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Biographical Research as a Cognitive and Practical Approach for Social Workers: An Interview with Catherine Delcroix

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Key words: biographical research and social work, generational transmission in families, immigrant associations, families from North Africa, housing estates in France ("cités"), discredit

Abstract: In this interview, the sociologist Catherine DELCROIX depicts an action research project with social workers and its consequences. The social workers were concerned about problems in a housing estate in Nantes Nord (the Northern part of Nantes) with many low-income immigrant families from the Maghreb. They contacted Catherine DELCROIX and asked her to help them understand the destructive behavior of local young people and the—as it appeared to them—indifference of their fathers. She guided the social workers in a self-reflexive action research project in which the workers asked fathers, mothers and their adolescent children for life-history interviews. Interviewing and interpreting the interviews together changed the preconceived ideas of the social workers about the immigrants. But there were unanticipated further consequences as well, which affected the entire community and the families. Through forming an association, the fathers created a forum of articulation and participation in public, and they became "coaches" for their children. They were able to counter the effects of "discredit," a concept that Catherine DELCROIX formulated in this research. One important finding is the relevance of a narrated "family memory" in this context since young people understood better who they were, where they came from, and what they could hope for.

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About the Interview

The interview is based on a series of conversations during the second half of 2007 between Catherine DELCROIX and Lena INOWLOCKI, who first met through the network of the International Sociological Association Research Committee 38 "Biography & Society" in the early nineties and have often met since at workshops, international conferences and academic exchanges. The conversations took place in French. The English translation of the interview is by both authors, with the help of Daniel BERTAUX. [1]

About Catherine DELCROIX

Catherine DELCROIX is a professor of sociology in France; she teaches presently at Marc Bloch University in Strasbourg and is a member of the "Cultures and Societies in Europe" research center there. She developed reflexive forms of action research with social workers working in deprived neighborhoods in France. Her research focuses on how people cope with precarious life arrangements in low-income households, focusing particularly on immigrant families from the Maghreb (her PhD was on the political participation of women in Arab countries; she spent several years in Algeria and Egypt researching this topic). She followed various immigrant families over long periods as ethnographic observer and biographical-narrative interviewer. DELCROIX studied specifically how they find ways to fight the effects of stigmatization or (as she calls it) "discredit." An aspect of particular relevance to the central theme of discredit in this interview is DELCROIX 2004 and 2005, an impressive sociological and narrative portrait of the members of an immigrant family from Morocco living in a French housing estate.

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1. Introducing Biographical Research in a Troubled Neighborhood

L. I.: How did it all get started when you began working together with social workers and social educators, doing biographical research? [3]

C.D.: At the time, in 1991, I was working with l'Agence de Développement des Relations Interculturelles (ADRI). I was sent to many places all over France to try and make French civil servants aware of the cultural gap between immigrants from the Maghreb and the written, bureaucratic culture of the French administrations. A group of social workers from Nantes Nord, a neighborhood in the north of Nantes who heard about this came to see me. They worked in a large housing estate where many low-income families lived. Many of the parents had come from Algeria and Morocco and their children were born either there or in France. There was a high rate of juvenile delinquency in this housing estate, some drug trafficking and a bit of drug addiction; the social workers who worked with the youths did not know what to do. Their task was to create social links in the neighborhood between youths and adults, mediate with the police, help youths in their school work, organize sports activities for them, and also help them to look for a job, which was a very difficult task given the fact that employers were extremely distrustful of these youths. The cultural center that they opened for the adolescents of the neighborhood had been badly damaged by them, so there was a real problem. The social workers wanted to understand how parents were bringing up their children; how they were coping with situations of high unemployment, poverty, and the risks of delinquency and drug addiction that their children were facing. In fact, the social workers held the fathers largely responsible for the situation. They were convinced that due to their lack or loss of authority they had lost control over their sons. [4]

When the social workers explained this to me, it turned out that they had the hypothesis that the fathers were not concerned and interested and had no role in bringing up their children. They also believed that the fathers were very isolated, had no social contacts; and furthermore, that they were oppressing their wives. These social workers were very open-minded and left-oriented, but they believed that in contemporary France, fathers—all fathers—had abandoned their parental role. I suggested that they do some empirical research to check whether their hypotheses did in fact apply. They agreed. They had already had an experience of working with a nationally famous social anthropologist, which had been frustrating—once he had used them to open the field for his research, he never contacted them again. They also thought that academic scholars are too far from "les réalités du terrain," the realities of the field of research to be able to really grasp and understand the inner workings of local social processes. They wanted to do the empirical research themselves: "If you were the one doing it we would not believe your findings," they told me. But they felt they needed some methodological supervision, which I agreed to provide once a month. [5]

