

Doing Qualitative Research with Migrants as a Native Citizen: Reflections from Spain¹

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Abstract: In order to look for new ways of evaluating immigration policies, I started research based on direct observations and qualitative interviews within the *Oficinas de Extranjeros*—the Spanish Offices for Immigration. I soon realised that my position as a researcher in this context was controversial, related to the fact that I was a Spanish citizen among foreigners, in a place where the only Spanish citizens were policemen or civil servants. I reflected upon this divide and the way in which I was, I felt, being perceived as part of the "institution": as a middle-class Spanish citizen with little "obviously" in common with the immigrants I sought to research. Reflecting on this led me to test a number of research "strategies" in an attempt to break through the insider/outsider barriers between migrant and non-migrant. The paper will reflect upon these strategies, and more generally, it will review the difficulties and dilemmas of becoming an insider (a friend) whilst beginning as an obvious outsider (a stranger).

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1. "What am I Doing Here?"

"What am I doing here?" (Appendix: Pictures [2](#), [3](#)) This question arose sometimes when I started my fieldwork at the *Oficinas de Extranjeros*² trying to come into contact with immigrants whose experiences I was interested in. [1]

When I began this research, I realised that the queue in front of the main entrance of the office (Appendix: Picture [1](#)) was a place where solidarity grew

- 1 This is the updated and abridged version of the paper "The researcher as a citizen of the host country in qualitative migration research" presented at the 7th Conference of the European Sociological Association, Torun, Poland, September 9th-12th 2005.
- 2 *Oficinas de extranjeros* ("Foreigners' offices") is the official name of the offices where residence and work permits are delivered to foreigners in Spain. They are provincially based and their organisation varies depending on the different provinces. In most provinces they are called *Oficinas Únicas de Extranjeros* as they render the whole of services both from the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Interior. In some other provinces—as in Madrid, where my fieldwork has been carried out- services of the different ministries are separated into different offices, all of them called *Oficinas de Extranjeros*.

among immigrants. They were connected as foreigners and as immigrants, and talk revolved around the different matters people were going to ask of the office. To share information was a main issue within these conversations. [2]

As a Spanish citizen, snooping around the office and not really queuing, I quickly realised that the first challenge I had to face was to get over this sense of "snooping". First, as a Spanish citizen, I was a stranger to those in the queue. I could *only* have been a lawyer, an immigration official, part of building security, or even more threateningly I could have been an undercover policeman. There were other possibilities: a sales agent from an insurance agency or a mobile phone company, or a journalist ready to exploit the queue for a few minutes before disappearing as quickly as he or she arrived. I also knew what I could not be and would not be seen as: a fellow migrant to pass time with and to share conversation with whilst waiting in the queue. [3]

As a young Spanish sociologist I was facing a real challenge. Even if civil servants were familiar with my presence there, foreigners waiting in the queue did so only once, twice or three times at the most. My presence there would always be strange to them, and I had only a small window of opportunity to develop relationships and trust³. That made my work be more difficult. [4]

Nevertheless, despite these initial problems, I found that these queues were an excellent place to "recruit" my informants. I could have recruited by more traditional and probably safer means to fulfil the objectives of a more typical research project⁴. However, having tried these other routes during the initial steps of my field work, in order to achieve the aims of my project, I was convinced that interviewing the same people I was observing had to be the normal consequence of my own observations. Why? Because if I was looking for concrete experiences concerning these public offices, was there any better way to talk about them than through a meeting in the same place where these experiences were taking place? [5]

Meeting people at a place of immigrant officialdom (Appendix: pictures [5](#), [6](#))—such as the *Oficinas de Extranjeros*—would allow me to talk directly and in the "here and now" to immigrants. These were the places to find participants to discuss the problems of migration policy with. In addition, this choice would allow me to follow all the steps that migrants were following and experience what they were experiencing: the logic of the offices of the Ministry of Labour, the delays of Government, the likelihood of having to return with additional information, the facilitating role of lawyers and immigrant associations, and the "final" step of

3 This is quite relative. On the one hand, people going to the offices changes from one day to another. On the other hand, it is certain that most interviewees say that they have the impression of having passed a very long time waiting and queuing. In fact, this can take sometimes the whole day or even more.

