

"But What Is Interesting Is the Story of Why and How Migration Happened"

Ronit Lentin and Hassan Bousetta in Conversation With Carla De Tona

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Abstract: Qualitative methodologies in migration studies are bringing new emphasis on the old question of the role and positionality of the researcher. The researcher with an experience of migration and as a member of a minority community is positioned in a qualitative research process in a particularly interesting and revealing way. We ask Ronit LENTIN and Hassan BOUSETTA to consider the implications of such a positionality. The questions raised are focusing on their experiences as migrant/minority researchers, with particular emphasis placed on gender and on the potential of a reflexive engagement with positionality to disrupt asymmetrical power relations in the field.

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1. Introduction

We work and research often under pressures of academic, canonical and social standards we have to conform to. Therefore, it perhaps does not surprise us, although it certainly still disappoints us, to see that qualitative methodologies conform to a large degree to what MRUCK, CISNEROS PUEBLA and FAUX have recently described as the "male, white, Anglo-Saxon, and more concretely North American domain" (MRUCK et al., 2005, p.3). This remains true despite the "relentlessly innovative" efforts of social inquiry (MRUCK et al. 2005, p.3). The voices and epistemologies of *others*, the racial, ethno-national, gender and cultural minorities are still silent in qualitative methodology agendas. Moreover, even in its homogenised male-white-Westernised version, qualitative research continues unfortunately "to be commonly disparaged for its putative nonconformity to an antiquated and hopeless flawed conception of scientific work" (WEINBERG, 2002, p.16). Hegemonic conformism is hard to bypass and subaltern counter-voices remain unheard. [1]

This interview section follows the continuing contribution of *FQS* to show the "diversity that is much broader and richer than virtually all textbooks on qualitative methods can cover" (KNOBLAUCH, FLICK & MAEDER, 2005, p.5). The diversity presented here centres upon the qualitative epistemologies and methodologies used within migration studies. Qualitative methodologies can be very relevant in migration studies, because of the nature of migration itself. Migration is an elusive

and fragmented experience and as it has been claimed "migration events are so ill-defeated and sometimes transitory they are rarely recorded" (POOLEY & WHITE, 1991, p.3). [2]

The qualitative enquiry of the meanings and practices related to migration can shed light on its complexities, perhaps even better than quantitative approaches alone. In fact, as Austin Bradford HILL's most cited quote reminds us "statistics represent people with the tears wiped off" (1977) and the tears of migrant people is what we often overlook and/or fail to understand. [3]

Part of the qualitative approach involves reflection around the role of the researcher in the construction of knowledge. Qualitative methodologies allow us to question how the researcher's standpoint influences: access to the "field"; the relation of the researcher to the research participants; and, the process of interpretation and data analysis. [4]

This can be particularly interesting in the field of migration studies when the researcher is an exponent of a minority group, an "outsider", an *other*, who researches other minority groups, other outsiders, other *others*. The question is not simply about being an "outsider scholar (people of colour, women and others traditionally outside the domain of research authority)" who holds an "insider monopoly on the production of knowledge" regarding the life worlds of migrants (STANFIELD, 1994, p.176). These "indigenized theories" as STANFIELD (1994, p.176) calls them need also to be deconstructed as we have now fully acknowledged the mutability and fluidity of our standpoints (HARDING, 1986). Therefore, even though it still matters whether we are "insider" or "outsider" researchers, whether we are from a migrant background or not, this does not matter in an unproblematic linear way. Different social categories intersect and create degrees of proximity on the spectrum of the "migrant/minority" researcher's insiderness. A related question is also how and whether the awareness and reflexive analysis of the "migrant/minority" researcher's positionality can disrupt asymmetrical power relations between the researcher and the research participants, which is another fundamental question in qualitative methodologies. [5]

These are the issues and questions which were raised and discussed in the interviews presented below with Dr. Ronit LENTIN and Dr. Hassan BOUSETTA, both of whom can be defined as "migrant/minority" researchers. The biographies and research interests of Ronit LENTIN and Hassan BOUSETTA made the interviews highly relevant and illuminating. [6]

Ronit LENTIN is Director of the MPhil in Ethnic and Racial Studies, Trinity College Dublin (Ireland). She is a converted academic, coming from journalism and fictional writing. She is a prolific writer, whose research interests include gender and genocide; gender, diaspora and migration; racism and Israeli-Palestinian women's peace activism; racism and immigration in Ireland. She has extensively contributed to debates on the qualitative, autobiographical and reflexive methodologies. Her books include *Conversations with Palestinian Women*

