Using Informal Conversations in Qualitative Social Research With People in Situations of Marginalization and Vulnerability

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Abstract

This case study shows how informal conversations and conversational interviews are research-effective and ethically sound methods in qualitative social research, especially with participants living in conditions of social marginalization or vulnerability. These methods can enable adaptable, context-specific, and culturally sensitive dialogue with participants and reduce (though not eliminate) power asymmetries, thus cogenerating information that would not otherwise be accessible. However, these methods are also challenging since they demand the researcher's high involvement with the participants, flexibility, and on-the-spot decisions.

The case study is based on a doctoral research study about "voluntary" return migration programs through 19-month-long fieldwork in Morocco with West and Central African young men and mothers migrating with children. It first began by presenting the research context and aims. Second, it describes the research design and the role of informal conversations and conversational interviews in the data generation process. Third, it considers these methods' ethical implications and practicalities, focusing on consent, transparency, and safeguarding. Fourth, it shows these methods 'in action' in three conversational situations during the fieldwork. Finally, it reflects on the benefits of a naturalistic and relational interview approach to generate meaningful information.

Readers will gain contextualized knowledge and practical insights on the use of conversational interactions in research, understand the different forms of interview as a continuum in a broader "know-how" about dialoguing with participants, going beyond a rigid and clear-cut distinction of interview types, and consider the practicalities and convenience of including them in their research.

Learning Outcomes

Having read this case study, readers should be able to . . .

1. Understand interviews as a relational research practice and the different forms of interviews as a continuum, whereby informal or formal interviews are equally valid research methods (if used rigorously).

2. Analyze how research design has to adjust the research questions and the data generation techniques to the context and the participants.

3. Analyze the practicalities, advantages, and disadvantages of using informal conversations.

4. Evaluate the ethical challenges of using informal conversations, especially if the participants are in conditions of marginalization or vulnerability.

5. Apply all of the above to one's own research.

Case Study

Research Overview and Context

Returning "undesired" foreigners, usually defined along racialized, postcolonial, gendered, and socioeconomic criteria (Kalir, 2022), to their countries of origin is an option widely evoked in political debates about migration in the so-called "Global North." However, those policies are mainly based on Global North countries' perspectives, disregarding migrants' individual intentions, pre-existing grievances and family situations, the contexts of their countries of origin, and, ultimately, the feasibility and long-term sustainability of returning people. Moreover, little is known about the everyday practices of return programs and how the different actors involved experience them.

I became interested in those schemes through years of professional and activist experience in the field of migration. In particular, coordinating a migrant human rights campaign in Latin America and working in legal clinics assisting migrant men and women awaiting deportation in Spain, or who had crossed the Spanish-Moroccan border at the Spanish enclave of Melilla, sensitized me about the ambiguities and grievances related to return policies. On some occasions, I witnessed how painful and conflicted was migrants' decision to return, and I was left wondering in what sense that choice could be defined as "voluntary." I was also puzzled by the return procedure as it seemed more focused on administrative paperwork than on assisting would-be returnees' difficult circumstances and vulnerabilities as migrants in irregular administrative conditions.

I decided to address those issues through my PhD research project. I set up to explore (1) how the decision to return emerges and transforms during migrant men's and women's personal and mobility trajectories, with a focus on how migrants experience the choice and negotiate return with their extended families and (2) how the everyday practices of the return program, and the different institutional actors involved in it, manage would-be returnees' voluntariness and vulnerabilities.

I opted to examine these questions in relation to the International Organization for Migrations (IOM)'s return program from Morocco as it is a relevant case for its dimension, geographical location and geopolitical interest. First, it is among the largest such programs worldwide. It occurs between the regions with the highest number of IOM returns, namely from North Africa as the host region, and towards West and Central Africa as the area of origin (IOM, 2023). Second, it takes place at the threshold of Europe and has been funded mainly by

European countries, including the UK, in the framework of the European externalization of restrictive migration policies. Third, it reveals Morocco's ambivalent stance towards migration (Cherti & Collyer, 2015). In the last three decades, the country has witnessed a sharp increase of foreigners' arrivals through several migratory routes from Sub-Saharan Africa. In response, the Moroccan authorities have, on one hand, issued legislation to integrate those foreigners mostly through two massive regularization campaigns (in 2014 and 2017), but on the other, they have collaborated with European States' and the European Union's demands to control migration by enforcing a harsh "hostile environment" against migrants in irregular condition (Gazzotti & Hagan, 2021). Hence, the return program is at the crossroads of different policy agendas, acting as a tool to allegedly both deter and protect migrants (King & Kuschminder, 2022).

