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Challenges and Strategies in Empirical Fieldwork with Asylum Seekers and Migrant Sex Workers

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Though a lot has been published on migration in general, little has been written about the specific methodological challenges in this research field. This is striking, since many researchers encounter methodological challenges in their work on a daily basis. We hypothesize that there are some specific methodological challenges in studying migrants in precarious situations, such as refugees, undocumented migrants, migrant sex workers or asylum seekers. Though these challenges might not be that different than those raised by other social science research and migration scholars can learn quite a lot from them (see also introduction to this book), they have some specific features requiring specific strategies guaranteeing unbiased data and sound findings. Such obstacles in data collection clearly influence the quality of the data. The aim of this chapter is to discuss three methodological challenges in migration research. The first challenge concerns the access to potential interview partners and motivating them into participation. The second deals with research across different languages and cultural backgrounds, all of which may ultimately impact on the quality of the gathered data. Finally, a third challenge is related to difficulties that may arise when addressing delicate research issues. Our reflections are based on two different studies, which have both been conducted in Switzerland.

The first study, which took place in 2003 and 2004, studied the trajectories and motivations of African refugees and migrants in Switzerland. It was a follow up study of a former survey with similar approaches (Efionayi-Mäder et al. 2001) which allowed developing our methodology further on the basis of 'learned lessons' in the first study.[1] The study focused on developments in asylum and migration policies and their impact on migration processes, as well as on the trajectories and decision-making. A total number of 51 asylum seekers, recognised refugees and a few other migrants (undocumented migrants, students)[2] were interviewed

in several Swiss towns. Interviewees mainly originated from West African countries, a smaller group came from Central Africa and all arrived in Switzerland within the last five years. 30 key informants, i.e. community leaders, experts or other persons who are in close contact with African migrants were interviewed as well (Efionayi-Mäder 2005). The planned sample size included more interviews with concerned migrants (80) and less with third persons. The numbers were however adapted in the course of the study for reasons we will discuss later. Interviews were carried out by native Swiss and African researchers and explored living conditions and events before departure, but especially events which took place during the journey and the mechanisms underlying the journey.

The majority of the interviewees were (former) asylum seekers who have experienced asylum hearings by the refugee authorities, which increasingly include conditions and modalities of their travel route to Switzerland. For years most asylum seekers in Switzerland by far have originated from the Balkans, Turkey and the Middle East. It must be noted that for Sub-Saharan Africans it is impossible to immigrate to Switzerland in a legal way, unless they are specialists or employees of international organisations. These were however not included in our sample.

In 2000 immigrants from Africa represented less than 3 percent of the foreign population in Switzerland. Their number has however increased substantially over the last two decades. Many of the African migrants and refugees were (and still are) young men – especially those from West-Africa – from various educational and social backgrounds. They were more subjected to negative stereotypes than asylum seekers. This was aggravated, as a substantial minority of them were involved in drug trafficking. As a consequent reaction, many retreated into their own communities, which increased their social isolation and stigmatisation. With this, they also became an easy target for some media who reflected anti-immigrant tendencies. This general context of stigmatization and politicization showed its impact on the due course of the research and forced us to rethink some parts of the methodology. The second study deals with the living and working conditions of cabaret dancers in Switzerland. These migrant sex workers mainly come from non-EU countries. Only very few Swiss women, or women from EU states, work as dancers in cabarets (according to official statistics, 2 percent of the women come from EU states). According to the Swiss Central Aliens Register, in December 2005, cabaret dancers primarily came from Eastern Europe (75%) and Central America (12%), very few from South-America (4%) and Asia (4%). Three quarters of all dancers are citizens of four countries: Ukraine, Russia, Rumania and the Dominican Republic. For our research we interviewed 70 cabaret dancers, coming from 11 different countries. We also conducted 30 interviews with experts and key-informants, including representatives of the Swiss

administration, cabaret owners and women's organisations (Dahinden and Stants 2006).

The Swiss legislation foresees a special permit explicitly for cabaret dancers from non EU-countries, the L-permit. This short term working permit presents – besides a marriage to a Swiss citizen – the only possibility for women from non EU-countries to legally work in Switzerland if they are not highly qualified. This special work permit, and all the regulations that belong to it, is the result of long political debates on the situation of cabaret dancers. Over the last years, more and more regulations have been issued, and a model contract defines all details of the dancer's working conditions, such as the number of working hours, the nature of the activities and the salary. These regulations have primarily been issued to protect those dancers from exploitation and abuse. In spite of all this, women's organisations and some political stakeholders consider the situation of these dancers as highly problematic. Indeed, one of the main results of the research was that a gap between the official regulations and the everyday working practices of the dancers exists. Although the work of the cabaret dancers is subjected to detailed legal regulations with regard to their stay and their activities in the cabarets, many offer services, which, from a legal point of view, they are not allowed to offer. One such offer is prostitution, or more general sexual-economic relations. Offering these services, on the one hand, allows them to improve their earnings. On the other hand, some women are forced to offer these sexual services by the owners of the cabarets or by clients.