(1982), *Israel and the Daughters of the Shoah: Reoccupying the Territories of Silence* (2000). She is the editor of *Gender and Catastrophe* (1997), *(Re)searching Women: Feminist Research Methodologies in the Social Sciences in Ireland* (with Anne BYRNE, 2000), *Racism and Anti-racism in Ireland* (with Robbie McVEIGH, 2002), *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation* (with Nahla ABDO, 2002), *Women's Movement: Migrant Women Transforming Ireland* (2003, with Eithne LUIBHÉID) and *Re-presenting the Shoah for the Twenty-First Century* (2004). [7]

Hassan BOUSETTA is a Research Fellow at the National Fund for Scientific Research, University of Liège (Belgium), working on the political participation of immigrant minorities, local multicultural policies and on North African migration towards the EU. He completed his PhD in 2001 on the political mobilisation of Moroccans in European cities in the Social Sciences Faculty at the Katholieke Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). Although he has not published yet on the qualitative implications of his positionality, he has been involved in the Institute for Political Sociology and Methodology at the Katholieke Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). His publications include *Institutional Theories of Immigrant Ethnic Mobilisation: Relevance and Limitation* (2000, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Research*, 25); *Le paradoxe anversois. Entre racisme politique et ouvertures multiculturelles* [The Paradox of Antwerp: Between Political Racism and Multicultural Perspectives] (1998, *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 14[2]); *Citizenship and Political Participation in France and the Netherlands: Some Comparative Reflections on Two Local cases* (1997, *New Community*, 23[2]); *Kunst, cultuur en Literatuur in de Marokkaanse gemeenschap in Nederland* [Art, Culture and Literature Within the Moroccan Community of the Netherlands] (1996, *Migrantenstudies*, 12[4]). [8]

The interviews with LENTIN and BOUSETTA were semi-structured, with four main questions asked. Ronit LENTIN's interview was conducted as a face-to-face conversation in her office in Dublin. Her interview was recorded and transcribed. Hassan BOUSETTA's interview was conducted via e-mail. After a first e-mail with questions and answers, a second one was sent to ask for further comments. Therefore in both cases, I was able to maintain the dialogical and synchronous nature of the interview. [9]

Both interviews reveal the strong relevance of the four main questions: migrant/minority researcher positionality, power relations, gender, and reflexivity. However, LENTIN and BOUSETTA's answers are different in certain ways and reveal diverse qualitative approaches. One of the differences lies in the degree of acceptance of the qualitative approach, and in its influence on the research directions. This diversity is a rich source for us to reflect and learn. [10]

2. Interview with Ronit LENTIN

Carla: Have you ever used qualitative research methodologies for researching migration or ethnic communities? If so why? [11]

Ronit: Yes, I think researching migration using qualitative methods tells us much more than simply quantifying migration. Quite a lot of people doing research using quantitative methods, I think, ultimately aim either to prove that we have a problem with migration, in European or Western societies; or to prove that we don't have a problem, but doing it by counting. And what I am more interested is the migrant as a figure of someone who has made a huge transition in her life. You know, it is very hard to be a migrant. Only 3% of the population are in fact migrating. What is happening? What is the story when one begins the thought of migrating, both forced migration and voluntary migration? I am thinking for instance about my own family who at some point left the small town in northern Romania where they lived, and tried to go to Palestine in 1940 when both the Nazis and the Russians were at the gate. Lots of people, it was a very affluent Jewish community, were saying to them, "don't go, everything will be ok, if the Russians come, it will be ok". But they made this decision and it was hard to make this decision, because they left a flourishing business and a very rich community life, to go basically to the unknown they dreamt about, but the unknown. When in fact eventually they arrived in Palestine, they were happy, but they lived very frugally. But what is interesting is the story of why and how this happened, because it was made out of very small everyday decisions, events, whatever. I used this to write a novel (LENTIN, 1989), in which I imagined the life of my family and the transition from Romania eventually to Palestine. The novel was based on some research but basically it's quite an interesting imaginary process of what makes people, and particularly women, decide to migrate. Because although women are very often migrating as part of the household, very often women are those who instigate and push for the migration, even though most people think that the men obviously initiate it. The other thing, generally speaking, is that I am really interested in people's life stories. But life stories are very complicated, recursive, non-linear, and particularly so women's life stories. They never go from point A to point B. They go through loads of transitions and changes. The story gives quite a rich picture of the complexities of human life. And this is why I have always chosen to use qualitative research, in particular based on life story, autobiographical research. Recently in a conference (2005), I was challenged when I was giving a paper on women migrants' networks in Ireland, about not supplying the conference with figures of how many migrants, and how many women, and where do they come from. That was actually quite mystifying to me, because this information exists. But the perception among loads of social scientists today, is that you cannot really understand anything without putting it in the context of a quantitative analysis. One of the reasons I am using qualitative methodologies, is in order to challenge it, because I think, right back to a classical social science methodology text by SCHWARTZ and JACKOBS (1979), the story of one life tells a lot about society, not only about that person. If you listen well to a life story, to how people narrate, you actually learn a lot about transition, about change, about social reproduction, about political structure,