Section Summary

- Migration policies designed in the Global North tend to insufficiently consider the social dynamics of migrants' countries of origin, their long-term effects on those contexts and on migrants' individual and family circumstances.
- Return migration policies are controversial, politicized and publicly available information about them is not comprehensive or systematic.
- The return scheme from Morocco is a relevant research case for its dimension and geostrategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Africa.
- A controversial policy in an antimigration hostile environment can pose challenges and obstacles to constructing and conducting research.

Research Design: Disentangling Social Practices and Power Asymmetries

The research questions (see previous section) address intimate experiences and complex social realities. The first question explores the return decision-making process and the family negotiations surrounding it, thus impinging into the personal and private realm (e.g., migratory aspirations, constraints to migration, returning associated with failure, to name a few). The second one observes the everyday administrative practices of the return scheme, hence the sphere of bureaucratic practices, interinstitutional relations and interpersonal exchanges that may comply with or diverge from the norms.

In designing the methodology, I was interested in capturing the variations, contradictions and negotiations that characterize those social experiences and practices. Return migration decisions can be a long and contradictory processes, transforming over time, and emotionally charged as they entail abandoning personal aspirations. People's stated intentions (e.g., expressing the plan to return in an interview) may not correspond with their subsequent actions (i.e., not traveling back home), and inner motivations can be opaque to individuals themselves (Bourdieu, 1990), hence not accurately rendered in words. Similarly, administrative practices can greatly differ from the norms specified in policy documents and entail conducts or realignments among the institutions and officers involved that go beyond what is codified in norms. Thus, my research could not limit itself to considering explicit and standardized verbal content, as those obtained through structured interviews and surveys or policy formulas, but had to take into account also individual actions that reversed stated intentions and institutional practices that diverged or contravened policy objectives and rules.

Moreover, I conceived the research to be diverse as to its participants and multisited. I planned to include as many participant profiles as possible to reconstruct the different perspectives, interests, practices and experiences surrounding the return program. Hence, I organized to consult public authorities and local administration, international organizations, civil society organizations, and migrant individuals themselves. In turn, accessing those participants required a multisited approach. I knew that the IOM offices were based in a few main cities, while civil society organizations and migrants' shelters operated in multiple locations. Migrants in irregular condition tended to be mobile throughout the territory, as they tried different routes to reach Spain and could be suddenly displaced by police pushbacks.

Therefore, I adopted a qualitative research approach that integrated observation-based and interview-based methods to capture diverging discourses and practices. In particular, in addition to policy documental analysis, I designed to carry out participant observation in several settings (e.g., administrative practices, migrant-officer interactions, migrant-CSO interaction, would-be returnees' interactions with their peers), and various forms of interviews (open-ended semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, conversational interviews) to dialogue with the different participants.

I preferred informal conversations and conversational interviews because they are closest to naturalistic settings, hence favoring participants' spontaneous expression about their different stances towards the return decision and the return program to emerge. Informal

conversations can be observed by researchers without their verbal participation (e.g., being heard) or participatory when researchers dialogue with one or more participants (Swain & King, 2022, p. 2). Conversational interviews overlap with the latter in that they also follow an everyday dialogic form but entail researchers' slightly more directive role in sustaining the conversation and orienting it on specific research topics (Devillard et al., 2012). These three forms of dialogue are not clear-cut research techniques and may overlap. The little difference among them is the degree of researchers' "directionality" (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). Namely, in conversational interviews, researchers explicitly consult participants about research topics, while in participatory informal conversations, the initiative rests almost entirely on the participants. In observed informal conversations researchers do not speak or engage in dialogue, although they participate in the setting through their physical presence.