I proposed to organize training sessions on qualitative research methods. I would also provide guidance in learning about the history of immigration in France, as well as about Arab-Muslim cultures and especially about how they define the

status and role of the father. They asked me to help them design a specific research project focusing on how immigrant fathers were conceiving their role as educators of their children, and what they were actually doing. They had an action-research project in mind. Action research should be done in a way to enable self-reflexive insights to all involved, as also you and Ursula APITZSCH (APITZSCH & INOWLOCKI, 2000) wrote. I suggested that rather than focusing the whole interview with the fathers on how they were bringing up their children, they should take a broader approach. Each interview should be seen as an opportunity to learn who these men were: what their life course had been and what had brought them eventually to Nantes. The social workers were reluctant at first, they thought it would be a waste of time; however they admitted that focusing immediately on education could be felt by the fathers in this context as rather aggressive; they might feel implicitly blamed and refrain from "opening up" to the interviewer. I described the biographical approach to them. They should look for men whom they did not know yet, so as to remain open-minded and not mix their status and role of social worker with their research task. I suggested that they go in pairs—there were about ten social workers in the group: one of them would do the interviewing and the other one would take notes. [6]

We constructed the interview guide together. They would ask the men for their own life story, beginning with where they came from, their childhood, their parents, their education, their professional and work experience, their way to France, how they got married, and how they educated their children. This last and possibly sensitive topic would come towards the end of the interview. The aim was that the men would gain historical depth through the telling of their life story and that their narrative would enable them to develop a comparative view of their own education and the education received by their children, through expressing how they had adapted their own educational experience to their situation and their children's situation in France. I suggested they should also ask the mothers, as well as the older children between 16 and 25, for their life story interviews. This would enable them to reconstruct each family's history, from the perspectives of the members of different generations. [7]

The social workers began looking for men who would agree to be interviewed. They did it by walking through the neighborhood, or going to local cafés and asking people. Some men came to them through friends who had been already interviewed, through word of mouth, some others, who had heard about the interviews, volunteered. The social workers were invited to their homes for tea and were warmly received. They interviewed altogether twelve families who had come from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Turkey. There was an average of four children in each family, so that they collected quite a lot of interviews, more than sixty. Each interview lasted between one hour and one hour and a half. [8]

2. Biographical Research as a Cognitive and Practical Approach for Social Workers

L. I.: How did you work together with them on the interviews? [9]

C. D.: We worked together for three years, meeting each month for one full day, from 8 in the morning until the evening. It was very demanding work, but also very motivating. We discussed the transcription of each interview in detail. A number of findings emerged. [10]

First of all, being asked for their life story, the narrative form of interviewing and the interest of the social workers in what they had to say, the men—the fathers—understood that they were not being blamed; that they were neither seen as passive, completely subdued persons, nor reduced to their present status of manual laborer. Instead, they were given a chance to tell their whole life story. Thus, they talked not only about their childhood, but about being a youth in the context of the Algerian war of independence, in which several had participated in; they described their multiple migrations and work experiences in other countries than in France, particularly in Germany. Many of them were presently active in workers' unions. Thus it became apparent that, contrary to what the social workers—and, generally speaking, all French—thought of them, they had complex and plural experiences and identities. Some of the Moroccans had fought as opponents to the king's absolutist power, and had to leave Morocco because of that. [11]

During the collective work of reading, re-reading and commenting on the transcriptions, something important turned up. The social workers realized very concretely how deeply rooted were some of their taken-for-granted assumptions and images regarding these men. There was a question about friends in the interviewing guide. Since the social workers assumed that the men had no friends and were isolated, they had in fact not "heard" them when they told them that they did have friends. Reading the transcripts, the social workers realized that they had asked this question again and again, since they had simply not "heard" their positive response the first time. They realized that while interviewing they had been expecting their interviewees to answer, no, that indeed they had no contacts with their neighbors. And when the interviewees had told them instead, "Oh yes, we do have a lot of contacts," they had asked the same question again and again, as if they had found the positive answer not convincing and only a negative answer admitting their isolation would have been convincing. This made them think reflexively about their opinions and prejudices. [12]

It turned out, to the amazement of social workers, that these men were not at all isolated. There were informal networks of immigrant men in the neighborhood; they met regularly, but the social workers, who had been present in the neighborhood for decades, had remained unaware of this. [13]

Working with the biographical approach renewed the professional praxis of the social workers. There was much talk at the time of the incompetence of fathers.