4 This would have happened if I had arranged the preparation of a list of "voluntary" informants through, for instance, an immigrant association, a social organisation or another more accessible institution, as schools or social services. Nevertheless, having studied previously the functioning of immigrant associations in the city of Madrid, I realised that it was certainly richer to go directly to the place where every immigrant had to go sooner or later.

receiving an identity card (which is always temporary because immigrants have to come back after 12 or 24 months to renew their permit). [6]

However, my decision to target research around the queue for the *Oficinas de Extranjeros* brought me problems, particularly related to how suspicious my activities were perceived to be by migrants. Implicit, and sometimes explicit suspicion, manifest itself in opening questions like: "Who are you and why are you interested in the steps I am fulfilling?", "Are you a civil servant?", "Are you a policeman?", "What do you want to know about me?", etc. These questions made me defensive, but at the same time had they not been asked in this way, I might have been suspicious myself. [7]

A particularly good example of this suspicion occurred one sunny Monday morning, when I was "roaming" the queue outside the office. There were a lot of people around and I was observing the security system from a distance but near enough to be able to listen to the conversation taking place between the security officer and migrant. My mind was focused on how one could answer so many questions from migrants without pause, and as I was thinking I realised that two people, a man and a woman, had moved alongside me and were talking about different aspects of their lives. Immediately, I found myself paying attention to their conversation rather than the now-familiar questions and answers between security and migrant. The couple talked about their lives in Spain, their families in Bolivia and administrative matters amongst other things. The Bolivian woman was admonishing the man, insisting that he had to take care of his family in Bolivia, and that it was his duty to save and send money home. This led to a very interesting discussion about the different roles of men and women who decide to emigrate. Just as I was entering their conversation covertly, the couple realised I was paying attention and I instantaneously decided to introduce myself. What happened then? With their suspicions aroused and my incongruity exposed the conversation was settled immediately. I was a native Spaniard, I was *choosing* to queue, and I was neither a journalist nor a civil servant, but I was starting to ask them questions. Why was I interested in them? My unintended intrusion broke the "natural" flow of the conversation between two fellow migrants: despite my willingness to talk to with them, I was an impostor, a perfect stranger. As it was not the first time that such a thing had happened to me, I knew how to act, and even managed to arrange a meeting with the Bolivian woman, who I eventually interviewed to talk about her experiences of officialdom and the queue. [8]

This example illuminates the main problem that guides my methodological reflection and has, since the beginning, shaped my research experience. Namely: why has somebody like me—middle-class, university educated, with parents both civil servants, who has travelled abroad freely and voluntarily—decided to get to know immigrants' life stories? Apart from a strong commitment to democracy and human rights—which can paradoxically be traced to my security as a content middle-class citizen, bourgeois or even paternalist as if I were "going to help them"—, which elements referred to the social position and to the biographic trajectory of the researcher determine the choice of such a topic? How this position affects to the making of this research? [9]

Equally, though, I did not know how prominent these suspicions were in the minds of migrants, and whilst I was rehearsing answers to questions like: "Who are you?", "Why do you want to know about my life?" "Why am I supposed to tell you about my life?" "Why do you assume that I am going to tell you the truth about my life?" "What are you going to do with the information I am giving to you?" "Are you going to do something to make things easier for me than they are?" "Are you going to push the authorities to change the functioning of those offices?" I was not entirely sure whether these questions were being asked, and if they were being asked I did not know how they, and my responses to the questions, would affect my research. [10]

In any case, I admit that I felt different from them. Very often, before some specially difficult stories, I was wondering if I could have done something more. With respect to their life stories, I was able to imagine what they were talking about, and as I was acquiring more experience during my fieldwork I was able to compare stories from the ones that I had been compiling until that moment but, was this enough to be able to put someday myself in their same place? Must a sociologist try to do this to be able to understand the phenomena he is studying? [11]

With the suspicion and my own incongruity in mind, I am now going to focus on nationality and the class differences between researcher and informant. These differences and my accounts of them will provide insight into the nature of the social dynamic that shaped qualitative data collection. [12]