Studying such a sensitive topic of course poses different methodological challenges. First of all we are aware that already by applying the term 'sex work' our political stance towards this phenomenon is reflected. We are convinced that we can only understand the work and living conditions of the dancers by considering them on a theoretical and empirical level as transnational actors with 'agency' (Giddens 1985). The aim of our research was not to investigate the theoretical perspective of 'deviance and criminology', but to highlight the conditions of their work and their strategies in dealing with them (Agustin 2006). Sexual work is still taboo and the dancers often find themselves in a dilemma between exploitation and their own economic interests. In sum, they find themselves in precarious situations and some of them are highly vulnerable. Working in the sex industry is often a stigma *per se* which renders research difficult and may cause 'socially desirable responding' (Meston 1998; Paulhus 2002). Also, the reliability of the stories of migrants involved in illegal activities as prostitution for dancers or working in stigmatised areas can be questioned. This forced us to think carefully about certain methodological challenges.

Methodological challenges

At a first glance, these two studies have very different characteristics and follow different research objectives. Whereas the first involved mainly male migrants and studied the migration routes and decision making processes of migrants, the second enclosed exclusively female migrants and studied their working conditions. Yet, interestingly enough, the methodological challenges that arose during the course of the studies, as well as the strategies adopted to overcome them, were quite similar. In both studies we decided to use a semi-standardised questionnaire and conducted interviews face-to-face. As far as migrants were concerned, written questionnaires were not an option given not only the variety of linguistic and educational backgrounds of the respondents, but also the complexity of the experiences and motivations studied. Furthermore, as we had to rely partially on external interviewers – who had access to the migrants or spoke their own language – unstructured interview techniques were not seriously considered, because it would have been difficult to ensure similar approaches and comparable levels of gathered information. We therefore opted for interviews based on a semi-standardised questionnaire and written guidelines of questionnaire-utilisation, which were discussed during collective or individual interview training.

For the interviews with the African migrants we developed a questionnaire with a majority of open-ended questions, allowing us on the one hand to capture a large variety of migration trajectories and to flexibly add further questions during the interview and on the other hand to avoid that the formulation of pre-defined answers induced errors or biases due to insufficient language competence or different understandings of terms, which had been observed in former studies. We also included a few sets of standardised answers especially when simple replies (e.g. numbers, ranks, preferences, etc.) were expected or when we were able to use categories, which had already been proven relevant in former studies (e.g. reasons for the choice of a destination country). Narrative answers were either categorised afterwards during the analysis or in a sort of 'sum-up-questions' in the questionnaire, which allowed drawing a balance of a longer narrative report during the interview. These 'sum-up-responses' have not only the advantage of later quantification, but may sometimes contribute to clarify the preceding narrative answers or detect misunderstandings. A similar approach was chosen in case of sex workers, though we opted for a slightly higher degree of standardization (more closed-ended rather than open-ended questions), which mainly concerned the concrete living and working conditions. However, also in this study we added open questions for core aspects and for 'delicate' issues. The interviews with key persons and experts followed in both studies a more explorative proceeding and were

conducted face-to-face by the main research teams according to an interview guideline.

Recruitment of and access to interviewees

An obstacle we were confronted with in both studies was the reluctance of people to participate. The reasons for that got clearer in the course of the research. The interviews with African migrants started in late summer 2003 when federal parliamentary elections were approaching in Switzerland. In the political debate and in the media, various aspects of the asylum policy were addressed. This was not new, as anti-immigrant sentiments had increasingly influenced public debate for long times in Switzerland. The debates focused on costs of immigration, control, security and asylum seekers as 'criminals and drug dealers'. The success of the anti-immigrant nationalist party (Swiss Peoples Party, SVP) was something new. Also a prominent SVP leader ended up being elected Minister of Justice and Police in December 2003, in which capacity he was in charge of migration and asylum. Though not informed in detail about political developments, many African migrants we approached adopted a defensive attitude, fearing judgements or stigmatisation from the researchers. Some potential informants even assumed that asylum seekers seen in TV documentaries had been trapped into being filmed by the journalists without their prior consent. In this context, the interviewers were sometimes considered as belonging to an official body and therefore prone to collaborate with the authorities like the police.[3] This suspicion was intensified by the fact that our interviews focused on migrants' trajectories; the very same topic asylum applications usually focus on. Besides, this topic is also something compatriots, lawyers or smugglers warned people about, because information on routes, methods could be used against them in their asylum requests. Though most interviewees proved to be ill informed in detail about refugee situations, most of them knew the basics. For instance, many knew that an asylum request can be rejected based on the trajectory or the claimant can be made to return to a 'third safe country'. Wanting to talk about exactly these topics filled some of the possible interviewees with distrust, which had to be overcome before we could carry out interviews under good conditions.

