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Conducting field research abroad – A socio-anthropological approach

Deutscher Titel fehlt

Abstract:

Departing from two research projects, one on the familial, social and political roles of women from different social backgrounds in Algeria, and the other on the transmission of educational practices in families with Moroccan origins in France and Germany, this article discusses the effects of conducting field research abroad in migration research. After having reflected the process of socialization in research, and how it may lead to doing socio-anthropological research in a foreign country, it presents methodological and theoretical implications of conducting field research abroad. The impact of this approach on the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee and its effects on theorization, as well as the way the socio-anthropological approach may complement biographical interviews and reveal phenomena of social stratification are considered. This article shows that socio-anthropological research abroad is particularly well suited for transnational migration research and for striving to develop a perspective which combines the “here” with the “there”.

Zusammenfassung:

Den Ausgangspunkt unserer Diskussion bilden zwei Forschungsprojekte: das eine zu den familiären, sozialen und politischen Rollen von Frauen in Algerien, die aus unterschiedlichen gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhängen stammen, und das andere zur Übertragung von Erziehungspraktiken in – in Frankreich und Deutschland lebenden – Familien, die aus Marokko stammen. Im Anschluss an eine Reflexion über den Prozess der Einsozialisation in Forschung und darüber, wie in diesem Zusammenhang die Hinwendung zur sozialanthropologischen Forschung in einem anderen Land zustande kommen kann, befassen wir uns mit methodologischen und theoretischen Implikationen von Feldforschung im Ausland. Wir betrachten die Auswirkungen dieses Ansatzes auf die Beziehung zwischen Interviewerin und Informantin und die Folgen für die Theoriebildung, außerdem geht es uns darum, wie der sozialanthropolo-

Keywords: socio-anthropological research, transnational migration, social stratification, socialization in research, biographical research

This article reflects the effects of conducting field research abroad, which has, according to our experience, an essential importance in migration research. We will depart from two research projects, one on the familial, social and political roles of Algerian women from different social backg

of origin of migrants and to deepen the encounter. Going abroad, to the country of origin of the informants is of central importance in migration research because it opens up the research perspective to the country of the migrant and does not only remain within the perspective of the receiving country. This epistemological approach, to construct the “here” from the “there” was uncommon at that time for researchers studying migration processes. This had an influence on the way I supervise students. In my eyes, it is essential to go to the country of origin of the migrants and do multi-sited research in the sense developed by George Marcus (Marcus 1995).

This was my first experience of a socio-anthropological approach in sociology. Doing socio-anthropological work means combining the ethnographic with the sociological approach in order to understand the lives of the people we investigate in depth. The ethnographic approach is based on living and staying with the people whom we study, joining them on outings and on holidays, observing their daily life activities and the way they reflect them. Nowadays, it is more difficult for a researcher to share the daily life

with whom she had already worked in the past, because they shared the same approach in migration research.

Catherine Delcroix: Helma Lutz and I had already worked together in the nineties in a project based on interviews with young women with a migrant family background. We were in Amsterdam and it was a comparative research. We rapidly discovered that we shared common views in our way to do sociology. We wanted to understand the situations and courses of action of the people we were investigating and we were also determined to make our readers and students understand them. We wanted to deconstruct stereotypes and fight against racism.

Elise Pape: What had an important impact on my interest for socio-anthropological questions were the experi038(u)5.7995743(033(e)-0.33(033(e)-0.3)85632(e)-03)85632(s)-0.4997ur033(s)-0.31.101gx m stui038(u)5.7995743(00038(s)-0.397289,e)-0.398835(-)67.01351s u w-0.100482(i)0.098443(t)0.0927522hn rus n i nth t-4.3279r o

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cal method reemerged at the end of the 1970's and in the 1980's. In France, it was mainly developed by Daniel Bertaux (Bertaux 1976) and Maurice Catani (Catani 1982), and in Germany by Fritz Schütze (Schütze 1976), Wolfram Fischer and Gabriele Rosenthal (Fischer-Rosenthal/Rosenthal 1997). While the method developed by Bertaux, which is presently the most widely one used one in France (Bertaux 2010) concentrates on the lived practices of the persons interviewed, i.e., the actions they undertake, the methods developed in Germany although also taking into account the action, have developed elaborated analytical hermeneutic methods in order to analyze the action and the patterns of meaning in the interview texts. These differences are closely linked to the different historical sociological contexts of the two countries at the time of the re-emergence of the biographical method (Heinritz/Rammstedt 1989; Pape 2010). While France was at that time widely dominated by the structural approach and sociology strived to adapt to the methods of the natural sciences, which explains the vehemence of Bourdieu's critique against the biographical method, Germany already had an important tradition of comprehensive sociology (Dilthey, Weber, Schütz) which was at that time largely unknown in France.

