the case could even prevent further co-operation. The officials in particular had faced suspicious concern about the impartiality of cross-border projects even among local entrepreneurs and activists, and they also regarded it as a problem that administrative borders cause delays and conflicts in the taking of decisions, partly because of a lack of trust.
The narratives show that co-operation is a practical question for the local people and that continuity requires that it should yield mutual benefits. Co-operation was not evaluated in terms of ‘us’ but still in terms of Finns and Swedes. The interviews imply that, instead of searching for mutual benefits, the local people often value success from a national point of view. In the context of tourism, for example, people calculated how many visitors there had been on the Finnish and Swedish sides. Often the easiest way to arrange the co-operation was to make the Finnish partner responsible for the Finnish side and the Swedish partner for the Swedish side. It was found easier to operate in an environment where the modes of action and language were familiar.

There was one person from the Finnish side and one from the Swedish side, and so it was natural that the one from Finland had responsibility for the Finnish contacts at first and the one from the Swedish side managed the Swedes. Then we tried to familiarise ourselves with the Finnish system and a person from Finland observed how the tourist industry operates in Sweden, for example. Then we, being from the Swedish side, were curious and tried to understand what the Finns are doing better than us (a Swedish woman).

The co-operation plan is often decided in meetings where officials, regional activists and entrepreneurs agree on the division of responsibilities and tasks. A national basis is regarded as the most practical medium for co-operative place-making and comparisons are then made between ‘our’ and ‘their’ ways of organising business, celebrations and meetings. People are used to having to ‘decode’ national differences in working methods, such as ‘the Finnish way of following the authorities’ and ‘the Swedish way of discussing and negotiating on everything’. Explanations for the different working cultures or forms of social behaviour are often found in national stereotypes and cultural myths.

Border co-operation and cross-border partnership require social capital, which often ‘stops’ at national borders (see Putnam, 1993). Many interviewees suggested that it is easier to create contacts and operate in their own country, where the administrative and business cultures are familiar. Local cross-border networks were found useful for organising marketing campaigns to reach a wider public across the border. Attitudes towards the border also varied according to linguistic capacity (see Zalamans, 2001), so that people with good language skills and existing connections across the border—i.e. with social capital stretching across the border—were more willing to participate in co-operation. The common culture and shared language, Meänkieli, were found to promote co-operation to some degree, but official co-operation often suffered from the differences in language and working culture. It is common to use both languages, but many actors feel that the meetings are not so fluent then. The interviews also confirmed that existing connections across the border lead to easier co-operation. Family relations and other social networks are rarely needed in the context of official co-operation, but they do promote trust among actors and a feeling of regional cohesion across the border.

The actors suggested that the principal condition for both official and non-official cross-border co-operation was that the partners should ‘see eye to eye’, in which a common language is only one factor. A feeling of ‘being in the same boat’ generates a favourable background for local co-operation. The interest in local circumstances and a shared set of motives will also encourage people to
maintain and develop co-operation. Many of the interviewees had become close friends with people from the other side of the border and also familiar with the environment, places and events on the other side. Thus co-operation can partly remove mental borders and broaden the everyday space. Mutual understanding can sometimes be based on quite spontaneous initiatives, like the one that gave rise to long-standing, intensive co-operation between Finnish and Swedish schools.

It was the end of November or the beginning of December when a teacher from the Swedish school came to visit us across the border on his kick-sledge. He came to see what sort of people were working here. He just walked into the classroom and said we should start working together (a Finnish man).

While national identities and the meanings of borders are often mediated by such institutions as education and the media, local identities are often based on everyday activities and personal contacts. Border landscapes thus become constituents of daily life (Paasi, 1996a). Cross-border interaction and co-operation are anchored in the intersection of national and local ways of organising space, norms, culture and meanings. Actors working at the grass-root levels also stress that co-operation should be based on daily practices. Personal contacts are considered just as important as ceremonial meetings such as political rallies, sports events or joint celebrations. What counts as significant is the sharing of mundane daily life. Where the collaboration between Finnish and Swedish schools during the 1970s and 1980s consisted of occasional sports competitions, current co-operation is more regular and covers not only shared field trips and festivals but also some shared lessons in schools—i.e. it exceeds the limits of one basic territorial element in national socialisation.

It is important for local teachers that co-operation should be based on and related to children’s ordinary activities. Regional and local culture is hence seen as the bedrock of cross-border education. Teachers suggest that local co-operation can build up a resistance to ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995)—practices of border delimitation by which economic phenomena, weather forecasts, etc. are frequently made intelligible in the media by referring to nationality and national maps. One teacher notes that they are not labelling the children as Swedish and Finnish pupils but as ‘our children’. On the other hand, we cannot forget the institutional power hidden in the national educational curriculum, which still pours the desperate and violent memories of national history into the classroom and presents the bounded state territories as self-evident facts in school atlases and on the pages of geography textbooks. In this context, Finland and Sweden exist firmly as independent, separate national state territories! Cross-border co-operation can thus challenge the practices of bordering at the local level and question distinctions based on nationality, for example, even though cross-border meetings often imply comparisons and assessments of national differences. National ceremonies are nowadays regarded as a form of co-operation, but they often serve in effect to strengthen national divides rather than contest them when they evoke the emotional practices of maintaining nationhood.