about the relation between the state and the individual, the relation between the genders, social classes and between races or ethnic groups. This is actually a very rich source of material. It is not very linear. It is not simple like 268,000 people migrated to Ireland in the year so. But it actually tells us a very complex picture, which to me is very interesting. Not very easily grasped, you cannot summarise it in two sentences. But that's the beauty of doing this sort of research and getting involved with people. Another reason why I use this method is because I think people want to tell their stories. I think people really enjoy being asked to tell about their lives. I know when I used my first big autobiographical methodology, I said to the interviewees, "you just tell me your life and tell me whatever you wish to tell, whatever you say is useful to me, because it is interesting". People then generate and orchestrate their own stories. It is really interesting to see what people choose to say or not say, how they say it. Are they influenced by people telling a similar story? Are there narratives that are deviating from the normal? I think this is all terribly exciting. Maybe because originally I am a fiction writer, interested in people's lives, but I also think sociology sometimes is like fiction writing in a way. You write stories. To me, the beauty of sociology is the writing of stories, the imagining of stories, and then inter-linking them with the grander side of things. What I am interested in now, hugely, is state racism, how do people negotiate it? Yes you put the theories out there, but then again, migration theories are very poor. What is interesting in migration studies is the stories people tell about their trajectory. Because migration is always a journey. The story of a journey is a very exciting thing. It is the kind of thing we look for in the sagas and in the myths. The person who actually crosses the seas and crosses continents, to reach a destination, what happens to her, what happens to her when she reaches her destination, and so on and so forth? [12]

Carla: And how do you mean this is a fiction story? [13]

Ronit: Fiction, I don't necessarily oppose to truth. When I talk about fiction I look at it as a story which is authored by the researcher, who authors it when she tells the story. In this respect it is fiction. Not because it is a lie, but because it is a construction. And people when they tell their lives as Liz STANLEY would say, they construct a story. And a story is never the truth, the one truth. If I told you a story today about some place in my life, I might tell it in a completely different way than how I would have told it 15 years ago, because I am a different person now. I had different experiences, age, health, occasions, whatever, so I think, it is interesting to look at the story as fictive construction in a way. When we construct something, this is the essence of sociology. We construct, we make, we invent, we just simply relate a truth which is a qualitative side of things. [14]

Carla: You could be defined as a member of an ethnic/migrant group and you are often researching other ethnic/migrant groups. How is your positionality influencing your research? [15]

Ronit: I think experience is the key issue here. Feminists have written a lot about this kind of theories. We derive different insights from our own experience, from being what you research. There are other insights to be derived and you are not