2. A Spanish Sociologist Doing Research on Immigration in Spain

A cursory glance through the literature gives one the impression that questions about the role of the researcher within his/ her own research are more a priority for anthropologists than for sociologists. This can possibly be explained by sociologists viewing their role as researchers as asocial and privileged observers of an objective reality, long after anthropologists the epistemological assumptions behind this now out-dated view of academic research:

"The anthropologist is a human instrument studying other human beings and their societies. Although he has developed techniques that give him considerable objectivity, it is an illusion for him to think he can remove his personality from his work and become a faceless robot or a machinelike recorder of human events" (POWDERMAKER, 1966, p.19). [13]

Moreover, reflexivity and social position has also been a concern for anthropologists: "Why should a contented and satisfied person think of standing outside his or any other society and studying it?" (POWDERMAKER, 1966, p.20) [14]

Notwithstanding this epistemological convergence as sociologists followed anthropologists, it was the work of anthropologists that most closely informed my own research encounters with the migrant queue. [15]

Starting from these assumptions, what are the real issues for a migrant researcher of being "a stranger" in the field, and what strategies can the researcher develop to address these?⁵ Immigrants are a particularly difficult population group to interview, something that is largely explained by their problematisation: their socio-economic position, their cultural difference, their racial visibility, and their legal position as denizens. Thus, a "successful researcher" is the one who has established a relationship based on confidence with his interviewees that comes from a long-standing field commitment:

"His interventions make easier their expression without inflecting it. They show a lasting familiarity with the population studied and its particularities. It is the interviewee who has the initiative of the exploration and he feels good by playing that role" (MAYER, 1995, p.367). [16]

The problem is that building rapport in this way is not possible in every piece of qualitative research. Time, for instance, cannot remove the barriers of social class, gender, age, ethnicity or politics.⁶ Moreover, and this is particularly an issue in my own research, there are simply instances when you have no time to carefully build rapport and forced therefore to conduct qualitative research that arises quickly and often awkwardly after only a first encounter. [17]

From my experience, contacting people in the endless queues in front of the *Oficinas de Extranjeros* (Appendix: Picture 4) allowed me to see immigration as a problem of "domination". Beyond the social divisions and time issue identified above, this was a real issue in trying to establish rapport. My aim was to study domination, but I felt that I was being perceived as a part of this by those who were being made supplicant in what appeared to both of us to be an unfair system. First, many of my family members could have been potential employers of the migrants I was talking to. Second, I was a native Spanish citizen—a taken-for-granted status I had naturally acquired, but one that my potential participants were queuing up for. Third, I was asking migrants about the functioning of public offices in front of these offices—places that had a legal hold on the lives of migrants, but places I was unlikely ever to be compelled to visit. [18]

5 Kathleen SAINT-LOUIS, a young PhD researcher from Columbia University, asks herself these questions about her field work on poverty in urban areas. She states that the main references on reflexivity can be found in *Ethnography and Anthropology*. Her case is different from mine. Even if she asks herself the same questions, she realises that the fact that she is an Haitian black woman has made easier for her to make contact with black families and specially black women. She thinks that a white man should have faced much more difficult challenges than she did, maybe through much more complicated strategies: "I felt as if my participants would hold me, a Black female researcher, more accountable for my research than they would a white, upper-class researcher. Being a Black female researcher, I would come in and make sense of their struggles in ways that a white researcher could not" (SAINT-LOUIS, 2002, p.6).

6 "The distance between the interviewer and the interviewee, it is not only a question of social class. Lots of works have shown that not only the social environment of the interviewee, but also age, gender, ethnic profiles, political or religious opinions influence the answers" (MAYER, 1995, pp.360-361). Concerning gender, Edgar MORIN says that in any case, a woman will always be a better interviewer than a man, because of a greater sympathy and confidentiality: "Amongst the disturbing factors coming from the researcher, first there is his appearance to the interviewee's regard. It is necessary that the interviewee feels an optimum of distance and proximity, and also an optimum of projection and identification with regard to the researcher. The interviewer must have a nice and reliable image. Very often, a woman researcher will be better on communicating than a man" (MORIN, 1984, p.187).

