

Briefs on Methodological, Ethical and Epistemological Issues

No.12

On the complexities of collaborative ethnography:

Ethical and methodological insights from the HOMInG project

Milena Belloni, Sara Bonfanti, Aurora Massa, Luis-Eduardo Perez Murcia, Alejandro Miranda Nieto, Ilka Vari-Lavoisier, Paolo Boccagni

Abstract

Big collaborative projects are today common in social sciences. These projects imply the collection of large data stored and shared by collaborators and with funders. As increasingly discussed by anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists, however, large collaborative projects, especially when they are based on ethnographic research, entail specific ethical challenges. While funders increasingly expect scholars to share their data to insure transparency and accountability, the nature of qualitative data collected on the basis of trust relationship between researcher and respondent makes sharing and archiving a problematic issue. This article aims to address these issues by drawing from the experiences of the 7 researchers involved in the HOMING project, an investigation of the nexus between home and migration. In particular, we discuss three issues which concern ethnographic and qualitative collective research projects: data collection (the role of serendipity and trust in doing ethnography and conducting in-depth interviews); data sharing (ownership and authorship, informed consent, usage of data of others); and data storage (waste or accumulation). First we argue for the importance to insure that ethnographic projects can count on a significant flexibility to be able to accommodate ethnographic serendipity and the need to expand or narrow down fieldwork boundaries contextually to the relationships and circumstances of the specific field. Second, we elaborate on the ethical difficulties we face in sharing our data among our team and reflect on the implications of sharing. Finally, we expand on the positive and negative implications of data storage and what that means in particular for migration research.

Introduction: Collaborative ethnography and its challenges

Since the nineties, scholars have explored the opportunities and the limits opened up by the use of multi-sited ethnography as a crucial methodology to explore contemporary social realities, ranging from global market, cultural transformation and migration. While ethnography is conventionally conceived as an activity performed by individual researchers, the involvement of multiple researchers on the same multi-sited research project would seem to be more appropriate. In particular, Fitzgerald (2006, 6) suggests that “the practical difficulties involved in multi-sited research, particularly when they involve multiple languages, can be resolved in part by abandoning the “lone ranger” model of fieldwork and adopting a bi- or multi-national collaborative model.”

Precisely in this view, the European Research project entitled HOMInG (based at the University of Trento) was designed by Paolo Boccagni to explore the multifaceted experience of reconstructing home away from home (Boccagni, 2016) for different groups of migrants in different national contexts. HOMInG focused on Indians, Pakistanis, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Eritreans and Somalis, living in urban areas of different European countries, namely Italy, Spain, Sweden, Great Britain and the Netherlands. Each member of the research team (who are also co-authoring this paper) focused on a specific national group based on his/her own previous fieldwork experience and linguistic skills. HOMInG was designed as a comparative project based on mixed qualitative methods, with ethnography at its core. A recorded collection of life histories and ethnographic field notes emerging from home-visits and observations in migrants' neighbourhoods is the main “raw data” collected by the HOMInG team so far.

Conducting a multi-sited ethnography in a team has several advantages. First, it means simultaneity, as different researchers are able to observe the same issue over different places at the same time. It also allows to match depth and breadth as researchers with already developed linguistic skills, social networks and cultural expertise with a specific group are able to build a deeper understanding of a specific social reality and share their findings with someone who has done the same somewhere else. Although these represent important advantages of conducting multi-sited ethnography, there are significant challenges in carrying out ethnography within a research group, which have remained little explored until now. Many of these issues have to do with the long-debated question of sharing ethnographic knowledge, which is by definition embodied and based on intimate relationships of trust between a researcher and their research participants (Mauthner and Parry, 2008; Slavnic, 2011). How can an ethnographer successfully share his/her acquired knowledge with colleagues who have not been in the field? Can a researcher analyse the material collected by another ethnographer? What are the ethical implications of sharing ethnographic data which have emerged from interpersonal relationships of trust and confidentiality with one's research participants?



Sharing what and for what purpose

Any discussion on sharing in collaborative ethnographic research needs to start from the understanding of what is to be shared: the data. The term “raw data” is often used in a quite straightforward way among social scientists who work in quantitative research projects. Raw data consist in codified answers translated in numbers which can then be elaborated through statistical tools. These data do not apparently bear personal connotations. Although we can discuss to what extent they are objective, they are anyway extracted from the respondent as well as from the enumerator who collected the questionnaire. Aside from the importance to grant privacy, scientists working with these kinds of “raw data” do not have particular resistance to share them. It is normal to think that such data will be (and can be) analysed by researchers who did not collect them in first person. However, when it comes to qualitative research, the expression “raw data” becomes much more problematic (Mauthner and Parry, 2008).