The cabaret dancers, on the other hand, feared the research could make them lose their jobs. During the months before the research started, a public political debate about exploitation of cabaret-dancers regenerated in Switzerland. Due to this debate, some cantons decided to prohibit the special short term working permits for non-European cabaret dancers. The argumentation they used was 'the laws which have been issued to protect the cabaret dancers are not effective and the state should have no

part in this kind of exploitation'. They consider the abolition of this special permit a way to stop exploitation.[4] In Switzerland, the conditions for entry into the country and the working conditions in cabarets are set by the federal state. The different cantons are the executive. They are not allowed to loosen the federal regulations, but they are free to apply even more severe laws, as for instance not to issue this short-term working permit.[5] After some cantons chose not to issue the L-permit to women from non-EU countries anymore, some cabarets had to close down. They were not able to recruit enough women from Switzerland or the EU, as the salaries and working conditions in Swiss cabarets are quite bad. Moreover, Swiss women, as well as women from EU countries, have the right to change occupation. This is in contrast with dancers from non-EU countries, whose permits are bound to their occupation in a cabaret. This closing down of cabarets resulted in a reduction of job opportunities for dancers from non-EU countries, and thus in a heightened competition among them. In this line of argument, the dancers feared our research could result in the closure of even more cabarets, depriving them of the possibility to work in Switzerland. This was one of the main reasons why they were reluctant to participate. Some also feared the consequences of an interview on a more personal level. This attitude towards our research mirrors the dilemma in which the women are captured quite well: they are sometimes exploited, but at the same time they earn more money than they could in their own countries, especially when offering illegal services like prostitution. In the following, we will describe the strategies we applied to access the targeted populations, given the constraints we faced.

When snowball sampling fails . . .

African asylum seekers and cabaret dancers are considered to be a 'hidden' or 'hard to reach' population (see introduction to this book). When classical accessing channels like telephone books or postal addresses do not work the so-called snowball method is often used. In snowball sampling, respondents are reached through referrals, i.e. through people they already know, persons out of their personal network. The snowball sampling strategy however also has some known and less known disadvantages. A known disadvantage is that in personal social networks there always is a tendency to homogeneity along ethnicity, gender, age, level of education as well as values and norms. This means that people are primarily in contact with people with similar characteristics (McPherson et al. 2001). 'Snowball samples' therefore tend to be biased, including the more cooperative participants out of one specific cluster of networks and leaving out others. Such a sample will thus mostly include people belonging to one specific network of friends or next of kin (Bloch 1999). When using snow-

ball sampling, researchers are therefore in danger of interviewing only people with similar experiences, whereas other subgroups of the society or networks are not accessed.

We deliberately opted for the snowball sampling, because at first it seemed the only possible way to get access to 'hidden populations', but it turned out that in neither of the research respondents could be reached through snowball sampling. Only six of the 70 cabaret dancers have been contacted through the snowball sampling method, i.e. through the referral of other interviewees. The contacting of asylum seekers through snowball sampling proved to be just as difficult. The main reason was the general lack of trust towards the researchers, as explained above. It became clear that even interviewees, who had overcome their own reluctance and actually confided in the researcher, did not always feel in a position to convince others to participate or even feared being suspected of working with the authorities by their friends or acquaintances. In other words many respondents anticipated negative reactions of their compatriots when they referred the researchers to them. The second reason for the failure of the snowball method was of more 'technical' nature: many interviewees did not know the precise address or even name of acquaintances, as they frequently met in public places. This fact illustrates the high degree of mobility[6] of these groups as well as their specific form of social interaction.

Gatekeepers and the importance of diversification

As snowball sampling did not work we tried another method to access potential interview partners: targeted sampling. This means you cooperate with so called gatekeepers who will contact potential interview partners on their behalf. Ideally, these gatekeepers are persons with a high credibility, because their recommendation of the research must be credible in order to convince potential interview partners to participate. Also, they need to be at the 'centre' of different networks in the researched community in order to bridge different sub clusters of the group. A difficulty of working with gatekeepers concerns the limitations of their contacts. As mentioned before, the stories of those less involved with these gatekeepers are rarely reported (Shaver 2005). Every gatekeeper has access to only one segment of 'her or his' community. In short, the limitation of the contacts of these gatekeepers at the same time sets the boundaries of a sampling through this technique (Dahinden 2005). Thus, relying on only one gatekeeper to form a sample will most probably result in highly biased data. The solution for this problem is diversification of the gatekeepers.

The strategies we applied in our research on cabaret dancers can serve as an illustration for diversifying contact points. Cabaret dancers were not defined by their nationality or ethnicity, but by their activity in a nightclub.