This explains why in French studies, a pressure to conduct a high amount of biographical interviews can be observed, in order to get closer to a large array of cases. While the advantage of the German approach lies, in my experience, in a detailed analysis of single interviews conducted in an interactive way with a team of researchers, the French approach, although it also includes detailed analysis allows, from my experience, in some cases more flexibility so that different empirical methods are more automatically combined with one another. When I arrived in Strasbourg, I was interested in understanding the differences of these traditions, and how they could be combined with one another in order to join the strengths of the two. These questions remained but partly shifted through my work. What became more important with time was the use of ethnographic observations in order to complete my biographical interviews. This was particularly strengthened by my experience of fieldwork in Morocco in the summer of 2009.

Catherine Delcroix: At the beginning of her work, I oriented Elise to a young woman with Moroccan origins whom I had met so she could conduct an interview with her. I do this for my PhD students with a very clear purpose. By being present on their field at the beginning of their research, my aim is to build a common ground to make team work possible. This common point of departure sets a basis to reflect on the method together, but also to link the interviews to the research questions from the beginning through a joint process, to see how these questions start and evolve.

Another factor that is important to me is that my PhD students have been engaged in the social or political field in some way in the past. This facilitates their entry into the empirical field, because being engaged most of the time already implies having a special relationship to their informants, who are not considered as distant research objects, but as real persons with whom relationships are built. It was important to me that Elise had been socially and politically engaged in the past.

One of the turning points of Elise's work consisted in her field work in Morocco. I have been conducting many empirical research projects abroad for a long time, starting with my PhD work in Algeria on the participation of women in the construction of a modern Algerian society. We had many discussions in

which we reflected these experiences. Going abroad to the country of origin of the informants is central in migration research, because it does not start out from the receiving country's assimilationist perspectives, but rather aims at grasping the *dynamics* of living in different countries. It is therefore particularly suited to transnational migration research, in order to observe the transnational aspects of the lives of migrants.

II Methodological and theoretical implications of conducting field research abroad

How does this approach influence the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and contribute to the theoretization process?

Catherine Delcroix: My research project was conducted for my PhD between 1980 and 1984 and by further research in 2008 and 2010. I first studied the official Algerian press, the Algerian constitution and the decisions taken by Houari Boumediene at the time that were pushing women to participate in the building of a modern Algerian society. I then decided to continue my investigation in Algiers. I wanted to confront this official political discourse with the reality. I wanted to discover the real situations of Algerian women and their practices. In order to grasp their different roles in society in a dynamic way, I decided to do my fieldwork by living several times in four families from different social classes: from the upper, the middle and the lower class. The fourth family had migrated to Algiers from the country side. I also interviewed 100 women, aged from 16 to 65 years with different social backgrounds.

The large number of interviews resulted from my will to meet women from different generations and social backgrounds. This was necessary at the time because Algeria was still a new independent country in which the social structure was not stabilized. I needed to meet many people in order to grasp the complexity of the situation and of the development of the social stratification. This amount of interviews allowed me to identify many different patterns of emancipation of the Algerian women. I deepened the analysis of these 100 interviews through two biographical case studies. I chose two women who were very politically engaged and who belonged to two different generations. I conducted interviews with them at different times in a longitudinal perspective (over four years). During this time of research, I lived in the four families mentioned, which I analyzed in depth. I developed the importance of crossing biographical interviews with interviews with other family members and of extending life stories to case histories of families in further research (Delcroix 1995a; Bertaux/Delcroix 2000).

During this process, I had a key informant: Soha. She was a university student, and was the same age as me. We had many discussions together. I stayed in her family and she came to Brussels three times on holidays. One of our main debates concerned what was important in the life of a woman. She considered the fact that I was a young occidental, non-French person as a mostly material advantage because at that time in Algeria (1980–1984), the access to goods and consumption

was very difficult. This was an element of our belonging (each of us) to a different universe. Many times she told me: “I am ready to fight to go to the library, to acquire the right to be recognized as a professional, to assume social and political duties, but not to practice sports, go to the beach or enjoy sexual freedom; these do not constitute essential goals for me”. She also criticized me because she added: “Your desire to swim and sunbathe to relax, sometimes I do not understand it. You should better work on your project all the time.” For her, the ideal woman was a proud one who was recognized by society because of her professional and civic engagement; she had no fear to claim her rights, neither to criticize what to her was unfair. She was searching for a modern but Arab identity. She did not want in any case to be compared to an occidental woman: “The freedom of women does not depend either on alcohol or on discotheques... There exists an Algerian way of life: I invite my friends, boys and girls; we drink tea and read poems”.