It is generally acknowledged that qualitative knowledge is co-produced by research participants and the researcher. An in-depth interview, for instance, is co-produced by the interaction of at least one interviewer and an interviewee. The latter should share their views and understandings of a certain subject, in a context of trust and confidentiality. The interview, thus, is already a product shared by two people which have established a personal connection with different degrees of depth, intimacy and personal engagement. As such, it would be hard to consider an interview audio recording, and then its transcript, as objective, abstract raw data which can be easily shared and interpreted by someone else than the interviewer her/himself. However, this does not necessarily mean that the interviewer is the only person able to understand the interview contents, for the simple fact of having been there. While he/she is the only one with a situated knowledge of the interview as event, it may well be that different people – with their own substantive expertise – gain another but anyway meaningful understanding of the contents of that interview.

The question of what raw data are becomes even more intriguing, if not problematic, when we move to ethnographic research. To keep it as simple as possible, we could say that ethnographic research is embodied knowledge acquired through engaging in the everyday life of research participants. Such knowledge is then translated into field notes. Even if there are several schools of thought about how objective field notes should or could be, it would be hard not to admit that field notes are anyway processed data. How could fieldnotes ever be considered as raw data, as so much of a researcher’s personal thoughts, reactions and interests shape them more or less consciously? To what extent is it possible to put someone else beyond the ethnographer in the position to appreciate the context and its sensual and relational implicit dynamics enough to produce realistic analysis of ethnographic data collected by someone else? The embodied nature of ethnographic knowledge and the personal connotation of fieldnotes make the issue of sharing ethnographic cognizance an extremely complicated one for a group of ethnographers, like the “Homingers” collaborating in the same project.



Although we shared our recordings, transcripts and a processed version of our fieldnotes, in practice each team member faced significant challenges in engaging with other team members' work. First of all, the wealth of material we collected would take an enormous amount of time to be duly read and discussed. Limited time, but also limited previous knowledge of the linguistic, historic and cultural context of others' research practically discouraged most of us to actually engage in analysing their work. No matter how much protocols of in-depth interviews were detailed, we found it difficult to appreciate recordings and ethnographic material collected among different migrant groups for nationality, religious background and history.

Instead, the most interesting instances of collaborations emerged at a more practical level – through ongoing dialogue, exchange of views and experiences between us. Teamwork meetings were a valuable case in point. At least once a month, “homingers” would meet to discuss about each other's fieldwork and to elaborate on the different meanings of home in the various contexts under investigation. Sessions of “tales from the field”, as well as of brainstorming and doing collective writing around the project keywords proved particularly valuable to enhance the collaborative potential within the team. Through these sessions we were able to compare substantive aspects of the production of home-like conditions and atmospheres that are simply irreducible to individual, group or place characteristics. One may think, for instance, of the comparative relevance and use of the senses, which have emerged as a core and neglected aspect of everyday homemaking; of the ways of using and displaying emotions, connected to feeling-at-home; then again, of the use of similar artefacts to produce home-like conditions, within otherwise very different research settings and life circumstances.

We have found another interesting way of collaborating by conducting fieldwork in small teams in different contexts. Aurora Massa and Milena Belloni have experimented with [shared fieldwork among Eritrean community in Rome](#). Paolo Boccagni, the principal investigator, has visited different field sites in Europe and conducted fieldwork with Sara Bonfanti in UK, with A.Massa in Sweden, with Alejandro Miranda Nieto in Spain, and with Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia in Ecuador and Peru. For instance, Perez Murcia and Boccagni conducted ethnographic research and interviews together with migrants' families in Ecuador. Partaking the embodied experience of doing research with the same people in the same context has then allowed them to compare their interpretations and their positionalities in the field. Although co-presence in fieldwork cannot be the sole way of doing collaborative qualitative study (Fitzgerald, 2006), we would argue that it represents a crucial tool to actually engage in each other's research and field-relationships. However, for joint fieldwork to be profitable, it also requires a mutual disposition to explore and possibly question the practical implications of the shared theoretical framework, which simply cannot be set up in advance; a systematic resort to ex-post daily sessions in which researchers revisit together the early fieldwork perceptions and the interpretations to be gained out of them.



Discussing together each other's research context and co-presence in the fieldwork are parts of the solution we devised in order to overcome the ethical dilemmas of sharing individual ethnographic knowledge (acquired through relationships of trust and confidentiality between the researcher and the research participants).

The ethical dilemmas of sharing

Although the informed consent form used in the project clearly stated that interviews and other data are shared with other team members, all researchers in HOMInG felt uncomfortable in a way or another to share their field notes, recordings and transcripts with their colleagues. This mainly had to do with the sense of ethical responsibility towards their own informants. This feeling did not necessarily emerge from a lack of trust towards other members of the team, but rather from the idea that, no matter the ritual of the informed consent, many interviews and research materials reported intimate and delicate details of respondents' lives which emerged from a contextual relationship of trust with a specific researcher, not with the whole HOMInG group. With this regard a member of the team states:

“Sometimes while sharing my transcripts with my colleagues I felt I was violating an implicit agreement with my interlocutors. I refer to cases in which people have accepted to be interviewed because of a mutual friend (i.e. because I was a loved one for a person close to them) or, even more, in which the flow of narration brought them to tell me something they wouldn't say in front of a voice recorder.”