Therefore, we could not determine gatekeepers based exclusively on the criterion of ethnicity. A first category of gatekeepers consisted of nightclub owners. Their advantage is that they have direct access to the dancers. The disadvantage is however obvious. It is in their interest that the image of cabarets remains advantageous. Hence, they will probably not ask dancers who are critical about their work in the cabarets to participate in an interview, they will ask those who are positive towards their work. As a consequence, the findings will be biased towards a more positive image of the work in a cabaret. A second category of gatekeepers consisted of women's organisations. They try to realise better and more rights for cabaret dancers and often offer free legal consultation. They, like the owners, have direct access to the dancers, but the interviews of these dancers might reversely be biased towards a more negative image of the cabarets. These women are most likely to have been confronted with problems in the cabaret, for instance not getting paid the (whole) salary or having been coerced into prostitution by the cabaret owners or clients. A third group of gatekeepers were the local administration. Some local offices organised monthly information sessions for cabaret dancers. We were allowed to assist these sessions and to present our research project. Women who were willing to participate were asked to write down their telephone numbers. Here, the disadvantage was that the dancers sometimes had difficulties distinguishing between the research and the administration.

The strategy of diversifying gatekeepers was also applied in the study among asylum seekers: this group was however defined by their nationality or ethnicity. Therefore, we looked for gatekeepers primarily among migrants' associations. Through a previous study on African migrants' associations from Senegal and Congo, we already knew some potential key informants. They proved to be of rather limited use, because some of the associations from West Africa were either no longer active or simply inexistent. Besides, most of the members of these communities had been living in Switzerland already for a long time. An important gap was observed between 'established' migrants and those who had arrived more recently in Switzerland. To avoid being constantly asked for support by countrymen in more precarious situations and for other reasons, as for instance the fear of being perceived as drug traffickers, the established sometimes deliberately did not want any contact with the newcomers, unless they had known each other already in the country of origin.

Again, these gatekeepers coming from migrant's associations could access only a specific segment of the community, because of their contacts with specific social networks. Therefore, we contacted potential interviewees also through social workers or other persons employed in reception facilities for asylum seekers. In a reception centre in Geneva[7] a Guinean night watchman, who spoke several languages, had gained the trust of quite a few young recently arrived men from Western Africa. He was convinced

of the importance of the study and liaised with the researchers. This contact proved to be extremely helpful to convince potential and mostly suspicious participants. In this example, two methods to access a specific population were successfully combined: site selection, which we will discuss in the following section, and the use of a special intermediary. In this study, as well as in other studies among asylum seekers, the help of such gatekeepers proved to be of utmost importance for the mere recruitment of interviewees, as well as the establishment of a trustful setting. It also helped to prevent – at least partially – a sample which was biased towards the better-educated migrants. It is often easier to convince well-educated migrants, as they often have better knowledge of the host country and are more inclined to trust research.

Unfortunately, the snowball method as well as the gatekeeper approach failed when it came to a particular migration pattern. Several interviewed community leaders convincingly pointed out a migration pattern that was related to organised drug networks. These networks enclose especially young, poorly educated and mobile migrants of specific ethnic groups, who have a traditional nomadic background or at least a collective experience as business travellers. According to key informants, these young men are recruited in their country of origin – for example, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone were mentioned – and sent to Europe in order to sell drugs on the streets. Once they had arrived in Switzerland most of them were instructed, by the people who had organised their trip, to file an asylum application. However, though several of our interviewees had admittedly been involved in drug trafficking in Switzerland or elsewhere in Europe, all of them reported that they had been recruited after their arrival and not by traffickers in their country of origin. Thus, it turned out to be impossible to contact anyone who had actually been sent to Europe with the help of criminal networks and who was ready to disclose her or his experience. For our research on the trajectories, this migration pattern would have been particularly interesting, even though most of the community leaders agreed that it was relatively rare. The impossibility to access any migrants concerned, related most probably to the fact that their 'agents' closely control most of them. This made them even more reluctant to participate in an interview than other potential interviewees. Finally, as only few of our interviewers spoke Fulani, Djoula or other idioms, the language was also a barrier, as less educated migrants often did not speak German, French or English.

The site selection strategy

A third strategy to access interviewees is the site selection. This method can be used if the targeted population can be found at an accurately defined

site, for instance special accommodation facilities for asylum seekers or nightclubs for dancers (or gathering places for street children as Empez points out in this book). Researchers can go directly to these sites to contact potential interview partners. The preparatory phase of a former research carried out among potential migrants in Albania offers another example. In Tirana, it was quite well known where the potential migrants and the smugglers met. There were several small bars and cafés where smugglers and migrants would meet in order to discuss the cost of the travel, the services provided by the smugglers or the needed documents. In this example, it proved a successful strategy to look for interview partners at these sites (Dahinden 2001). As mentioned earlier, site selection was used in combination with gatekeepers at reception facilities for asylum seekers. But we also tried to use this strategy to contact cabaret dancers. Some of the interviewers went to nightclubs in order to contact the dancers directly. They distributed flyers and a short description of the study to the dancers. The use of the site selection strategy was however of limited success in this study, as the interviewers were sometimes denied access to the nightclubs by the owners. In some other cantons, intercultural mediators working on aids prevention have access to the cabarets. Some of these mediators overtook the task of distributing the flyers among the dancers, as well as the cabaret owners.

