

Editorial: Research methods in ethnic and migration studies

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Abstract

The acceleration and diversification of the movement across borders of millions of people has recently implied a heightened relevance of topics such as ethnicity, race and migration in the social sciences. Nevertheless, being migration a highly interdisciplinary and complex issue, the diverse national academic traditions and methodologies of investigation currently existing have up to now hindered the development of a clear framework for the understanding of the phenomenon. Through this special issue HERMES (European Researchers in Migration and Ethnic Studies) attempts to provide a dedicated arena offering European researchers the opportunity to disseminate the results of their investigations in the field of migration and, in particular, of reflecting on fieldwork and/or methodological issues. The eight articles presented here all contribute – in their own ways – to the provision of a reflexive ground for the understanding of methodological choices and options and, hopefully, to the creation of a shared understanding of such issues across disciplines and research traditions.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, methodology, reflexivity, positionality, visual and participatory methods.

Methods and research practice

The study of ethnicity and migration is a prominent subject in the social sciences since the 1960s. Its relevance has been proven and heightened in more recent years with the acceleration, globalisation and differentiation of international migration (Castles and Miller, 2003). Ethnic and migration studies remain however ‘a rag-tag field’, as Piaras Mac Éinrí claims, ‘a ragged field of study, not an intellectually unified discipline’ (Mac Éinrí, n.a.). Drawing from a range of disparate and sometimes competing disciplines, different paradigms have emerged. However, we still lack a set of clear and dominant theories and approaches to help make sense of this complex phenomenon. Moreover there is a ‘tendency for all paradigms to outlive their usefulness, and the specific historical circumstances which produced them in the first place may by now be helping to obscure fundamental underlying changes’ (Mac Éinrí, n.a.).

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In this context, migration and ethnic studies have been largely preoccupied with formulating and devising appropriate theories and often competing with each other. Far less structured and critical has been the engagement with methodological questions and the quest for appropriate and sophisticated methods. Clearly, the accumulation of data must be guided by broader theoretical formulations but at this stage our understanding of fieldwork remains underdeveloped and our empirical work often a provisional, tentative and isolating task. The process is largely carried out borrowing methods developed in other fields, trying to fit and refine them *ad hoc*. While there are many and illuminating accounts from scholars and researchers working in the field (Booth 2003; Babbie 1998; Clifford 2003; Gerber and Chuan 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Johannes 2001; Marcus 1998; Sanjek 1990), there is still limited space and interest for fruitful exchange and confrontation. Furthermore, due to the diverse nature of the disciplines and European academic traditions involved, there is the need of critically analyzing the consequences of methodological choices on the research process and outcomes.

For Stephen Castles, some basic methodological principles for a critical sociology of migration and ethnicity include interdisciplinarity and comparative studies that can increase awareness of general trends and alternative approaches. He argues that researchers in this field need to take a holistic approach and needs to investigate the human agency of migrants, employing participatory research methods, which give an active role to migrants and other persons affected by migration in research processes (Castles, 2007: 367). Castles also notes that migration and ethnic studies must often use 'information-collection methods that correct frequent practices of exclusion based on class, gender or race' (Castles, 2007: 366).

Reflections from the field

As a network of early stage researchers working in various European institutions, often engaged first-hand in the design and application of research methods in the field, we have been informally and formally reflecting on these issues since 2004, when we set out to form and consolidate *HERMES, European Researchers in Migration and Ethnic Studies*. HERMES was born out of our need to facilitate communication and cooperation among European researchers. At present, HERMES operates as an inclusive and non-hierarchical network, offering the possibility to explore and learn from the differences of disciplines, cultures and research traditions inside – and, recently, also outside – the EU (<http://www.hermes-researchers.net/>).

Our initiatives have been largely concerned with the reflection on methodological issues, often driven by intellectual curiosity and practical necessity. Since 2005, we have coordinated various Research Streams at the European Sociological Association conferences on research methods in Ethnic and Migration Studies; we implemented the IMISCOE/HERMES

Training Messenger and, in 2006, we edited a Special Issue on "Qualitative Migration Research in Contemporary Europe" published on *Forum Qualitative Socialforschung* (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs>).

The rationale for this special issue of *Migration Letters* emerged out of the Research Stream 9 within the research network Qualitative Research of the 2009 ESA Conference in Lisbon, entitled 'Research Methods in Ethnic and Migration Studies'.

The conference hosted more than 30 papers over three days divided into clear-cut sessions, ranging from the use of new approaches in migration research, to the analysis of the challenges of qualitative research to the identification of power structures in doing fieldwork.

The variety and the level of the papers presented, the liveliness of the discussions that followed, and the sense of having created a group of people enthusiastic for each other's work was such that a special issue of *Migration Letters* including some of the articles presented at the conference was felt as a necessary step.

Researching ethnic and migration studies: this Special Issue

The authors of the articles here presented are research professionals based in various European countries who investigate and question the methods used in their analyses with migrants and on migration. To some extent, these are not new themes, nor are they unique to migration studies. However we believe as the authors also show, that they become particularly relevant in migration and ethnicity studies and deserve to be examined in depth. Despite the differences, some common elements emerge from all these papers, concerning the challenges encountered and the variety of approaches used.