In all cases, spontaneity in conversations is not achieved effortlessly. It requires the researcher's conscious effort to decenter oneself in favor of participants' expression and the ability to maintain meaningful communication. In culturally diverse contexts, the researcher needs to learn how to navigate different communication codes. In my case, being a polyglot myself and having previous professional experience in Morocco, I was already relatively acquainted with West African migrant men's and women's translanguaging parlance, mixing French or English and idiomatic expressions that came from their native languages or the migratory lingo. Even so, I knew I would have to refine my conversational skills through practice to sound sufficiently familiar. All this effort was worth it because it would reduce power asymmetries and cogenerate rich information.

However, the informality of the conversation could be perceived as empowering or threatening depending on the participants' positionality. For migrant participants, an informal setting was nonthreatening and necessary to dialogue. On the contrary, in Morocco, international organizations and public administration prefer to avoid it and are keen on formal and structured ways of conversation to retain as much control as possible over the narrative. Sometimes, they ask for the interview questions to be sent in advance before authorising an interview. On their part, associations may also be weary of informal exchanges as they suspect the information could be misused and expose them to authorities, since migration is a politicized and controversial issue in Morocco. Hence, I designed open-ended, semi-structured interviews for those participants. I also understood that audio-recording interviews would be challenging in this context, so I opted for quick note-taking during the conversation, when feasible, and writing down summaries soon after every conversation. Ultimately, the interview form is not

only a researcher's choice but also a terrain of power negotiation with participants. I deployed different forms to adapt to contextual constraints and participants' preferences. In the following sections, I will focus on how I used informal conversations with migrant participants.

Section Summary

- The "objects" of this research (personal and family experiences of returning and deficits or barriers in administrative practices) were unsuitable for standardization and needed to be captured in their variations and contradictions. Hence, structured interviews, fixed categories or questions, and exclusive attention to verbal expressions would have engendered poor data, insufficient to answer the research questions.
- A qualitative methodological design integrating observation-based and interview-based methods allows for capturing the variations and contradictions of discourses, practices, interactions, and administrative procedures.
- The researcher prioritized informal conversations and conversational interviews because they are more suited to generating data in naturalistic settings. The main difference between informal conversations and conversational interviews is the degree of the researcher's "directionality" in the conversation.
- Context and participants' characteristics are essential factors in the researcher's choice of interview format.
- The choice of the interview form can also lead to power negotiations with participants: some, such as the migrant participants in this research, may experience informality as more liberating and prefer informal interviews, while others, such as public administration officers, may prefer more formality structured interviews to control the narrative and convey an "official" message.

In the Field: Ethical and Methodological Considerations When Conducting Informal Conversations

Once I started the fieldwork, I witnessed how antimigration policies in Morocco created legal, economic, and social barriers forcing migrant men and women to live in precarious conditions and how this hampered my research. Migrants were often more concerned with getting by than having time for an interview. They were also diffident, weary, or defensive towards questions, given the hostile social control they experienced daily. In public spaces, they felt overexposed and vulnerable to potential police interventions. I soon realized I needed to

rely on civil society organizations' support to find safe places to interact with migrant research participants. Thus, after a few months of multisited research, during which I consulted different institutions and social actors, I opted to be based at a migrants' shelter in North Morocco, near the border with Algeria. It offered 24/7 hospitality and assistance to irregular migrants who had just arrived in Morocco or were pushed back by Moroccan police towards Algeria or needed to rest or recover from illnesses. Paradoxically, I could better access mobile people by becoming immobile in a place where migrants' trajectories converged repeatedly.

Through the shelter, I contacted potential returnees and followed their return process. Among my migrant research participants, I could consult 65 people enrolled in the return program (58 males, 7 females; mostly aged 18–30) and 19 people considering return (14 males, 5 females; mostly aged 18–30) from 13 West and Central African countries, mainly Guinea, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Nigeria.

Given the defensive attitude that formal interviews generated in participants, even more so if I audio-recorded them (with participants' consent), I soon abandoned both intentions. In this context of heightened marginalization and everyday antimigrant violence, not recording was the only way to establish meaningful conversations, as observed elsewhere (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). Overall, I conducted only 12 open-ended semi-structured interviews (11 audio-recorded), all at the beginning of fieldwork. Later, I practiced many hybrid forms of informal conversations and conversational interviews (both group and individual) that occurred in a variety of settings related to the shelter: taking tea in groups or washing dishes at the shelter, sitting together on the shelter's patios, walking back and forth from the shelter to offices of the IOM and other institutions, visiting offices for different administrative procedures, or visiting the dwellings of migrant mothers and their children assisted by the shelter. All this meant participating in hundreds of interactions.