Interviewers, translators and questionnaires

How to study people who do not speak the language of the interview team? As long as migrants do not speak the local language, all communication efforts, for instance during an interview, are highly complicated and susceptible for cultural and linguistic misunderstandings which puts into question the quality of the findings of such studies. Both research teams knew, from previous experiences, that the use of interpreters, translated questionnaires and external interviewers implicates not only a lot of time and money, but also asks for a detailed research plan in order to ensure the quality of the research. But it is not only the quality of simultaneous translations or the translation of the questionnaire that matters; the skills of the interviewers are also of vital importance. We maintain that these aspects are generally underestimated and need detailed consideration. In this section, we will therefore discuss these issues in detail.

Recruitment and training of the interviewers

It seemed indispensable in both studies to conduct the interviews in the languages of the targeted population. First of all, many migrants had not

lived long enough in Switzerland to master one of the Swiss national languages. Secondly, speaking with asylum seekers about illegal ways of entry into Switzerland, and with cabaret dancers about illegal activities, requires an atmosphere of trust and confidence. Conducting the interviews in the language of origin of the interviewee was believed to contribute to this situation of trust. For both studies, interviewers who spoke the language of the targeted research population were recruited. They needed to follow set procedures to ensure reliable and objective data and as 'access difficulties' were calculated beforehand, the interviewers were expected to help accessing potential interviewees. Furthermore, it was planned to involve the interviewers in the translation of the questionnaires.

Sub-Saharan Africans – and West-African migrants in particular – migrate on a rather limited scale to Switzerland and African diasporas in Switzerland are only scarcely researched. It was therefore difficult to find interviewers with optimal knowledge of the research topic and the terrain. Knowing that some newcomers among the less educated migrants were not fluent in English or French, it was important to seek collaboration with speakers of a few native languages (Fulani, Krio, Manding, Susu, Yoruba, etc.) or pidgin. At the same time, the interviewers needed to have at least basic research skills. The team opted for five interviewers with a migration background from the respective areas and four native Swiss interviewers (including the members of the research team), who had good knowledge of various West African communities. All of the interviewers had research experience, but training was necessary to get them acquainted with the questionnaire and the specific topic of the research. The team consisted of four women and five men. In the end, the majority of the respondents – as of the basic population – were male. The number and 'successes' of the interviews varied considerably, which we will discuss in the following section about gatekeepers.

With regard to the research on cabaret dancers, requirements for the interviewers were not only linguistic proficiency in one of the Swiss national languages (German, French or Italian) and one of the languages of the targeted groups, but also the ability to access these communities. Furthermore, knowledge of interview techniques was also required. An advertisement was sent to different university institutes as well as women's organisations on national level. In this advertisement we specified that we were looking specifically for female interviewers, fluent and literate in one of the Swiss national languages, as well as in Russian, Rumanian or Spanish. These languages were chosen because the majority of the cabaret dancers come – as mentioned before – from Eastern Europe and Latin America. We decided to look only for female interviewers based on the assumption that the cabaret dancers would speak more easily and openly about their problems with a person from the same sex. Talking about for instance sexual violence implies feelings of intimacy or shame, which

presumably can be generated more easily when talking to someone of the same sex.[8]

Only later, during the actual selection procedure of the interviewers, did we realize the requirements we formulated were quite contradictory. Having the capacity to access the sex-industry or being familiar with the sex-milieu and therefore being able to access dancers, almost automatically excluded the criteria of having in-depth knowledge of German, French or Italian next to the language of origin. Furthermore, these women almost never had experience in interview techniques. On the other hand, the 'true' bilingual interviewer had almost no knowledge of the sex-industry. This resulted in two types of interviewers: on the one side, we got applications from academically educated women, of Russian or Rumanian origin, with good linguistic proficiency and knowledge of interview techniques and methodological issues. On the other side, we got applications from women who knew 'the business', such as former dancers who had married a Swiss citizen and were looking for work, women working as mediators in the context of aids-prevention, and so on. These women could guarantee access to dancers and might have a high credibility for dancers, but they had almost no knowledge of interview techniques or other methodological aspects. Moreover, they often had limited knowledge of (one of) the Swiss national languages.

Eventually, we worked with 14 interviewers, consisting of both 'types' of women. During the pre-fieldwork period, the interviewers received training in research methods and especially in how to apply the questionnaire. They were also informed about the legal situation of cabaret dancers and equipped with different instruments to facilitate their fieldwork (flyers with information about the research in the different languages, a list of addresses of women's organisations offering help to cabaret dancers in difficulties which could be handed over to the interviewees, and so on).