The Finnish Independence Day ceremony was certainly an impressive experience for the Swedes, for they do not have this kind of culture of national ceremonies. They arrived at this festival, which started with a
blue-coloured drink (the colour of the Finnish flag) and we had flags and ex-servicemen here. They were amazed (a Finnish man).

The narratives show that national and local identifications and differences in working culture are negotiated in the actual practice of co-operation. This enables people to reflect on their understanding of borders. National stereotypes and misunderstandings regarding the working culture ‘on the other side’ are obvious risks when people try to make sense of these cultures, but they can be recognised and criticised with a certain sense of humour.

It is more of a laughing matter to compare our differences and relationships and how life is organised (a Swedish woman).

While national identities appear to create partly ambivalent attitudes among border citizens, their narratives indicate that cross-border co-operation is above all a practical question. It familiarises people with new working habits and the institutions of the neighbouring state, and the learning process enables actors to develop their professional skills, to acquire local knowledge and language skills and often also to develop a personal interest in the local cross-border heritage. Moreover, it enables people to negotiate their understanding of the border and to create new spaces with shared experiences. As noted by Anderson et al. (2003, pp. 17–18), border communities are ‘problem-solving entities’ which try to achieve economic and social affluence for the local people while remaining aware of the historical conflicts and their negative effects on the development of the border region. It is therefore not only researchers who can discuss the artificial nature of state borders, but this may also take place in civil society and in everyday interactions between citizens.

Discussion

Borders are back on the social science research agenda, but highly divergent views exist on their current nature. One problem is that scholars often present rough generalisations and interpretations regarding the roles of borders, often neglecting their context-bound character. Cross-border co-operation is often understood in the current literature as an activity by which borders are removed. This paper suggests that generalisations on borders have to be based on looking both at broader social processes and at contextual features. This means that nationalism, territoriality and national identity, for example, are key contexts that have to be reflected upon in each border case. These categories should not be associated with all national borders, as if imposed ‘from above’, since their manifestations may vary in different contexts. We also have to look at the structuring and meanings of everyday life at a particular border.

We have tried here to develop this approach in the context of the Finnish–Swedish border. The initial analysis of the historical development of the Finnish–Swedish border shows that co-operation and traditional connections at the level of civil society (people’s everyday contacts, language skills and local ways of living, including cross-border marriages and smuggling) are decreasing. Basically, every generation since 1809 has had its own ‘border business’—its local way of responding to and taking advantage of the existing border regulations.

Our analysis has placed special emphasis on the forms of local co-operation. The shaping of local co-operation consists of ‘pairing’ the resources, motives
and organisation of co-operation and exploring the compatibility of social and cultural norms. Institutionalised cross-border co-operation has increased since Finland and Sweden entered the EU and has become a conscious regional development strategy. The interviews suggest that, in the actual practices of co-operation, borders are simultaneously both contested and reconstructed, and sometimes even strengthened. The narratives of the inhabitants of the border region indicate that the national border is not inevitably rejected in the process of co-operative place-making, but instead it manifests itself in local habits of organising space and in local work. A border can be actively crossed in certain social practices at the same time as it is maintained as an element of difference in some other practices. Mental borders rooted in everyday life may thus even strengthen at the same time as formal co-operation proceeds in the opposite direction and opens up the border. This becomes obvious in another way, too. The currently popular phrase ‘borders are everywhere’ means in this context above all the continued existence of emotional, national landscapes of symbolic power that impinge on everyday life. Contrary to the debates related to the rise of new technical landscapes of power and surveillance, strengthening the (b)ordering of societies, this peripheral border region in northern Scandinavia has been developing in the opposite direction: towards openness and interaction. Yet we only need to move a couple of hundred kilometres to the east, to the border of Finland and the EU with Russia, to find a different order: systematic surveillance of movement, visas and passports. Geography and context make a difference and this fact should also be taken into consideration in border studies.

Notes

1. It is interesting that the opening of an Ikea store in the Swedish border city of Haparanda in 2006 created new images of cross-border collaboration. One reason for choosing Haparanda as the site was its location next to the border and the inherent transnational image to be gained from this. Several other new stores have been opened in Haparanda besides Ikea and there are powerful expectations that this will put a stop to out-migration and unemployment in the region. On the other hand, many actors do not consider Ikea to be an advantage. Although it is difficult to evaluate its influence within such a short space of time, some small firms in Tornio on the Finnish side have closed down during its first year and many Finnish entrepreneurs think that most of the benefits are accruing on the Swedish side (Valtavaara, 2007). For them, the national border means that the expected benefits for the Swedish entrepreneurs are achieved at the expense of their counterparts in Finland.

2. The (open-ended) interviews (n = 36) were conducted by Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola with the Finnish and Swedish people involved in this cooperation during fieldwork in 2005 and 2006. The idea was that with the help of a few key questions formulated by the researcher, the participants could speak freely about their experiences of cooperation. In addition to the interviews, the fieldwork included participant observations made at local festivals, meetings and seminars where local circumstances, the means of cross-border cooperation and the difficulties encountered were discussed intensively. An examination of people’s narratives of their personal experiences provides us with an understanding of wider socio-spatial processes and shows their meaning in everyday life (Wiles et al., 2005, p. 90). The aim of our analysis is to distinguish different border themes that are then structured and analysed using our theoretical framework and concepts (see Polkinghorne, 1995). Hence this analysis aims to reveal spatial representations, social norms and identifications in the actors’ narratives of activities in the border region.

References