Through the life story interviews, the social workers understood that the fathers had in fact constructive attitudes regarding French society and the quality of education in schools. They also understood that they had associated informally to counter experiences of racism and of—what I termed—being discredited. [14]

L. I.: So did relations change between the social workers and the fathers? [15]

C. D.: Yes. In fact, one day three of the fathers who were already interviewed came together to see the social workers and told them, "Look, we understood that you want us to take a more active role in helping our children through the risks of becoming adults. We have discussed the matter at length between us and with quite a number of friends who also have children and are very concerned. We all agreed to support you in this matter." The social workers were extremely happy to hear that. For years they had tried to work hand in hand with the parents, usually in vain. And suddenly everything seemed possible. [16]

But the three fathers had something more to say: "What we are asking you to do is to support our request to the municipality that they lease to us an old, run-down, city-owned building in the neighborhood. We want to transform it into a mosque." Since this was happening in 1990, just before the beginning of the first Gulf war, at a time of high tension between the West and the Muslim world, the social workers were alarmed. What if these men were in fact religious fundamentalists? What should they do? When they asked me I told them to calm down. I had done my PhD research on the political participation of women in two Muslim countries, Egypt and Algeria. I had studied the history of Islam and was aware of the internal debates in Islam through the centuries and today. "There are different trends in Islam," I explained. "The modernist trend favors equal relations between boys and girls." I gave them articles to read, it changed their view of Islam. With their mind at ease they accompanied the delegates to see the mayor. They confirmed that these men could be trusted; that they wanted to restore the building themselves—many were construction workers—and use it not only as a mosque but also as a sort of center for cultural exchanges with all inhabitants of the area, whatever their religious creed, including those without a religious orientation. That their main objective was not religious but to help those of their children who were "deviating" from a good course to come back to their senses. In this perspective, teaching them religious values could be one of the means to achieve this goal. The mayor accepted to lease the slot of land, provided it was to a non-religious association. This was because in France, since the law of 1905 that separated the State from all Churches, or religious institutions—particularly the Catholic Church—it is absolutely forbidden to use any public money to finance religious activities. Thus 57 fathers of the neighborhood, all Muslims but from different regions of the world, from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, and Turkey, formed a cultural association (L'Association culturelle des Musulmans de Nantes Nord). They renovated the building together. I went to the inauguration; it was very moving. The rabbi was there, the Catholic priest as well, and the mayor; the members of the association thanked the social workers for helping them to build a place to pray, and also for

their research project. The thought came to my mind that in a way, what was happening that day was the indirect outcome of the biographical approach ... [17]

L. I.: What about the young people? [18]

C. D.: At first they were not happy at all. They thought, now the adults have made a coalition between themselves and against us, they will get at us now. But their attitude began to change when we organized the public "restitution" of the research project, actually in the building that was also used as a mosque. The fathers who had been interviewed were all there. The social workers said publicly how impressed they had been, listening to their life stories. They were sure that every immigrant in the area had an important story to tell. The youths were pleased that their fathers were given such praise in public, in the presence of the local police officers, school principals, and the city's mayor, a Socialist. [19]

But then we had to face another problem. Suddenly the French families of the neighborhood, families of industrial workers, protested that they also wanted an action research project devoted to them. They deserved public recognition for their own history, which included moving from small peasant families in the countryside to industrial labor under harsh conditions. We did life story research with them, too, and it worked out quite well. [20]

3. Changes in the Neighborhood

L. I.: Did things change in the neighborhood? [21]

C. D.: In the following years, the 1990s, the rates of delinquency went up for the whole city of Nantes, and actually in most deprived housing-estate areas ("banlieues") all over France. Except for this group of neighborhoods in Nantes Nord. It is not even the case that rates went up there at a slower pace: they actually dropped! I was not aware of it. I had moved to work at a different place. I heard about it when the police chief of Nantes quoted the statistics himself in a television interview; he had all the data at his fingertips. He did explain what had been done by this association of Muslim fathers. It also helped that the mayor and the local police were very open-minded, and that we had talked to journalists about this research when it was published. [22]