During the fieldwork, one of the researchers from the SFM contacted the interviewers on a regular basis in order to discuss the interviews. Concretely, each interview has been prepared and discussed in detail, as to guarantee a good quality of the data. By doing this, potential methodological problems could be detected. Problems the interviewers faced during the fieldwork, such as methodological questions, were also discussed. This constant contact with the interviewers ensured the highest professional and ethical standards were maintained. The contact guaranteed that the interviewers were closely accompanied and could – in an atmosphere of trust – discuss ethical questions, which arose out of the interviews. On the other side the researchers could be sure that privacy and confidentiality as well as human dignity were part of the interviews. This was especially important, given the sensitive nature of the research and the potential vulnerability of some of the research participants. If an interview did not meet these standards, it was once more discussed with the inter-

viewer, but not used for data analysis (5 interviews were sorted out because of these reasons). The main problem during the fieldwork was that this supervision and monitoring of the interviewers was much more time consuming than anticipated. The researcher in question was occupied during three months solely with the supervision of and discussion with the interviewers.

Interviewers as gatekeepers

In both studies the interviewers were also deployed as gatekeepers. In addition to the fieldwork, the 'co-ethnic' or at least 'co-linguistic' interviewers acted as key informants for the targeted communities and helped to negotiate access to them. However, using co-ethnic interviewers raises issues of objectivity. It is often assumed that being of the same national or ethnic origin, speaking the same language or sharing a similar cultural background as the interviewed person automatically gives the interviewer an 'inside-status' among the concerned community. This assumption is however highly problematic, and has to be questioned. Kusow (2003), a Somali immigrant in the USA, carried out an ethnographic research on Somali immigrants in Canada. He described in an interesting article how he remained an 'outsider' within the Somali immigrant community, whereas at the same time being very much an 'insider'. Kusow describes how he became a kind of 'suspicious insider', especially in discussions pertaining to politically or culturally sensitive issues. As soon as Kusow revealed being a researcher, the nature of the conversion changed. Although speaking critically about Somalia and the Somalis at first, many started to advise him about the proper things to write about the Somali community in Canada as soon as they knew about his research project. More generally stated, co-ethnic interviewers might be torn between their intellectual knowledge and the loyalty to 'their' immigrant community. This might implicitly encourage them to present their subjects in a more positive light.

The risk of covering problems within ethnic communities increases when the studied community is confronted with negative stereotypes, as observed with the young West African men. They are subjected to various negative perceptions related to black people in general and are, or were – at least at the time of the study – often labelled as 'abusers' of the asylum system and drug dealers. In this situation, migrants from a similar ethnic or national background may be tempted to break the negative image of their compatriots or of members of a community who share the same type of experiences (which is called a 'community of experience' in French). A case we were confronted with during our study can illustrate this point: most of the interviews of one specific well-trained Guinean researcher

lacked any kind of details about the trajectories and only presented 'socially desirable' information about 'his' interviewees. Although it cannot be entirely excluded that the information in these interviews were (partly) related to the type of migrants he met, we decided to stop collaboration, after discussing the issue with him. We felt he had difficulties studying controversial aspects of the trajectories and more generally any feature that might shed a negative light on migrants he probably felt loyal to and he did not want to 'betray'. This example shows that the insider/outsider distinction is far more complicated than the professional literature suggests.

The research team also worked with an obviously more experienced Rwandan researcher, in whose case the mix of aspects he shared with the interviewees – migration background and related experiences – and aspects that differed him from them – not belonging to the same community – seemed to be very beneficial for a confidential interview atmosphere. However, this researcher, as well as his Swiss colleagues, also faced situations in which it was difficult to establish a constructive exchange with the interviewee. According to their own sayings 'some migrants felt freer to talk to interviewers who had no connection whatsoever with their communities, others even had a clear positive opinion of Swiss researchers'. Based on this study, it can be stated there is no general rule when it comes to the ethnic or national background of the interviewer, apart from the fact that common languages and reference points can of course be useful.

Another problem arises from the fact that the defined 'communities'- in terms of ethnicity or nationality – are never homogenous, but often characterised by internal segregation or diffractions along social roles and status, such as gender, social class, political conviction, migrant status and so on. In this sense, a co-ethnic interviewer can never represent the 'whole' community and will thus never be accepted by all its members. His functioning as a gatekeeper will therefore always be limited. In case of cabaret dancers, this is blatantly obvious. A Russian interviewer with an academic background will not easily be trusted by or find access to a Russian sex worker. Their lives are too different and role problems are to be expected. In this line of reasoning, an interview setting across ethnic or national barriers may be more complex (language, stereotypes, references), but not fundamentally different from other interview situations. In any situation, professional expertise, soft skills and empathy of researchers prove to be most relevant elements of success.

Translations and questionnaires

In both studies, the survey instrument consisted mainly of semi-standardised questionnaires. Some open questions provided more information about some important or idiosyncratic issues. It was clearly outlined in the

research design that the questionnaire would be translated into the languages of the interviewers. However, translating questionnaires into different languages is far from being an easy task. For a study to meet the scientific requirements, each respondent should be asked the same question in the same way, in all languages. One of the major problems with cross-linguistic research is to ensure that the questions are comparable across different linguistic groups and that interpretations are not affected by cultural bias. Bloch (1999, 2004) describes how she adopted two techniques simultaneously in order to ensure the translations conveyed the same meaning. The first strategy is called 'translating decentralizing procedure' (Brislin et al. 1973). Both the source and the target language are open to modification. The second strategy is called 'back translation' in which two bilinguals are employed, one translating from the source to the target language and the second blindly translating back from the target to the source language in order to detect differences between the original and the (back) translation in the source language.