Under these circumstances, I began to reflect in considerable depth on how best to present myself in the field and how best to tap in to the transient conversational flows of the migrant queue. One decision was very simple: I decided to contact my interviewees in the queues from the outset, even though my position in these places was extremely problematic. I then decided on the strategy of complete openness with respect to my research in order to convince potential interviewees that my aim was not to make a "formal study" for an "official agency", but to explore experiences of official policies and political institutions. Giving the difficulties of using the queue to recruit respondents, and what we know of the scope of migrants' networking abilities, I also developed the strategy of snowballing from contact made in the queue. [19]

Every immigrant in Madrid had to go to the *Oficinas de Extranjeros* sooner or later, and would have to make the most out of their time spent in the "snaking" queue. This was by far the best place to find out about the triangular relationship between politicians and their policies, political institutions, and immigrants. Apart from some exceptions (immigrants represented by a lawyer or an association) everybody had to queue to experience Spanish legislature in practice. Most of the stories collected reveal a chaotic path through the different offices. The "typical" case, for illustrative purposes, is of a person going to the offices for the first time and getting some information without having understood everything. The person will then have to go back to the office for a second time to complete all that is required of him/her. Between the first and second visit the migrant will have used his/her own networks, visited an immigrant association, or been to an advocacy service, in an attempt to understand the explanations given by a civil servant at the office. The disconnect between policy and what goes on in practice, allied with migrants' interpretations of this, takes time to resolve. [20]

In this context, and despite the "strange" situation I was confronted with, I made contacts. I tried to intervene in migrants' encounters with officialdom by using the publicly accessible space of the queue. I did this through: words of support; "innocent" questions; and, answering the doubts raised by migrants. In doing this, I never hid the fact that I was a researcher; I simply preferred to be open and use this honesty as a basis to establish confidence. Once confidence was established (I would not use rapport because this was only our first meeting) I then used "banal" conversations about the *Oficinas de Extranjeros*, perhaps followed by an invitation to take a cup of coffee, and was on the whole very surprised by how few people rejected my offer. Edgar MORIN is probably right when he suggests that deep down everybody likes to speak about themselves and "tell their stories" (MORIN, 1984, p.185). [21]

3. Positions of the Researcher: Nationality, Class Position and Cultural Cleavages

Just after these first steps, I had to face the making of interviews, whose difficulties are now to be presented. [22]

Four strategies within an open list can be adopted by a researcher making interviews⁷:

- The first strategy is based on the knowledge of the population interviewee by the interviewer, through a long experience of research or of a sufficiently large knowledge of the interviewees that allows the interviewer to handle with the initial problems encountered. The only way to acquire this skills is time and a continuous research of empathy, paying attention to the fact that a greater proximity as well as special personal trajectory of the researcher facilitates this work. Nevertheless, this can affect to the illusion of objectivity implicit in social research (MAYER, 1995, pp.360-361).
- Another strategy is the one that the researcher adopts accepting his own social position. During the interview, the attitude of the interviewer is frequently characterised by a certain paternalism expressed through a forced empathy that sometimes can be useful or not⁸.
- The third option is the one of the researcher who considers that he belongs to a "special" social sphere as a sociologist, as an "outsider" within the relationship with his informants. This vision is characterised by the illusion in which the sociologist only can be placed in a distant position with respect to his informants and to his own topic. This allows him to constantly maintain the illusion of objectivity. He is neither positioned as a "dominant" (although sociology, practiced in good conditions, that is to say, "well paid", is more an instrument of domination than any other thing) nor as a "dominated" person (this would ruin his illusion of objectivity).
- The fourth strategy is the one adopted by the sociologist who, knowing and being—even partially—conscious of the gender, class or cultural cleavages that interfere between the interviewer and the interviewee, accepts the difficulties of the fieldwork developing a set of strategies of continuous learning and understanding. This last strategy is the one defended by Hortense POWDERMAKER when she states that "The conditions for successful mutual communication include 1) physical proximity of the field worker to the people he studies, 2) knowledge of their languages, 3)

7 This list is based on the different qualitative research based on focus interviews compiled by Pierre BOURDIEU in *La misère du monde* (1993). Different interviewers develop different kinds of strategies within their relationship with their interviewees.