What gave me a lot to think about was the relationship of my interviewees to their body. Women’s bodies, hidden bodies, silent bodies without desire: bodies considered by society and by the women themselves as a property of the family group and of Algeria. I could not understand how in refusing to consider the needs of their body, they could construct a free life-course.

On their side, my interviewees did not understand me either. We finally understood we belonged not only to two different cultures, but – even though we had the same age – to two different *historical generations*. These emerge when an entire generation is marked by a period of creativity and effervescence generated by a historical event: for them it was the war for independence of Algeria; for me it was May 68. These experiences lived collectively have a huge influence on those who live through them and they respectively shaped our world visions. Through discussions with women in Algeria, I discovered how much my belonging to the May 68 generation mattered to my views on the world and how the feminist movement influenced my perspective.

The confrontation of our points of view but also our reciprocal feelings – sometimes so near and sometimes so distinct – forced me to become conscious of my own models of masculine or feminine roles, of the place of religion in my personal life and of the dialectic between personal development and collective engagement. These models operate like “image-guides”. These are powerful representations which unconsciously influence dimensions of our personality like our parental identifications or our sexuality. They also guide our evaluation of professional or family relations. They sometimes push us to reject other opinions. The intercultural relationship can be tense and Soha and I had to find ways to overcome these feelings. The fact that she came to Brussels helped her to understand the collective context in which I was living. We finally agreed that there can be more than one process of emancipation for women in the world. This has very much influenced my research hypotheses (Delcroix 1989, Delcroix 1995b, Delcroix 2009).

How does this approach complement biographical interviews?

Catherine Delcroix: The fact that I lived with some of the families I interviewed was very important for my study and complemented the interviews I conducted in different ways. To live with the people you are interviewing provides a context in order to link what they say about their past and their aspira-

tions to how they act in different situations and with different persons. In one of the families in which I stayed, for example, there were two parents and 14 children (7 boys and 7 girls). I was very astonished to discover how differently the girls and the boys who had succeeded in school were treated in the family compared to the ones who had not succeeded in school.

The ones who had failed at school could not choose their spouse or husband. I participated in the wedding of one of the boys who had not chosen his wife (I was charged to accompany the spouse to her new home). Some of his sisters had to live in a much more traditional way. They had to cook for everybody. They could not go out without permission. They put on veils when they went out. It was the opposite for the successful sisters: they could go to foreign universities; they had no restrictions on their freedom at all. This differentiation had a big influence on their discourse and on their *fields of possibilities*, but they had not mentioned it during the interviews.

In this example, socio-anthropology has very much complemented my biographical interviews. By observing and by interacting with the members of the household, I could evaluate how strongly the social and the professional success was linked to the participation of the women to the building of an independent, strong and modern country.

How does this approach influence the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and contribute to the theoretization process?

Elise Pape: In my research project, I work on the innerfamilial transmission of educational practices in families with Moroccan origins in France and Germany over three generations. I conducted three weeks of field work in Morocco during the summer of 2009. My aim was to interview the family members who lived in Morocco, whom I had not been able to interview in France or Germany, as well as to get to know the country of origin of my informants. During my stay, I visited five families in different parts of the country whom I had met during my field work in France and Germany. I either met the families themselves during their holiday in Morocco or stayed with their relatives who lived there permanently.

When I first arrived, I was struck by the cosmopolitanism I encountered. I was very impressed by the plurality of the languages spoken. Morocco has been a French and Spanish protectorate, so that French and Spanish are still important languages there. Furthermore, in addition to the Berber language and Arab, many people also spoke English or German. This is due to the fact that many Moroccans I met, even on the street, had lived in a foreign country at some point in their life. It is also linked to the fact that numerous people currently wish nothing as much as to migrate to Europe. Many young people told me about the importance foreign languages such as English and German have for them, as this enhances their chances of migration.

In addition to this, transnationalism is also experienced within Morocco itself, as there still exist two Spanish enclaves in the north. This leads to very contrastive situations within the country. Some of the people I encountered, for example, work in the Spanish enclaves and in some cases even live and send their children to school there.