Moreover, some respondents tended to be reticent to give an interview that was going to be shared in a research group beyond the interviewer. A member of the team for instance reported:

“One respondent told me: ‘I do not want other people hear what I told you. I accepted to be interviewed and invited you to my house because my friend told me that you are a trustworthy person. I do not invite strangers to my place.’”

This points to the very intimate nature of doing ethnographic research on home and migration. Not only is the domestic space by definition coupled with a private domain to which “guests” as well researchers can gain access only if invited, but also the stories connected with the idea of home seem to be perceived by informants as intimate. As Bonfanti, Massa and Miranda (2018) highlighted, access to others' home spaces is stratified according to the researcher's own positionality in terms of age, gender and race. Different spaces in a house, whatever form it may have, can be entered if reciprocal trust is established and a certain level of intimacy is achieved. Thus, ethnographic knowledge and in-depth interviews collected in these circumstances acquire an intimate tone which makes sharing with colleagues more problematic. At the same



time, the gradual development of a collective skill in focusing on the substantive questions emerging from narratives or field notes collected by the colleagues – rather than on the personal experiences of each informant – has paved the way towards comparative analysis. While the ethical dilemmas discussed above have no ready-for-use solution, engaging in reflexive teamwork sessions, and directly participating in at least part of the colleagues’ fieldwork, have emerged as effective options to cope with these dilemmas in practice.

Concluding remarks

Drawing from the experience of the HOMInG project, this brief has aimed to identify some of the main challenges faced by ethnographers collaborating in large research projects. As we have argued, the embodied and personal nature of qualitative research and in particular ethnography makes sharing data – a sine qua non condition of almost all collaborative research projects – a problematic process. As we suggest, there are several reasons behind this. First, qualitative data can never be considered “raw”. As such, it is hard for someone beyond the ethnographer to make fully sense of them, and maybe analyse them in meaningful ways. Second, qualitative knowledge can be accessed only on the basis of reciprocal trust between a researcher and their research participants. Even in presence of clear informed consent forms, ethnographers may often find themselves in the uneasy position to share data which are perceived by the respondent as exposing them to “strangers”, albeit professionals bounded by confidentiality. Against this background, we developed mainly two practices, which have allowed us to engage in each other’s fieldwork while respecting the above ethical and methodological sensitivities.

First, we systematically shared our “tales from the field” during our common meetings. These reporting sessions became a way for the ethnographer to make sense of his/her own data in a wider theoretical frame relevant for the other team members, and for the whole team to be inspired by different case studies and ways of conducting ethnographies in their own practice. Second, joint fieldwork – to be understood as co-presence of (at least) two ethnographers within the same location, under a common theoretical framework – has emerged as a potentially fruitful but far from obvious methodological development. Joint fieldwork allows not only to gain a material sense of the context navigated by other team members, but also enables both researchers to develop an understanding of the ethical sensitivities of different migrant groups in different geographic, legal and political contexts. Its success has to do less with organizational factors (fixing suitable dates and arrangements for all parties involved) than with the ongoing negotiation of a mutually supportive relationship between researchers. This on-field collaboration requires, on the one hand, to formulate a well-defined and limited research scope (whether a setting, an event, an aspect of material culture, etc.). On the other, it also demands each ethnographer to loosen up her/his tight control of the fieldwork. Rather than abandoning altogether the lone ranger model in ethnographic practice, it is the



reflexive exploration of ways to conceive and conduct qualitative research in teamwork that qualifies the ethical and methodological insights of the HOMInG project. We hope that our ongoing reflections may inspire other researchers willing to take the plunge into the challenges of collaborative ethnography.

Acknowledgment:

HOMInG is a research project financed by the European Research Council starting grant no. 678456 (2016-2021) awarded to Dr. Paolo Boccagni

References

Boccagni, P. (2016). *Migration and the search for home: Mapping domestic space in migrants' everyday lives*. New York: Springer.

Bonfanti S., Massa A., Miranda A. (2018), Setting the table, having a seat. A reflection on positionalities while searching for home and migration_ HOMInG WP 3_2018, https://erchoming.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/homing-wp-3_2018.pdf

Fitzgerald, D. (2006). Towards a theoretical ethnography of migration. *Qualitative Sociology*, 29(1), 1-24.

Mauthner, N. S., & Doucet, A. (2008). Knowledge Once Divided Can Be Hard to Put Together Again' An Epistemological Critique of Collaborative and Team-Based Research Practices. *Sociology*, 42(5), 971-985.

Slavnic, Z. (2011). Preservation and Sharing of Qualitative Data-Academic Debate and Policy Developments. Linköping University Electronic Press.

Suggested citation:

Belloni, M. et al. (2019) “On the complexities of collaborative ethnography: Ethical and methodological insights from the HOMInG project” in Briefs on Methodological, Ethical and Epistemological Issues, No. 12, www.migrationresearch.com