Social research with people experiencing marginalization and vulnerability requires careful ethical assessment. First, I considered if the precarity of those social conditions undermined participants' capacity to consent. In principle, I recognized that vulnerability *per se* did not eliminate it. I wanted to avoid diminishing migrant people by the sheer fact of facing adverse circumstances (Baker et al., 2024) as I was aware of the misuse of 'vulnerability' as a demeaning social and policy category (Brown et al., 2017). Secondly, I identified basic protection requirements. Choosing the shelter as the primary research environment offered safety and physical integrity guarantees necessary to enable participants' decisions. I also

specified *exclusion criteria for safeguarding and practical purposes*: I could not include as participants people with severe mental and physical distress, significant learning disability, children below and including the age of 15 years, or people who lacked a minimum knowledge of French or English or Spanish.

Thirdly, I carried out *informed consent as a process at different levels and in parallel with offering information and accountability*. I first presented the research to the shelter directive team and obtained the authorization to stay there as a blanket consent. Then, I presented my research to the staff and migrant guests. I made the research aims and methods clear and understandable to different audiences (through different and culturally/age-sensitive information sheets and explanatory meetings) and provided contact details. This information was reiterated informally on various occasions, especially to newcomers, so it was shared knowledge among those staying at the shelter. When I first approached or was approached by a person considering a return, hence relevant to my research, I took time to explain my research and role at the shelter again. I then asked for an opt-in informed consent through a written or oral procedure. I had obtained university ethical clearance for the oral procedure in case a participant felt uncomfortable with the forms. It proved helpful. However, as I stayed at the shelter for several months and interacted with various returnees on multiple occasions, I could not and did not repeat the consent procedure each time I had an informal conversation (in any of the three forms considered in this case study). I allowed the spontaneity of informal discussions, and only later did I double-check participants' consent if I doubted that a person could have forgotten about it. I also remained available at the shelter for participants to withdraw their consent (*ongoing consent*) or share any comment or critique (*accountability*).

As the shelter had many visitors and guests and only a fraction was interested in returning, I did not consider all people there as research participants. Hence, I did not ask for informed consent from everybody. It would not have been feasible for the high volume of people and their, sometimes, rapid turnover. Yet, there were cases where people passing by could make a quick revelatory remark about migration or returning, which became an observed informal conversation. In those cases, it was unfeasible to interrupt the situation or pursue the participant to explain the research and ask for informed consent. Hence, these were the few exceptional cases of unaware contributors to the study. Being from people passing by, I did not know them, so I annotated those remarks anonymously.

While requiring consent and after informal conversations, I reminded my interlocutors that I would protect the confidentiality of what they shared with me. I practiced anonymization through all research stages and registered only information relevant to my research questions. I also guaranteed fundamental care and safeguarding: I could suspend a conversation if I perceived the participants' well-being was affected or if they asked to stop, and refer to relevant support at the shelter, if needed and agreed with participants.

Soon after a conversation and whenever possible during the day, I withdrew to a quiet place and jotted down my fieldwork notes. At first, this unfamiliar activity could raise curiosity or suspicion. However, as mutual trust grew, everybody got used to my intermittent hasty scribbling. I annotated the conversations in the language it happened (i.e., mainly in French, sometimes in English, rarely in Spanish, and mentioned relevant translanguaging expressions), used pseudonyms and anonymized identifying details. I summarized the main topics discussed, mirroring the order of the conversation as much as possible, described the emotional tone and relevant gestures that added meaning, and highlighted the direct quotes I had retained. I handwrote the information in 10 fieldwork notebooks, totaling almost 1,500 pages (including data from all participants and all techniques). Once I left the field, I selected six notebooks and digitally transcribed them, resulting in 600 pages of digital text.

Although these notes did not have the same literal precision as audio recordings, I could validate and nuance the data through reiteration, triangulation of the sources, and saturation (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). Moreover, I quickly realized that migrant participants' idiomatic parlance (through a mixture of vernacular turns of phrase, repetitions, and simple syntax mixed with allusions and ellipses) made verbatim transcriptions not immediately intelligible to a reader who did not know the context. Hence, in this case, audio-recording did not automatically guarantee information accuracy.