Migration is also very present in the country through the fact that it is a highly discussed topic. Moroccans in Morocco have many discussions on the effects of migration with the European Moroccan migrants during their holiday stays. Even when they have never been in Europe, they know many details about life in Europe and are well aware of the questions, the richness and difficulties migration may pose. They reflect the effects of migration but also its causes and its political implications on a national and international level. I was very impressed by the high reflexivity on intercultural and international issues of the people I met. I made an experience of cosmopolitanism I had never made before. The discourse on migration in Morocco was much richer and more multifaceted than the one in Europe. This had an important effect on my research hypotheses. It stressed the fact that migration cannot be grasped from only one country, especially as the migrants know the Moroccan discourses on migration which are much more open and profoundly influence their views and what they transmit to their children. This also made me become more aware of the effects of these European discourses on the researchers, which can be better understood after having been in contact with the migration discourses in countries abroad.

Conducting research abroad was especially important, because it affected my relationship to my interviewees in many ways. Going to the country of origin of the informants has an impact on the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, because by doing a long journey, the researcher shows it matters to her/him to get to know the country of origin of the informant. Furthermore, the guest status one has during her/his stay has an impact on the relationship (Olivier de Sardan 2000). According to my experience, being a guest leads to a greater adaptation of the researcher to the life of the informants. I had already experienced being a guest in the Moroccan families I had met in France and Germany, but I experienced it much more intensely in Morocco, where I didn't know the language and the culture, so that I was much more dependent on them. By being a guest in a foreign country, I was much more obliged to leave behind the patterns of understanding I have in Europe. Spending several days with the informants strengthened this experience of adaptation. Through living with the families and sharing common experiences with them, I started *experiencing* events in a similar way as them, which helped me to understand the statements and the action patterns of my informants better.

During my field research, for example, I was struck by the division between men and women, who spent a large part of the day separated by gender. Furthermore, when women wanted to go somewhere, at least in the families I visited, they needed to be accompanied by men, for example for walks along the beach, or when they wanted to go downtown. At the beginning of my visit, this feeling of dependency on the men greatly irritated me. I had difficulties understanding how women who live in Europe and who are accustomed there to moving more freely accepted this dependency during their holiday stay in Morocco.

Although travelling alone as a woman posed no great difficulties, walking downtown at night on my own turned out to be quite uncomfortable. While I was alone in Oujda one evening, I felt so ill at ease walking alone because several men starting talking to me, that I suddenly dearly wished for men to be there to accompany me. All of a sudden, I didn't perceive this as a situation of dependency myself, but as a great help that I wished for.

Spending several days in a fishing village in Northern Morocco complemented these experiences. Being part of the group dynamic, I realized, for example, that

although the women were dependent on the men to go somewhere, the men on the reverse had to stay nearby all the time in order to be there in case the women needed them. This also created dependencies for them. I started enjoying this dynamic myself, not finding it bothering anymore, but observing the dialogue between the sexes and experiencing the possibilities of action that women have on the sequence of the day of the men. Regarding the gender questions, this made me shift my focus much more strongly on the *dynamics* at work between male and female rather than considering them as living in different worlds.

I decentered my attention from questions of inequalities between men or women or the oppression of women, to think more about the formation of the groups and the effect this had on their social identity. I noticed for example that sociability was something that was developed as well by women as by men outside of the nuclear family. The women were not the main ones who organized or regulated meetings. They developed sociability among themselves, and the men had to be active within their own circles.

By the process of becoming part of the group and sharing experiences with the family members, which in my eyes is increased in a context abroad, I was changed in different ways. I got closer to the perspective of my informants and started experiencing things in a similar way as they did, which changed my relationship to them. This is very important to overcome the idea of incommensurable differences between people and cultures.

How does this approach complement biographical interviews?

Elise Pape: This experience complemented my research among migrant families in European countries in many ways and helped me to better understand the people I had met there. It helped me to complete the biographical interviews I had conducted by seeing the impact of different contexts on my interviewees, as well as by gathering more information on their social and familial context.

One example in which socio-anthropological research complemented my biographical interviews was in Naima's case. I had interviewed Naima in a city in Western Germany. She was 24 years old, had grown up in Morocco and had come to Germany after her marriage at the age of 20. Her husband, Tarek, had himself grown up in Germany. Naima had a two year old son and worked three hours a day in a bank as a cleaning lady. She told me that her father worked in a bank in Morocco and that she herself regretted that she had pursued no studies before and after the birth of her child. She explained that pursuing a career later on was one of her goals.

