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Insights from an ethnographer: processes of immersion and self-reflection in the fieldwork

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Abstract

Being an ethnographer is not a simple task. Fieldworkers engage in processes of developing new relations, asking people for information and almost inevitably experience anxiety, insecurity, depression, embarrassment or discomfort. Besides the emotional roller-coaster encountered in fieldwork, it is also an immense process of self-reflection, learning, negotiation and adaptation. In this brief, I present the methods that I used in my research studying Mexican migrants engaging in homeland politics from Brussels and Paris. In the first section I discuss the immersion in the fieldwork as a process of negotiation between the ethnographer and the participants. The second section of this paper focuses on matters of reflexivity and positionality. Emphasis is put on the fluid identity and the different roles and memberships that ethnographers adopt during their fieldwork. Indeed, I was not only a researcher but also a photographer, a cook, an event organiser, a cashier, a text editor, an embroiderer, a painter, a musician, and an improvised graphic designer.

Introduction

Conducting ethnographical research is not a simple task. As explained by Corsino (1987), fieldworkers engage in processes of developing new relations, asking people for information and almost inevitably experience anxiety, insecurity, depression, embarrassment and discomfort (Corsino, 1987, p. 276). Besides the emotional roller-coaster encountered during fieldwork, I would describe it as an immense process of self-reflection, learning, negotiation and adaptation.

In this article, I present the methodological steps I followed in my research investigating the engagement in homeland politics of Mexican migrants residing in Brussels and Paris. The first section analyses the immersion in the fieldwork as a process of negotiation between the ethnographer and the participants adopting an interpretive methodological approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). The second section of this article focuses on my reflexivity and positionality while conducting this ethnography. In this section I emphasise the fluid identity and the different roles and memberships that ethnographers adopt during their fieldwork (Williams et al., 1992; Jansson & Nikolaidou, 2013). Indeed, I was not only a researcher but also a photographer, a cook, an event organiser, an embroiderer and even a musician.

Entering and discovering the field: negotiating a place among the Mexican community

Ethnography is a method used in qualitative studies to have access to the place, lives and everyday practices of people under study (Weeden, 2010; Blomberg et al., 1993; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). For my study, ethnographic methods were particularly relevant for four main reasons. First, because ethnography provides insights into the processes and meaning that sustain and motivate social groups (Herbert, 2000). Indeed, through ethnographic methods it is possible to observe the composition, behaviours and organisation of social groups. Second, ethnography is used to map out the multiple layers of power involved in political structures and observe the expression of emotions linked to people's activism (Schatz, 2009; Bayard De Volo, 2009). Third, ethnography has been recognised as an appropriate method to study populations whose voices are not well represented in the dominant discourse and whose specific legal status, level of education, ideology, gender, age, or place of residence complicates other types of contact or interaction (Bayard De Volo, 2009). Last, ethnography is a method used to examine shared patterns of behaviours, beliefs, memories, and language among members of a culture-sharing group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on previous research conducted by social scientists and anthropologists, I decided to conduct an ethnography involving extended observations of the Mexican community engaging in homeland politics.

I collected data for 26 months, observing 55 events and conducting 41 semi-structured interviews with Mexican activists involved in the organisation of political transnational movements from Brussels and



Paris. With these methods, I was able to gain access to informants, to build rapport and to observe their interpersonal relations and group dynamics (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Bertaux, 2016).

In addition, over the course of my fieldwork and during my participant observations, I decided to adopt an interpretive methodological approach, which enabled me to recognise on the one side the agency and positionality of my interviewees and on the other side the impact of my presence in the field as a young, middle-class, mixed-raced, women raised in Mexico City.

According to Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), in interpretive research, human beings are understood as agents as opposed to passive individuals or victims. They are seen as active people collaborating and constructing their polities, societies and cultures – along with the institutional, organisations, practices, language and concepts (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p. 18).

After critically analysing the positionality of my participants and their vulnerability as a result of their migratory experience (París, Ley & Peña, 2016; Bustamante, 2002), I observed that they were not living in particularly precarious conditions. Besides specific problems such as accessing a job aligned with their abilities, experience and diplomas, none of my interviewees were struggling to make ends meet. On the contrary, I quickly realised that the Mexicans engaging in homeland politics from Brussels and Paris had both the social capital and the interest to navigate the political systems in their host-countries to sustain and organise transnational political movements.

To summarise, interpretive research seeks to study how actors understand their contexts and why they conduct themselves in particular ways. An interpretive approach posits that researchers develop their skills through interactions with participants in the field. As a result, researchers must be open to adaptation, reflection and improvisation in the fieldwork while co-generating data with the participants involved in the research. Finally, an interpretive approach insists on the relevance of overcoming the idea of “bias” in human research by focusing instead on critical reflexivity in unpacking the researcher’s physical, cognitive and emotional presence in the fieldwork and engagement with the people involved in the study (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, 98).

Reflexivity and positionality: beyond participant observation

Entering the fieldwork was not a smooth process. This can be explained by different factors. First, because of the general scepticism of the Mexican community in welcoming new members to their political groups. This is directly linked to the tactics of transnational state repression (Moss, 2016) experienced by my interviewees, taking the form of threats, surveillance and suspected hacking attempts. In addition, the



feeling of mistrust can also be explained by their perception of insecurity and the practices of some political groups insisting on protecting their confidentiality for security reasons.