We adopted a similar procedure in both studies. First of all, we produced a German version of the questionnaire, which was tested with cabaret dancers speaking either German or English. Apart from language the pre-test revealed a few problematic aspects of the questionnaire that were very important. For instance, if the women were directly asked if they were involved in prostitution, the answer was always 'no'. They did not consider themselves as having the status of a 'prostitute'. However, if they were asked whether they were involved in 'sexual relations with the clients of the nightclubs', they answered more openly. It was then possible to discuss these sexual relations. Bilingual persons translated the first tested version of the questionnaire in their respective languages (French, Russian, Rumanian and Spanish). A second bilingual person then compared the translations to the German version. This person was asked to indicate all text which, according to him/her, could be translated better or more 'culturally sensible'. The two translators then discussed these differences and decided, from case to case, which translation to adopt. Sometimes, the feedback of the translators resulted in a modification of the German version. At the end the interviewers were actively involved in identifying sensitive subjects or mistranslations. Every single question was discussed within the interview team. The interviewers used their Russian, Rumanian and Spanish questionnaire and the research team worked with the German or French version. Not the literal translation was essential, but the meaning of the question. Every question was scrutinised and if necessary, changes were made to the translated and/or the German questionnaire. In some cases, the literal translations differed, but the meaning remained the same.

Raising delicate research issues

Both studies dealt with socially, morally and legally sensitive research issues. Both interviewees may have entered the country illegally or been involved in earning 'extra money' in an illegal way. However, many of the migrants did not always know – at least in the first place – that they would get involved in such illegal actions. In some cases, interviewees only realised upon arrival in the host country how precarious the possibilities for a legalisation of their stay or a professional activity were. In other words they were encouraged either by kinsmen, employers or smugglers to deceive the authorities, e.g. by hiding or changing their identity, their trajectory or forbidden activities (prostitution). This background placed both target groups in a position where they constantly had to – or believed they had to – present their own history in a way to avoid sanctions with potentially far-reaching consequences (expulsion, withdrawal of work permit etc.). In fact, many of the respondents proved to be *poorly informed* about the host country or the functioning of the asylum system. This goes for cabaret dancers in Switzerland as well. Especially first time dancers often had little knowledge of their rights and duties. Asking them about their working conditions meant addressing a 'delicate' topic. The situation gets even more complicated when dancers are in situations of exploitation. Women have been observed to minimize their situation in order not define themselves as 'victims of exploitation' (Kelly 2002). Anyway, asking this kind of questions during interviews needs a basis of trust and highlights the problems in interpreting data out of this kind of interviews.

The fact that most interviewees felt unwanted or stigmatised in the residence country induced additional pressure on the migrants to present a favourable portrait of themselves and their community. In the study on African trajectories, several respondents told us they had been surprised about *the stereotypes and prejudices* they were confronted with as refugees, as Africans, as Muslims, etc. Therefore, they felt constantly incited to give a positive impression of themselves and their communities. Again, the situation of the cabaret dancers showed some similarities. It was striking for instance they never used the term 'prostitute' to describe themselves. They tried to construct a more positive image: that of a dancer, who sometimes offers sexual favours to friends in exchange for gifts and (money) presents. In case of asylum seekers more than an issue of social desirable answering is at stake. Their stay in the host country not only depends on their actual migration history, but also on the way they are able to communicate with the refugee desk and other relevant actors (NGOs, lawyers, etc.). This particular context places a great relevance on their *self-portrayal* and the way they are able to handle this issue in order to increase the chance of being accepted as a refugee, or at least of getting a residence permit on humani-

tarian grounds.[9] Frequently, smugglers or acquaintances also advise on the 'best way' to present asylum cases (Efionayi-Mäder et al. 2005). Consequently, many of our interviewees presented an 'arranged' version of their trajectories (see also Bilger & van Liempt in this book). While some of the respondents distinguished clearly between the version they used to tell the authorities and the 'reality', others got confused about details and over time started to mix up the 'official' and 'unofficial' report of their trajectory. Very often, the established confidence was challenged when the interviewers asked specifications about the trip, because this reminded the respondents of the refugee interview by the refugee authorities.

Different strategies to overcome such difficulties were deployed. Often it was helpful to state once again that our research was absolutely independent of the asylum application and that we understood the fact that some had used another version for the official application. As an example, we assured respondents that we perfectly understood why they had to tell the authorities that they arrived by boat, though we guessed that they actually had come by plane to a neighbouring country of Switzerland and that there was nothing wrong with that. In other cases, the experiences seemed so painful that we decided to skip details, which were not indispensable for a global understanding of the migration process. Interestingly respondents sometimes opened up more easily when they understood that we accepted their reluctance to disclose all the details of their trip; some of them who first refused to talk about a stage of their trajectory later returned to it spontaneously. Another 'trivialisation' strategy consisted in reporting details of other trajectories to avoid that migrants had the impression they disclosed an unacceptable or illegal act we had not heard about yet and therefore betrayed other refugees. When the interviewees understood that some of their migration strategies were already known they felt freer to talk about them.