excluding them, but they are different insights. I am very interested in how I can use my life experiences in telling other people's stories. And these are also the stories that attract me. It's like when you go to a shop and you always wore black and the clothes you see there would only be the black clothes, even though there would be cloths of all colours. The point is that you are actually attracted in a way if you are open to what you are most excited about and what you know in an experiential and interior way. And being a racialised person in a European State gives you an insight into not simply social relations, but into the experience of social relations, in a very interior and very personal way. I am not saying that only migrants can research migrants, but the thing is that this knowledge gives us the added insight. But I also would agree with Joan Scott (1992) that the notion of experience in itself, once it began being used by feminist historians, was sometimes too easily used, because we have actually, then, to look at the criteria, or the categories that we make, while we talk about experience. And the moment we say migrants, we are talking about a specific sort of category. And we have really to ask ourselves what does it mean? Particularly in this post-modern age, where supposedly everybody has done some migration. So is it a category we arrive to through state categories, through racialised categories? And if we don't look at the genealogy of that category, I think we are not sufficiently open. The notion of migration is attractive to me, because in the history of my family, Jewish people in Europe tended to migrate from place to place. And if they didn't migrate, political ownership of the places in which they lived for many years had changed. So my family lived in one area, but the area belonged first to the Austrian Empire, then to Romania, now it is Ukraine, it was occupied by the Nazis, by the Russians, etc. So there is this sense of moving. Also during World War I my family moved from their area to an area in Hungary, to escape the onslaught of the war. So the notion of having been a family of migrants and having made this huge leap from the place they were born to a new place has influenced a lot of my thinking and my writing career. I suppose everything I have written about has to do with dislocation, with dispossession, with movement. And in a way, I am applying both to the migrants within Ireland, the interest deriving maybe from my own experience. I am also very interested in the issue of Palestinian refugees. Are they refugees because of something that my sort of people have created? The notions of refugeeship, of dislocation and the interactions and inter-cultural contacts that may have resulted out of this movement, are a huge sort of interest. And a very personal one. I have been attacked for being too close to the bone, too close to myself, for deriving research from what I know, and I think ultimately it helps, it enriches. But I don't want to sound as if only migrants can research migrants, I think when migrants research migration, they bring to it an insight that the person who did not experience migration in a same way, doesn't, or a person who has experienced migration but does not consider herself a migrant, does. Lots of people don't relate to their experience as migrants, because they don't need to, maybe, locate the research in that. Very often not to locate oneself is a product of the hegemonic, the male, the Christian, and not the marginal. [16]

Carla: And here we get to our next question, does a researcher positioned as a "migrant" among "migrants", or an insider if you would agree to categorise

yourself like this, is maybe better able to disrupt asymmetrical power relation in the fieldwork between the researcher and the "researched"? [17]

Ronit: This is an interesting question, but the answer is not always ingenuous. Because if I would say to a migrant woman who lives in Ireland today, of a racial background, maybe a black person, someone that maybe came as an asylum seeker and I would say to her, "I'm also a migrant in Ireland", and people are interested but they know there still is a power differential, by means of having status, having citizenship, having a job in the university and so on and so forth. I think it does help to disrupt power relation, but I think we as feminist, we have written a lot about the need to be aware of these power relations, we mustn't delude ourselves that these power relations therefore are disrupted by saying that we are disrupting them. Because we still have a privileged position in deciding what we are going to research. Take our research on migrants' women networks, we decide who we are going to include, who we are not including. It is not because we are particularly power-drunk, it has also to do with time, and access, and language, but we ultimately write our texts. Even if we show it to the women, who often don't want to see it, because they don't have the time, but it is our piece of work. So in that respect we are powerful in our representation of the migrant and the other, and we don't fully deconstruct these power relations, even though we talk about deconstructing them and being reflexive about our positions. I think being reflexive and deconstruct power relations is a minimal condition but it is not sufficient to actually disrupt the power relations. [18]

Carla: And now the last question, about gender. How do you think gender influences you and your research on migration and thus your methodological choices? For example, PERSONAL NARRATIVE GROUP (1989) and HARDING (1987) claim that women often manifest their agency through locating themselves in the world, by telling and relating to the other and becoming cognizant of one's unique personal history. How do these theories of gender relate to your research, if they do? [19]

Ronit: Yes, I think we have tended to say that women relate to other people better. They talk more, they tell their stories in a way that men don't. Some social scientists are saying to us, "ok but you haven't done the control group, you haven't researched men, so how do you know?" But I think instinctively, and stereotypically, women tend to relate more easily, and we happen to be in it as female researchers who are also migrants themselves. It is easier for us in a sense to come to the research process as a woman, as a migrant, as somebody who shares some things with the researched, and to assume yes, they will talk to us, they would be interested in talking to us, they would feel easy with us. But I think again we have to be quite careful not to ignore the power relations, the racialised relations, the hegemonic-vs.-dominated relations. Because we can, as white people, as people who have status and a proper job, research people who are not white, whose migration status is not assured because they have not got a passport, or because they have no residency permit. We actually are writing some of the commonality between women out of the equation. And I think sisterhood between women must never be taken for granted. We must always

remember that there are other divisive issues between women, not only between women and men. I think that many migrant men share a lot of the oppressed and racialised conditions of migrant women, and that they have more common things with women migrants, than they have necessarily with men of the hegemonic group. We have to be mindful of a lot of things, which makes it difficult, because we have to find a specific project, and very often we have no time to reflect on the methodologies we have used. I think sometimes we do it afterwards, we reflect on the methodologies afterwards, which is something that a lot of social scientists do. But I think we need to continuously reflect and not take for granted that if we construct what we call a collaborative project, collaboration must be mutual, and partnership equal. I think partnership is never equal. On the other hand we depend on migrant women, in this instance, as our data. Very often we take their words as raw data and we make the interpretation. Very often we don't take time to ask them, so what do you think of this interpretation? [20]