Another factor that obstructed my access to the field were my personal characteristics and background constituting my multi-layered identity such as my gender, age, education, class, race-ethnicity, and birthplace. According to Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), these intersectional factors forming the researcher's identity may contribute to his/her access or rejection in the field.

In addition to my multi-layered identity influencing the way I was perceived by members of the Mexican community in Europe, it is important to note the different membership roles that were assigned to me by my interviewees, specifically during the events that I attended as a participant observant. Negotiating membership roles in the fieldwork through participant observation is recognised as a key strategy in ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Jansson & Nikolaidou, 2013; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Adler and Adler (1987) identified three membership roles for qualitative researchers conducting participant observation:

“(a) peripheral member researchers, who do not participate in the core activities of group members; (b) active member researchers, who become involved with the central activities of the group without fully committing themselves to the members' values and goals; and (c) complete member researchers, who are already members of the group or who become fully affiliated during the course of the research.” (in Corbin & Buckle, 2009, p.55).

I would argue that for my research the distinction between these membership roles was blurred. Instead, I would describe the intensity of my participation and belonging in the field as a continuum which depended, on the one hand, on my positionality, personal emotions, and well-being and, on the other hand, on the direct demands and expectations of my interviewees.

In their research with immigrant care workers, Jansson & Nikolaidou (2013), explain that the roles that they were assigned in the field were influenced by their backgrounds as researchers and academics. Indeed, their interviewees asked them to translate and use their language skills in their fieldwork. Similarly, in my research I adapted my skills and capacities to participate in several events as a photographer, a cook, an event organiser, an embroiderer, a painter and a musician. I did not always perform these activities passively or only because I was requested to. By performing these different roles and adapting myself to the environment I managed to: 1) minimise any power relations; 2) avoid confrontations with my interviewees; 3) position myself at the forefront of the organisation of their transnational activities and 4) recognise the



agency, capacities and interests of my interviewees navigating and building transnational spaces of activism.

As soon as I started observing a group of Mexican musicians and activists in Brussels, I realised that I could not simply be a peripheral member without participating in the core activities of the group. The first time that I attended their *Son Jarocho*ⁱ workshop, I arrived with my notebook in hand but without an instrument. Since the beginning of the rehearsal I felt out of place since I was not participating actively as a musician. I started clapping and making percussion noises with my feet to set the pace and accompany the melody they played with their guitars. Once the workshop was over and I came back home, I thought that I could bring a real percussion instrument the following Monday, so I got a pair of claves. I was not particularly good at playing music but for the rest of our interactions I felt that I was collaborating with the band and that I was being welcomed as more than a researcher.

Through music and by becoming a participant rather than just an observer, I was able to rearrange the power hierarchy (Amelina & Faist, 2012) between my interviewees and myself. Indeed, by being a complete novice in music I started receiving guidance and advice on how to accompany their guitar melodies. This transformed our social interactions since I became their apprentice and music became the domain that enabled us to balance our power relations to a certain extent. In addition, playing music with this group of Mexican activists enabled me to learn about their political activism, their behaviour, sense of humour and attachment to our homeland.

The different roles that I adopted in my fieldwork underline the fact that in interpretive research, the degree and nature of participation of the research in events comes in different roles. As shown by this research approach, the ethnographer needs to remain flexible in the field and design his methods in relation to what he observed in the field, considering both his own and the interviewees' positionality and his self-reflexivity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012). Since ethnography and participant observation involve recurring human interactions with several interlocutors, it is crucial to pay attention to the body language, facial expressions and tone of voice to anticipate any discomfort and attenuate any confrontation that might jeopardise the relationship between the researcher and his interviewees. Thus, in my research I had to improvise and adopt different roles to get access to the fieldwork, construct a balanced-power relationship with my interviewees and collect data that enabled me to understand the motivations, dynamics and strategies of their transnational political mobilisation.

Regarding my acceptance in the field, membership, and positionality, I would like to conclude this article by clarifying my role as an “insider” and “outsider” conducting research among Mexican migrants from different ages, occupations, social backgrounds, with a specific political ideology and with different



personal interests. Reducing my “insiderness” to sharing the common ethnic origin (Markova, 2009) with my respondents would limit the critical analysis of both my interviewees and my multi-layered identity. I do not conceive my presence as being either an “insider” or an “outsider”. Rather, I would argue that in each group of activists that I studied and for each person that I encountered in my fieldwork, we managed to connect and construct a relation based on punctual experiences and interests (Corbin & Buckle, 2009) that cannot be reduced to our shared nationality. Being Mexican enabled me to read between the lines and decipher the cultural codes to understand my interviewees’ reactions when they met me. On the one hand, my nationality allowed me to detect when my physical appearance, age, occupation, gender and even tone of voice hindered my access to the fieldwork. On the other hand, it allowed me to interact more naturally, partake in jokes and bond with some of my interviewees on different occasions.

As shown by this article, qualitative research on migration studies needs to integrate a critical analysis on the positionality of both the interviewees and the researcher, to openly reflect on the unique situations that ethnographers encounter in their field and to recognise that power relations may vary depending on the capacities and abilities of each researcher. Power relations may also evolve during the different stages of the study. Thus, as a researcher it is relevant to critically analyse one’s presence from the entrance to the exit from the field and to question the insider/outsider dichotomy, largely accepted in ethnographic studies.

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ⁱ *Son Jarocho* is a regional folk musical style from the Huastec coast in Mexico.