Firstly, the *relation between the research participant and the researcher* assumes a growing relevance in the conduct of research on migration and ethnic studies. *Reflexivity* is useful to position the researcher in the process of collecting data and making sense of it. Reflexivity is also meaningful for the research participants as they are also able to reflect on and question the research process. In this interaction, 'participation' can be imagined differently and can develop different methods and forms of inclusion. *Wray* and *Bartholomew* problematise the role of 'insider' and 'outsider' researcher, showing how these positions – as many other identity positions- are fluid, interpersonal and contextual.

Secondly, given the complex relations developing in the field, *methods and tools of research attentive to dialogue and participation* are now moving centre stage. These methods allow *responding to ethical and political challenges* concerning migration typical of contemporary societies. Visual methods prove relevant in the attempt to grasp emotions in transnationalism on deeply felt issues of 'home(s)' and 'away' (see *Schiebelhofer's* paper). Visual methods are also useful to learn from children and young people's per-

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spectives, as *Moskal* shows, particularly when dialoguing with them individually or in group (Heath, Brooks, Cleaver and Ireland, 2009: 120-1). Moreover, participatory action research can be a fruitful methodology for investigating sensitive topics, such as child labour in migrant communities, as *Bertozzi* tells us.

Thirdly, even if as researchers we are now reflexively and reflectively positioning ourselves, paying more attention to our relations and conduct in the field, power asymmetries still remain. Despite our best intentions and efforts, *power imbalance* continues to weight on the unfolding and outcome of our researches. *Kuehner* and *Langer* question whether research on migrants can be ultimately another practice of "othering" and propose 'peer dialogues' as a way forward. Often, we are left with the only option of *acknowledging and showing power in the field* and as the Italian anthropologist *Ernesto De Martino* put it, develop a "critical ethnocentrism".

The articles we present in this collection are dealing with many other significant issues and we hope they will provide a ground for reflection and exchange in the quest for a common vocabulary and ethical research practices. In this special edition we include eight papers that each, in different ways, present new and interesting approaches to the understanding of our methodological choices and options.

Sharon Wray's paper "Some reflections on outsider and insider identities in ethnic and migrant qualitative research" explores how the insider and outsider identities are not fixed but are influenced by personal and socio-cultural backgrounds. This argument is also linked to questions of access and trust in researching with migrant African Caribbean older women. This work takes into consideration the experiences of two researchers employed in the study of elderly African-Caribbean migrant women in the UK. Both researchers were of working class background but one was a white British woman and the other an African-Caribbean woman. The question raised is whether it is both possible and desirable to match the ethnic background of researcher and researched, by arguing that insider and outsider status shifts constantly throughout the research.

Langer and *Kuehner* in the article "Dealing with Dilemmas of Difference-Ethical and Psychological Considerations of "Othering" and "Peer Dialogues" in the Research Encounter" deal with issues related to the research encounter, such as the consequences of 'othering' the 'researched'. The authors do so by juxtaposing their reflection on two very different pieces of research: 1) the analysis of foreign students' reaction to the teaching of Holocaust in Germany and 2) the study of sexual risk behavior in HIV positive gay men in Germany. It is a theoretical analysis on the methodology used in the two very different studies. In particular, it deals with the common dilemma in qualitative research related to the differences / analogies between researchers and respondents.

Marta Moskal's contribution affirms the need of children's participation in research not in tokenistic way and offers an interesting insight in migrant children's experiences of transnationalism (Poland and Scotland). Migrant children maps and drawings are used to prompt dialogue with the researcher. Her point is to learn to move reflexively between image and verbalization.

Elisabeth Scheibelhofer's paper "Gendered differences in emigration and mobility perspectives among European researchers working abroad" focuses on the migration patterns of highly skilled migrant women. The author reflect on her qualitative research strategy including graphic drawings sketched by the interviewed persons and how these contributed to a better understanding of the gendered importance of social relations

Rita Bertozzi presents findings from a 'peer research' project conducted in Rome (Italy) which involved a group of foreign working adolescents. Young people were included in the research team, discussing the aims and methods of the research, cooperating in the generation and interpretation of data, participating in the dissemination of results and also writing their own research report. Her analysis shows different dilemmas and controversial issues, giving an important contribution in developing youth/child-centred approaches.

The article by *Nina Rother* is quite innovative. It represents an evaluation of the results of language courses on the integration of immigrants through the use of a survey implemented in Germany by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. The study is quite rigorous in terms of methodology, through its longitudinal nature and use of a control group.

Maria Psounos' article investigates - through use of the narrative approach - the way refugees understand the relation between their migratory experience and their psychosocial health. Differently from the common belief that migrants are vulnerable in terms of psychosocial health, the study indicates that this is mainly a stereotype in which the respondents did not identify with. The study, however, underlined the important effect of the social context on the refugees' perceptions of their psychosocial health.

The final two papers in this issue are not part of the special theme but published as regular papers. *Phouxay, Malmberg* and *Tollefsen* are elaborating on internal migration and socioeconomic change in Laos and argue that internal migration is linked to international mobility and regional policies and opportunities. In his viewpoint article, *Daniel Rauhut* examines and criticises Adam Smith's work on migration and argues that Smith had no empirical support for his theory.

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Finally, the editors of *Migration Letters* would like to thank Columbia based artist *Alejandro Garcia-Lemos* for allowing us to print cover images from his installation show entitled *Migration Letters in Spanglish* which was launched in 2009. The two images on the front cover and back cover are from letter "A" of the installation. At the end of the issue, we have included a self-introduction from Alejandro. Hopefully, we will be able to use other "letters" from this artwork in future issues.

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