Carla: And what about feminism in your research? Does feminism inform qualitative methodologies better? [21]

Ronit: What makes our research feminist is not the method we use, but our orientation, our commitment to equality, our commitment, in my opinion, to the transformation of society. And I think we can use this commitment, whether we use qualitative or quantitative methodology. We can use quantitative methodology extremely well if we remember that our aim is to transform society. One of the transformations, only one of them, is the gender equality. I must also remember that another more important equality is racial or ethnic equality. I no longer consider women all the same. We have to challenge it. And while women find it easy to use qualitative methodologies, because women talk to each other better supposedly, I think that we might find that many men would talk to us very well, if we give it time and patience and do not take out authority as a given. [22]

3. Interview with Hassan BOUSETTA

Carla: Have you ever used qualitative research methodologies for researching migration or ethnic communities? Why? What are the advantages/disadvantages of using qualitative methodologies in research on migrants/ethnic communities? [23]

Hassan: I have been involved in both qualitative and quantitative research projects on migrants/ethnic minority communities. To be fair, my competence in quantitative methods is fairly limited and I have spent more time using qualitative methods. The point however is that I think both options have their distinctive merits and need not be opposed too simplistically. Let me just give you one or two examples of the value of being open to both approaches in the field of migration. When I started doing qualitative research on Moroccan migrant organisations in different European cities, it appeared to me that the regional origins of migrants were an important variable to take into consideration. In the Netherlands, more specifically, I was faced with many respondents answering during qualitative interviews that 90% of the community was of Berber ancestry. And it was also often assumed that Moroccans in France were predominantly

from the Arab-dominated cities. Then a few years later, I had access to new survey data which clearly showed that the Berber component was overestimated in the Netherlands and underestimated in France (see the work of TRIBALAT, 1996 for instance). That's an area where valid and reliable quantitative data have the solid advantage of confronting social constructions and social realities. Another example has to do with the interconnections between migrant organisations. After having done some research on ethnic associations in Brussels, I came to the hypothesis that Moroccans were reproducing a form of segmented structuration reminiscent of the kind of segmented politics analysed by anthropologists in Morocco during the seventies. On the other hand, the Turkish community seemed to have a more vertical kind of collective organisation. When quantitative research was undertaken on the interlocking directorates of ethnic associations, the results showed opposite tendencies and compelled us, as qualitative researchers, to reassess some of our initial hypotheses. [24]

Carla: You could be defined as a member of an ethnic/migrant group and you are often researching other ethnic/migrant groups. Do you think this influences your research process? How? Does it make you more of an "insider"? [25]

Hassan: A distinctive element of my position in the research process is the personal relationship I have with the reference population I am generally led to study. Being myself a Belgian Moroccan citizen of Muslim parentage, there is an issue that you could define as the interaction between personal experience and research experience which always need to be reflected upon. Several authors (Van HEELSUM, 1993) have studied this specific problem and have shown that sharing a minority identity with a population of respondents actually makes a difference which is often referred to as the "race of interviewer effect". Respondents often tell different stories depending on the profile of the interviewer. Some research has shown that this issue becomes even more salient if the interview is about issues of racial-ethnic identity. [26]

My position in this discussion is built on two broad arguments. First, the influence of ethnic origins in the interview situation with "co-ethnics" is not a specific problem to ethnic minority researchers, although they are more likely to be asked to justify possible interferences/irregularities in the research which may seem to have arisen because of their ethnic origin. The effect of a majority-identity on the part of the interviewer on a minority respondent is just as problematic as the situation of the minority researcher. While majority and minority ethnicities will probably not have the same effect on a given respondent, it cannot be argued that the value of one is superior to the other. They mean different things and this bias has to be dealt with by being reflexive during the process of data analysis and interpretation. The "race of interviewer effect", should in theory have no effect on the veracity of the responses of the interviewees. The veracity of responses is never something out of the real world. If we accept this idea that veracity is always dependent on a social situation, then it should be no surprise that different interviewers may produce different outcomes, and these different outcomes may not be treated as more or less true, but simply a mirror of two

different social situations. Therefore, it is important to lay to rest once and for all the easy reading which conceives the "race of interviewer effect" as the typical sin against neutrality of minority researchers. [27]