As we experienced throughout both studies, a well informed, empathic and flexible attitude of the interviewers was an important facilitator in this context. It was interesting to discover with how many different and sometimes unpredictable reactions – before and during the interviews – we were confronted. Obviously, it did some of the respondents good to open up to someone who did not judge their testimonies. Others refused to answer some of the questions. This possibility was offered, as we preferred this to an 'official' report of the trajectory. The research team always explained the purpose of the survey fully and honestly and guaranteed total confidentiality.

Conclusion

When conducting research on migrants in precarious situations, such as

Sub-Saharan refugees and migrant sex workers, all sorts of methodological challenges arise. These challenges can influence the quality of the data and lead to biased findings. Different aspects of two studies conducted in Switzerland were discussed in this chapter, one dealing with asylum seekers, the other with cabaret dancers. In both studies, the main difficulty was to find persons willing to participate in the study. As it concerned sensitive topics – such as the involvement in illegal activities – and as the targeted population often faced different forms of negative stereotypes, it was particularly difficult to motivate potential respondents to participate in the studies. This problem was partly overcome by working closely with trusted gatekeepers who were familiar with the targeted population. Though almost indispensable in this kind of research, such a strategy also has its disadvantages. In general, gatekeepers can only access one segment of the studied population which asks for diversifying the profile of gatekeepers as much as possible in order to be able to cover a wide range of different types of respondents. As far as interviewers were concerned a balanced mix of closeness and distance to the interviewees proved to be successful in gaining their trust. In this respect, a similar background of migration as well as a common belonging to a 'visible' minority group was an asset, while shared nationality or ethnicity was sometimes perceived with apprehension. Besides, the use of co-ethnic interviewers – and gatekeepers – can raise problems of objectivity towards the respondents and in the interpretation in results. Researchers need to be aware of these potential difficulties and develop strategies to tackle them. The methodological challenges presented by research on migrants in precarious situations are obviously not unknown to other studies, but they are certainly more pronounced here. In short, migration research may be more complex implicating multifaceted cumulative difficulties in its approaches, but it is not fundamentally different from other research. We do not need to 'invent' new methodologies, but rather improve the critical reflexivity, which anyway should be a consistent part of the daily work of social scientists.

Notes

1 The study consisted of a quantitative approach of the asylum flows, a policy analysis and an interview-based research part; only the last one will be the subject of this chapter.

2 The term 'migrants' will be used in a wide meaning including all interviewees, whether (former) asylum seekers, refugees, students, undocumented migrants or others. We will however also refer to asylum seekers in particular.

3 This assumption reflects the fact that universities in some countries of origin are indeed not always independent from governments.

4 We cannot discuss this in detail in this chapter. Other cantons, which have not abolished the permit, argue these women will work in the sex milieu anyway.

If they are deprived of their official status however, they will be forced to work as undocumented migrants, which render them even more vulnerable.

5 Switzerland is a state with a strong federal system, which confers a high degree of autonomy to its states (cantons). Police, educational system and social aid, to mention only a few examples, belong to the competence of the cantons. Cantons are allowed to make and enforce laws, as long as they are not in conflict with federal regulations. Switzerland is also famous for its so-called executive federalism: Regarding migration or asylum policy, the federal state issues the laws, but the cantons have a large liberty in how they enforce these laws. In this way, one canton can decide not to issue this specific short term permit anymore, as others continue issuing them. All cantons however have to respect the minimal requirements, which have been defined on federal level. Hence, the 26 Swiss cantons often all have their own regulations for specific issues.

6 Cabaret dancers only have contracts in cabarets on a monthly basis. This means they change their place of work every month, thus travelling through all of Switzerland. Though most refugees and migrant students stay in the same canton, they frequently change their apartments or collective place of living for financial or administrative reasons.

7 Geneva presented itself as an interesting study place, as it hosts the largest reception facility for asylum seekers in Switzerland, with a relatively large proportion of Sub-Saharan inhabitants.

8 We had one male interviewer in our team who did interviews with cabaret owners. He tried to find dancers for interviews as well, but was not able to access even one of them. However, he chose not to adopt a site selection strategy, which would mean he would have to go in the nightclubs and speak to dancers directly. To adopt such a strategy and to frequent nightclubs would have made him almost automatically indistinguishable from clients, as there is an almost exclusively male population in these nightclubs. This would result in a difficult form of 'participant observation', which raises another set of methodological questions and will not be discussed here.

9 This holds true whether they actually have to hide something or not. It is worth noting that some respondents were convinced to *deserve* refugee status though their chances were quite limited, while others who were in a much better position did not have that same hope. A man told us that he assumed only notorious political leaders were accepted as refugees in Western countries.

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