It was only in Morocco that I fully understood the very privileged social background she came from. Through the profession of her father, the family had a very high income compared to other families and lived in a very luxurious house with a telephone and an internet connection, which is very uncommon in Morocco. The house, which was also luxurious for European standards, formed an even greater contrast in Morocco because of the much greater poverty there. Some of the relatives in other families I had met for example lived in shantytowns. I also met Naima's brother, who is in his early twenties, and who, as

These observations made me gain a whole new perspective on Naima's life story, which she had told me in Germany. After my field research in Morocco, I felt even more respect for her flexibility to shift from different social situations, passing from a very privileged family in Morocco to cleaning duties in Germany. This showed me the different social status one and the same person may experience in different settings. Through meeting her brother and through getting insights into his situation, I also understood better what migration to Germany nowadays represents for young people in Morocco.

Through meeting Naima's family in Morocco, I was able to better understand the context she comes from as well as to gain more insights into the *point of view from Morocco*, which is constitutive of Naima's interview, but which I was not able to grasp by staying in Germany.

The other families I met also led to a better understanding of the biographical interviews I had conducted and showed me the complexity of the social situations that may be triggered by transnationalism. They gave me an insight into the way migration movements to Europe and the internal boundaries within Morocco create a vast range of different economic situations within families, which may be very plural and unexpected. In one family I studied, for example, one of the siblings I had met in France lives in a rather precarious situation, since her husband works night-shifts as a cleaner. The richest siblings of the family were the brothers who lived in Morocco. One of them, the richest one, owned stores in the Spanish enclave, possessed two villas, one of them with a swimming pool, which is only accessible to the richest people in Morocco, and had a highly expensive wedding for his daughter during my stay. The people I met have long experience in integrating these situations into their daily life reflections. They know of the unexpectedness and the complexity of the effects of crossing borders and have developed high reflexivity. These experiences have opened up many questions on transnationalism in my work, which in Morocco are closely linked to colonialism.

Conclusion: Contributions of socio-anthropological research conducted abroad

In the first part of this article, our aim was to show the effects of socialization on conducting research abroad. Our experience revealed that this approach often results from a long process and allows to question the relationship between the 'here' and the 'there'. Important factors in this process of socialization were the presence of the supervisor on the field of the student at the beginning of the project, social and political engagement in the past, which helped to become aware of the different possible perspectives on the field, and a comparative approach, which helped combining the methodological traditions of different countries.

In the second part of this article, we focused on the methodological and theoretical implications of conducting field research abroad. We did so by discussing the impact of this approach on the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee and its effect on theoretization, as well as the way the socio-anthropological approach may complement biographical interviews.

It became clear that socio-anthropological research abroad contributes to change our “image-guides”, and opens our perspectives in many ways. On the gender dimension, it showed us that there exist different models of women’s emancipation. It made us shift our attention from a vision of the sexes as separated to the dynamics between men and women and its impact on their social identity. Through this, the importance of belonging to different historical generations became apparent.

These experiences showed us the complexity of the social stratification of families and contributed to deconstruct stereotyped, uniform views on the social situation of migrant families. In our projects, we could concretely understand how closely success at school was linked to the field of possibilities within the family and how social stratification in a newly independent country was taking place. We could also see how complex and unexpected the social positions of the members of transnational families may be, and how transnational migration contributes to the shiftings of social and personal belongings and identities.

Our experience helped us to complete the biographical interviews we had conducted, as the socio-anthropological approach enabled us to deeply contextualize the way the people we interviewed live. This enabled us to gather further information on their cultural, social and familial background, but also to change ourselves, which had a profound influence on our perspective on the interviews. The longitudinal perspective adopted also made it possible to grasp the actions and the discourses of our interviewees through time, which showed how they may change in a dynamic way.

Our experiences show us that it seems difficult to do research on transnational topics in only one national setting, as one will always miss the perspective of the ‘there’, which is constitutive of the ‘here’ of migrants. Migrants often have extensive transnational experience, having learned to deal with different contexts and points of view. It seems crucial that the researcher also gathers part of this transnational experience her-/himself, and acquires similar knowledge and shifts of perspectives, in order to understand the knowledge that migrants have gathered through intense and long lasting biographical work and to better understand the life courses she/he tries to reconstruct.

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