Second, there are other dimensions, linked either to the role or to the status of the researcher, which come into play in an interview situation. Some of the most significant ones are gender, age, physical appearance, social status, a notorious name, etc. Once again, different personal characteristics on the part of the researcher will not have the same influence, but in no way does this invalidate the interview process. An interview is indeed a social interaction involving all the attributes of such processes. Reflexivity and transparency in the report of fieldwork activities is the only way to control such inescapable biases. Therefore, the reflexivity and transparency that should be expected from ethnic minority researchers are in every respect comparable to the competence that should be expected from any majority researcher. [28]

Carla: Do you believe though that as someone who experienced being a minority you might have a better access to and a better understanding of migrants' groups? [29]

Hassan: The answer to your question is no. Knowledge is a construct, not a predisposition. [30]

Carla: Does a researcher positioned as a "migrant" among "migrants" (or an insider if you would agree to categorise yourself like this?) is better able to disrupt asymmetrical power relation in the fieldwork between the researcher and the "researched"? [31]

Hassan: In the framework of my research, I haven't yet had the chance to determine and analyse the impact of the "race of interviewer effect" on the content of the responses I get. I don't have any basis for comparison. There are however other aspects worth reporting, which have to do with the "race of interviewer effect" during the fieldwork. At this level, personal experience is a very important asset. The major advantage is that it facilitates access to very different networks of mobilised actors who are often led to presuppose that you're in the best position to endorse the content of their claims. Another important advantage I find is that the symbolic violence caused by the unequal relationship created by the interview situation is softened in several ways. First, I usually interview my respondents in their native language, a situation which place them, and especially those who have a weak competence in the mainstream language, in an easier situation. Sometimes, there is also a sense of sympathy expressed by the respondents. The reason is not only a matter of sharing the same ethnic identity, but is more profoundly rooted in feelings of frustration against what is perceived as the confiscation of minority voices by majority researchers and experts. In this context, the emergence of researchers of the same ethnic group is viewed as a positive step towards reappropriation of the self. It is a matter of fact that respondents often have a very sharp sensitivity to the relationship between power and knowledge. This sympathy is not negligible as a resource considering that

there is also a widespread opinion among the respondents that what is needed is not more research, but more effective solutions to their real-life difficulties. Sharing the identity of the respondents also facilitates the identification of the key-respondents within the communities. Nonetheless, personal experience is also the source of real disadvantages. One serious problem is that when there is a wide base of shared knowledge between the interviewer and a respondent, the latter is less inclined to provide in-depth answers, assuming that a great deal of information is already known by the interviewer. In some cases, important information is simply not divulged. It is for instance our experience that the responses that I collected about the socio-political experiences of Moroccans before emigration are often underestimated. The reason for that is an underestimation of the role of politics when it's played out less formally than in receiving societies. [32]

Carla: How do you think gender influences you and your research on migration and thus your methodological choices? [33]

Hassan: It is indeed a critical aspect in the research and I am not sure I have explored it sufficiently. My feeling is that your gender plays a role and influences every single stage of the research process: from the selection of the object of study till the process of writing down the results of your analysis. Now the question becomes even more complex if you combine both your ethnic and gender identity. We're talking about communities where women have an unequal access to the public space. This is all the more obvious when doing interviews as I do on political processes and on ethnic associations. I am often confronted with a sort of dualism characteristic of many Muslim women. On the one hand, you find a majority of Muslim women whose voices are silenced by their unequal access to the public sphere and, on the other hand, an avant-garde of activists and successful spokespersons whose sociological reality may be very different from the first. One oddity that I discovered when doing research on ethnic minority involvement in electoral politics in Belgium is an asymmetrical power relationship between ethnic minority men and women according to context. I am referring here to the differences that exist between men and women when political interactions are taking place within a political space which is internal to the community and when they are not. Women have a relatively easier access to political power outside the community than inside. This is because Belgian political parties have promoted an exceptional number of ethnic minority women (mainly Moroccan) in elected positions. What is intrinsically a very progressive development has however a reverse and dark side which is the persistence of social constructions of ethnic minority men as threatening politicians in the mainstream. [34]

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