Section Summary

- Researching people experiencing marginalization and vulnerability requires extra careful ethical assessment, particularly to ensure participants' understanding of the research and expression of free consent, which can be given in written or oral form (both forms need previous university ethical clearance).
- Experiencing social conditions of marginalization or vulnerability does not automatically erase participants' capacity to consent. However, it is essential to specify exclusion criteria for safeguarding and practical purposes.

- The researcher quickly abandoned formal interviews with participants, especially if audio-recorded, because participants experienced them as threatening.
- It is crucial to annotate conversations in fieldnotes as soon as possible to register them accurately, summarising the contents, reflecting the order of the topics, reporting some direct quotes (where possible) and relevant observational information, and anonymising the data.
- Accuracy of annotation, reiteration, triangulation of the sources, and saturation all contribute rigor to informal conversations as qualitative research methods.

Informal Conversations in Action

I present examples from my fieldwork that illustrate the relevance of informal conversations to the research.

Migration as an Adventure: Informal Conversations While Sipping Tea

At the beginning of the fieldwork, in October 2019, I realized that young migrant men and women preferred to refer to themselves as adventurers rather than migrants. They associated being a migrant with the demeaning condition of being undocumented and marginalized. "I cannot wait to obtain a passport to get rid of the stigma of being a migrant," sighed a young man while we rested in the shelter's patio garden to avoid the scorching summer heat. In fact, having a passport would not have granted him a residence permit in Morocco, so he would still have been a migrant for the authorities, but not an undocumented one. Although not a solution, that wish exposed the humiliation of being labeled as migrant.

The idea of traveling and migrating as adventure is a widespread social narrative in West Africa (Bredeloup, 2013; Bachelet, 2019). Self-defining as an adventurer is a way of claiming a status vis-à-vis peers and society. I wanted to understand how my research participants defined the adventure and expressed their motivations to migrate or return, the traveling experience, and the physical and emotional demands of being in irregular condition through this prism. Exploring those matters through formal interviews and questions had little effect, because participants were not used to explain the adventure, and ended up stating generalities. Spontaneous conversations could better reveal the breadth of this notion. Sipping tea in the afternoon thus became a privileged occasion to interact informally and nonintrusively with young men and women at the shelter. For one hour or more, staff and guests chatted while

drinking two or three rounds of tea, according to Guinean customs. The hardships of migration were a recurrent subject of conversation. "Adventure minimizes you," pondered sadly a young woman on one occasion, which was echoed by a man's exclamation: "Adventure destroys you." On another occasion, when I complimented a man from an anglophone country for this articulate French, he told me proudly: "In the adventure, we learn all languages." This revealed a positive side of adventure, as a discovery and an opportunity to develop new skills. Frequently, teatime passed with endless variations of the same joke about who had the status of "the great" (le grand) among them and was thus worthy of respect by all the youngsters (les petits). Poignantly, the status was not assigned based on age, as would have been the case in their countries of origin, but on the time spent in the adventure. Hence, resilience in the adventure was also a source of authority and respect. Over time, witnessing the various uses of the term adventure in those informal conversations unfolding without my input (i.e., observed informal conversations) allowed me to detect the breadth of the idea and experience of adventure. This was relevant to my research since it was within this perspective that participants framed the decision to return.

Therefore, informal conversations were essential in various ways. First, they offered rich information that complemented the (few) formal interviews and enabled me to grasp and describe the adventure. Secondly, they facilitated 'impregnation' (Olivier de Sardan, 2008), namely progressively absorbing and being absorbed in my participants' views, which then helped me to reformulate my interview questions about returning in culturally sensitive, context-specific ways that engaged the participants.

Agonising Over the Decision to Return: An Informal Conversation Walking Back From an IOM Office

Idris, a Guinean young man in his early twenties, was considering returning home. He had already enrolled in the IOM's return program but did not know if his return procedure was progressing. Hence, he spent several days at the migrants' shelter, while staff obtained information about his situation. During this time, he agreed to an interview with me about his decision, and we found a quiet room with two comfortable chairs to talk with ease. However, soon after we started talking, I sensed he was increasingly uneasy. He was reticent to talk about himself, gave only general answers, and tensed up even more when I took my notebook to scribble some notes, although he had previously agreed to it. So, I decided to suspend the conversation.