Since 1993 the association that the twelve interviewed fathers had set up has grown. In 2007, it counts nearly four hundred fathers, all Muslims, coming from various countries. They are linked with Muslim families that represent two thousand persons, out of twelve thousand inhabitants living in Nantes North. The association now organizes sports and cultural activities. Sports, especially indoor football attracts the most troublesome young adults, including those who have lost hope of ever finding a job. The fathers themselves act as coaches and referees, doing volunteer work. They use these opportunities to get along better with their grown-up sons, to help them gain a bit more self-esteem. Eventually, when the desire to find a job re-emerges within a youth, they introduce them to career advisers; but they are cautious not to do it too early. I find they act with

much sensitivity and wise judgment. Some of the young adults have been through jail and most have repeatedly experienced racist rejection, especially when looking for a job. They are full of rage; they become known as "difficult cases." Their fathers, meanwhile, have become partners of the social workers in welfare agencies, medical institutions, schools ... for the sake of their children's future. [23]

The public recognition that the social worker gave to the Association has had long-term effects. Every time there is a problem involving some Muslim youth in Nantes Nord, or elsewhere in Nantes, the association's mediation is called for. Frequently, association members organize public debates on relationships between girls and boys and between generations, or about such major geopolitical events as the second Gulf War, or the consequences of September 11th. Quite often police officers join in the debates about public order and how to fight racist attitudes. Over the last ten years, tensions have really significantly reduced in this area. And as I said earlier, this change in collective mood has even translated into statistics on rates of delinquency. During the last five years, the statistical rates increased everywhere else in France, and also in Nantes generally. One of the reasons is that the police began to register complaints more accurately; but complaints were also increasing, not only their recording. In this district of Nantes Nord, however, crime decreased by twenty percent. [24]

4. Some Sociological Implications for Further Research: Fighting Discredit

L. I.: What did this research mean for your work since then? [25]

C. D.: The self-reflexive action research in Nantes Nord was definitely oriented towards very concrete practical goals. The open interviews were done by social workers, also the analysis, working in the group, using a thematic approach. These enabled them to realize their stereotypes of immigrants; stereotypes that most of the French population shared, and still shares, deriving from the history of colonialism. For more than one century this history has been taught in French schools as a glorious epic, of how the country that invented the Enlightenment and the Rights of Man brought civilization to the backward populations of North Africa, Black Africa and Indochina. This myth, which replaces and represses true historical knowledge, is so ingrained in French minds that it is no wonder that also the social workers were heavily influenced by it. However, they were politically aware and sufficiently self-reflexive to be able to accept the idea that perhaps their beliefs had to come under empirical scrutiny, and they were able to change their minds when they had a chance to do so, which is not so common. [26]

If only for this reason, the action research would have been worth doing. But there were many other consequences, including some that registered in the statistics, as I said. I believe that the life chances of many youths from that area were enhanced in the long run, but I have no direct evidence for this. [27]

L. I.: Which were the sociological findings of this self-reflexive action research? [28]

C. D.: Research projects do not stand in isolation from each other; they form chains of incremental knowledge. In retrospect I can see that this particular research performed the three goals that any piece of research is supposed to aim at and hopefully reach, as Daniel BERTAUX (2005) describes it: to validate or invalidate ideas and hypotheses that were formulated before it, also by other scholars; to bring empirical findings of potential general importance to the fore; and to lead to the formulation of new hints, clues, intuitions, which would deserve further attention in future research projects. [29]

In terms of validating previously formulated hypotheses, I am thinking about the idea of "puissance sociale" that had been proposed by a very experienced social worker, Gilbert DELAPIERRE, in Lyon, on the other side of France. He had noticed that in the deprived neighborhoods he had worked in for years, whereas everybody shared more or less the same history of poor education, hard jobs, and low income, some persons fared better than others; and over the years, their lives improved even more. Some of them were men, some were women; some were French, others were migrants. Wondering what made them more "successful" than others in the long run, and trying not to think in terms of character and other psychological features, he thought about them—he had several cases in mind—for a long time and comparatively, and came up with three specific "skills": their ability to join existing networks and to mix with people easily; their ability to get relevant information from others, whether from neighbors, or from people in local institutions, such as social workers, teachers, clerks in the administration; and their ability to use such information in practical ways, by developing plans of action. Taken together, these three skills constituted what he referred to as "la puissance sociale": social power. It points to a capacity to mobilize one's very scarce resources to achieve one's goals, step by step. I knew about this idea, and the Nantes social workers knew about it, too, so that at some point we tried to see if it made sense in the context of Nantes Nord. We found that it did make a lot of sense. It was quite obvious that among the men and women who were interviewed, those who engaged in networking, collecting relevant information, and using it to design realistic and successful plans of action, were also the ones whose children were doing well. [30]