8 Nonna MAYER gives the example of the interviews made by Pierre BOURDIEU in *La misère du monde* opposed to the ones made by Abdelmalek SAYAD. Whereas the Algerian sociologist bases his interviews with young "immigrants" in his expanded experience in this field, his large knowledge of immigration and, so, in the fact of being himself Algerian and also an emigrant, Pierre BOURDIEU, during his interviews with young people of poor districts adopts a directive attitude, by a forced accomplice regard with what those young guys are telling. This is reflected, for instance, in concrete uses of slang completely strange to the experience of the researcher and not always suitable.

psychological involvement. In my four field experiences each of the three conditions was met in different degrees" (POWDERMAKER, 1966, p.287). [23]

Concentrating on these three questions, how can they be analysed in my case? [24]

First, I understand "physical proximity" and "psychological involvement" as the essential conditions of a "well done" research. This allows me to handle the initial cultural distances as well as the differences in class positions: a) a research that lasts a long time, b) my connection with the aims of the research project based on a continuously renewed commitment with the fieldwork, c) my continuous search for a relationship based on confidence with the informants and d) a commitment with the idea (or the illusion) in which my research is going to be useful, in some sense, for my informants, which leads to a some kind of exchange. In my case, the fact that I knew the best that I can the laws, decrees and regulations of the Spanish policies in immigration as well as the administrative procedures and the functioning of the different offices, became very useful with respect to that illusion. [25]

Second, concerning the expression "knowledge of their languages", it is certain that it is necessary to know the language of the group studied (in my case, as I was supposed to be able to "catch" a conversation between Latin Americans, and not always, I should have been able to also understand Tamazight or Arab to understand Moroccans, as well as Romanian, Ukrainian, Polish and Mandarin to understand people from other countries), but it is also certain that sometimes this is not possible. Although my ignorance certainly limited the possibilities of my research, "knowledge of to their languages" can be also interpreted more widely as a kind of empathy or a knowledge of a certain specific vocabulary, as well as of certain attitudes or strategies. In the queues in front of the *Oficinas de Extranjeros* the most commonly spoken language is Spanish, with the only exception of conversations between people from the same country. However, although the nationality of origin is very important, in the queues, when somebody ask someone else a question⁹, language was not a serious problem neither for the researcher nor for the informants. [26]

9 It is very interesting to observe how the image of the others determines who people ask for information in case of doubt among people queuing. Thus, it is probable that a Latin American woman goes to another Latin American woman to ask her a question. It is also common to see how an Eastern European goes to another person whom he or she identifies as an "Eastern European", talks to him or her in his or her own language, even if the other person comes from another different country and does not understand the question. The conversation finally takes place in Spanish. Finally, the same situation can be continuously seen when somebody identified as a Moroccan decides to talk to someone else also identified as a Moroccan.

4. Immigration, Nation-state and Qualitative Research

The connection between nation-state and immigration was present in all the steps of my research and created a number of particular difficulties. It is a connection that defines the limits between citizen and foreigner, and the existence of the *Oficinas de Extranjeros* in Spain seems to be the clearest example of the importance of this cleavage. The fact that foreigners see the offices as a public institution that conveys to them the power of the state, and in doing so reinforces their own powerlessness, influenced the relationships I developed from the queue. Migrants knew I was Spanish and thus indirectly linked me to the symbolism of the offices. It was also a link that I was very conscious of, and so as well as my participants acting differently, I also acted differently in the shadow of the offices. [27]

This issue of nationality and its broader legal significance affected my ability to establish a confident and informal relationship with participants. A good introduction was not enough. More was needed—at very least an open attitude and empathy towards migrants. Nonetheless, and in spite of the strategies I developed to breakdown the legal-national cleavage between Spanish national (interviewer) and foreigner (interviewee)—the cleavage never disappeared. It was part of my research both in a social justice sense (it made my project necessary and timely), and in a methodological sense (it shaped the production of interview data). [28]