I want to point out that this touches on a larger issue, one which has not been much researched by sociologists so far, but on which I have focused my research over the last decade. This is the issue of what people can do when they lack everything of what Pierre BOURDIEUX (cf. BORDIEUX & PASSERON, 1990) calls capitals, that is money, education, and relations to decision-making people. What kinds of initiatives can they take, what kinds of levers can they activate, if they lack all of this? The idea of "puissance sociale" provided a first bit of answer to this very general issue. [31]

In terms of new findings now, perhaps the most relevant one has been on the effect of "la mémoire familiale," family memory. The interviews had allowed twelve immigrant fathers to tell their life story. Some of them had already told their story, or bits and pieces of it, to their children in the past. But others had not, and it was the first time their children were hearing it. As we were moving from

one case to another, we noticed something interesting: in the families where the father had not passed on his story, some of the adolescent children had the most problematic behavior. When they were interviewed, which was not easy, these adolescents often expressed a terrible rage against the social injustice that was done to them. They compared themselves to kids of their age in secondary schools, kids from middle class—French—families who "had everything," good clothes, expensive shoes, and the like. They thought it was totally unfair that they were unable to afford the things that "everybody else" had. [32]

Now, in families where the father had told his history, or at least where the children knew about it, perhaps from their mother, they saw things differently. They saw themselves as the outcomes of a long, historical process whereby their parents had decided to emigrate in the hope of providing better life chances for them. Their father had been forced to take very demanding jobs, and their mother, to live very far from her kin and her networks of solidarity. But they had done it "for you, our children." As a consequence, the young people understood better who they were, where they came from, and what they could hope for. The difference was sometimes striking. [33]

I believe this is a major discovery. Telling one's life story to one's own children turns out to be a powerful tool in helping them to know about the world their parents lived in, and to orient themselves in their present situation. It is important for understanding their identity. But it is not so easy to pass on one's own life story. There is the competition of the media, watching television, playing video games, and spending time with one's peer group. Kids might have better things to do than listening to stories of the past, to stories that are not even fiction ... and if the right moment for this is lost, there might not be another opportunity. But I kept this finding in mind and tried to check in my subsequent research projects if it held. It does, as I described in my portrait of the Nour family (DELCROIX, 2005). [34]

As for ideas and intuitions from the reflexive action research that opened a new stream of sociological thinking in my research, I would name the issue of acting (*Handeln*) in situations of discredit (DELCROIX, 2003). The social workers had thought that the fathers were passive; that they had "quit" their job of educating their children in the proper way. Then they discovered that this was not true, but that the fathers were extremely worried about the risks that some of their children would encounter by "deviating" from the right course, by stopping to study, play truant, associate with older kids involved in dangerous games, and so on. The fathers had kept discussing among themselves what they could do. But because of their low status in how they were considered by the authorities, including the social workers, it was extremely difficult for them to do anything. The discredit they had to bear made it almost impossible for them to communicate with the French authorities. Since they had no "credit," nobody would listen to what they had to say, and they stopped even trying. We saw how even the empathic social workers did not hear what they had to say in the interviews. [35]

So since this research I developed this line of thinking further, and discovered the enormous differences it makes whether or not you have credit, whether or not

you have to bear discredit. For your possibilities for acting, it makes a world of differences, but this might not be visible from the outside. At the time this was a new idea for me. The theme of "recognition"—the reverse of the theme of "discredit"—was not popular then; I had not heard of Axel HONNETH (1994), for instance. More recently, there is also the concept of *Aberkennung* in Detlef GARZ's work (2006), which bears parallels to discredit. I believe this is a theme of great importance, especially if empirical research projects keep enriching it with observations of diverse social contexts. [36]

L. I.: Thank you very much, Catherine. Hopefully, more of your writings will become accessible for non-French readers in the future. [37]

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