Even after months of fieldwork, I was confronted with the same problem, only my experience had grown and with it my ability to negotiate, but never completely overcome, the national/ legal status difference between me and my research participants. That is why I asked myself: is it not much better to leave migration research in the hands of other sociologists with stronger connections to the population being studied, and more generally, how relevant is the social position of the researcher in qualitative migration research? [29]

These questions are important, not least because the issue of nationality and the native-foreigner divide made me think about the dangers of viewing participants as simple objects? Linked to this, there are real questions over my research motives and the way social research is used to help people. Specifically, will my conclusions be genuinely beneficial to my informants, and does this matter? Or, are my informants going to be mere objects in yet another research consultation exercise? This brings me back to the legal-national cleavage and to a suggestion: enabling informants to see themselves as the main component in the research, and giving them active roles or voices in the research conclusions, conclusions that may then go on to support their cause, may well be the best way to break national-legal "us and them" divides. [30]

Nationality sometimes means "suspicion" in this particular case. This happens also with class position, but I do not think it was so clear in my observations and interviews. In any case, to break this suspicion was one of the primary aims of my daily field work. However, is it possible to make completely disappear this

suspicion in a field work that is always limited by time, money and academic delays? I do not think I have an answer. At least, the question will remain open. [31]

5. Provisional Reflections on Reflexivity

There is not too much sociological literature available on this question, but there is probably less written concerning the particular situation of young PhD candidates or researchers, obviously less experienced¹⁰. [32]

I agree with the idea that reflexivity is an ability to locate "yourself" in "the scene" but also as the process in which you are able to reflect upon the ways your own assumptions and actions influence a situation, and thus change your practice as a direct result of this process. This allows a researcher to research his own practice and that of others in order to change or improve it. It is a main point to be considered during fieldworks. [33]

From my experience during my research with immigrants in Public offices that is going to lead to my PhD dissertation, I am interested in understanding the conditions of production of every research project, but specially of a research mainly based in qualitative techniques as observing and interviewing immigrants. Questions such as "Who the researcher and the "researched" people are?", "How their particular social positions influence their relationship?" and "Which are the concrete strategies adopted by the researcher and what is the aim of this choice?". Although after my fieldwork I already have an experience on using qualitative methods when doing research on immigration, as a young PhD candidate and researcher, I still have more questions than answers. However, I think experience should be a path to be followed for the next years. First, in order to make the difference between the first steps of a fieldwork and the fact of getting used to a population, to a particular situation or to specific social relations through a research and, second, in order to have knowledge enough of a concrete field through the time. [34]

10 The conclusions of the reflection on reflexivity carried out by Kathleen SAINT-LOUIS, "a middle class, Haitian American woman, pursuing a PhD", illustrates some of these additional difficulties: "In a presentation at a conference, a well-established white male academic boldly asserted to his colleagues that there should be a moratorium of white researchers researching marginalized people. I do not plan to engage in a lengthy discussion of where I stand on this issue, but it suffices to say that I understand the claims he is trying to make about power, others, marginalized people and subjectivity in research. I understood the ideas behind his statement to imply that the power hierarchy between white researcher and the minority "researched" is great and problematic. Too often the benefits to the researcher far outweigh those to the "other". However, what does this claim mean for minority researchers? Is there more pressure to do research with "our own people" and report back what academia wants to hear? Clearly, I have generated more questions than answers in this paper. While I advocate for reflexivity in research, I also realize that reflexivity will not provide us with all the answers researchers seek in research and re-presentation. What reflexivity can accomplish, however, is a better sense of why and how we choose to do the types of research we do. More importantly, reflexivity can help us to produce stories that are more honest" (SAINT-LOUIS, 2002, p.11-12).

Acknowledgements

To those who, by queuing under the hot and sunny summer, the rainy autumn and the cold winter, are obliged to overcome another crucial test within the difficult challenge of being foreigners in Spain.

Appendix: Pictures



Picture 1: Claiming Ids on Saturday morning



Picture 2: The crowd (1)



Picture 3: The crowd (2)



Picture 4: The endless queue



Picture 5: Waiting in summer time



Picture 6: A whole day waiting

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