That same morning, Idris had to go to the IOM office to rectify some information, so I suggested I accompany him. During the walk, we chatted about things for sale on the sidewalk, Moroccan cities, and music, as he gradually opened up. Once we reached the office, I waited outside while he worked out his paperwork. When he exited the office, he confirmed that all was sorted, and the return procedure was underway. On the way back, his attitude changed, and he became eager to confide in me. Perhaps the idea that his return was now a real prospect stirred him, and he felt the need to express his inner torment. So, throughout the walk, he did most of the talking, while I mostly listened and spoke only when the conversation required it. Little by little, he expressed his regret at returning and abandoning the dream of a better life in Europe, his pain at leaving his adventurer friends, and the urgent need to return to assist his mother, who had fallen ill. He wanted to be a "good son" and felt obliged to return. "My mother gave everything to me, she kept me in her womb for nine months … how can I refuse to care for her now?" He resented his fellow migrants' disapproval: "My friends don't understand me, so I cannot tell them I will return."

We conversed fluently, in a personal way, and at the end, upon arrival at the shelter, he thanked me for listening. I thanked him for his trust, repeating my commitment to confidentiality. I added that the conversation had also answered some of the questions I wanted to ask in the interview earlier. Therefore, I asked if I could write down parts of the conversation. After he confirmed his consent, I took notes that were not a verbatim rendering of his words, but described his circumstances and return motives. Although later, in the doctoral thesis, I did not present his case, this participatory informal conversation nourished my corpus of data. It helped me conceptualize the decision to return as a relational choice and a conflict of loyalty (to the family, peers, and personal aspirations).

Migrant Mothers' Experience of Return: A Conversational Interview Walking Back From the Medina

Walking proved a mundane activity conducive to many meaningful interactions during my fieldwork. On one such occasion, while I was walking back from the market in the Medina with some would-be returnee mothers, they started discussing how difficult it was to return and settle down as mothers. "If I return, I will not only be my children's mother," one said. Other echoed this idea, adding: "Yes, I will have to care for my own mother, but also for my partner's father who is sick and needs medicines.… While I'm here in Morocco, I can choose how much I spend for my children [who were with her] and how much I send home [in the country of

origin]. But if I return, everyone will expect me to support them." This spontaneous exchange was relevant to my interest in the family negotiations surrounding return and gave me the opportunity for a conversational interview. I took part in their discussion and, while adjusting to the pace and inevitable digressions of a conversation, I posed specific questions about their extended families' economic expectations. I thus gained insights about their complex family arrangements, the tensions and competitions among different members, with a richness of details and emotions that a formal interview would have hardly attained. This conversational interview shed light on the return process as a gendered experience.

This type of "conversation with a motive" (Swain & Spire, 2020) is not merely a discursive way of "applying" a predetermined list of questions or an interview guide, but it requires adjusting to the pauses, surprises, detours, and reiterations proper to human conversations without forgetting the themes of interests and while adapting them to the tone of the exchange.

Section Summary

- Informal observed conversations enabled the researcher to gradually absorb participants' cultural and personal views, which answered some of her interrogations without asking participants directly, and they also helped refine further interview questions.
- Before, during, and after an interview, it is crucial that the researcher pays attention to how the interviewee feels, listens emphatically, and gives time to build up trust so that the participant will engage in the conversation meaningfully and consensually.
- Many informal interviews took place while walking, and researchers need to be skilled in judging when the moment is right to probe further without disrupting the conversation so that the spontaneity and depth of the exchange continue.

Lessons Learned

Overall, informal conversations played an eminent role in my research and often were the only way to carry it out. Employing them will depend on the research questions, context, and participants' circumstances. Still, they are adaptable and suitable methods to coproduce data, with participants experiencing social marginalization, vulnerability, and insecurity insofar as they are conducted in an ethical and culturally sensitive manner.

The three forms of conversational exchanges presented in this case study show how enabling participants' spontaneity and involvement in conversations meaningful to them is crucial for relevant data to emerge. This requires researchers' willingness and ability to reformulate research questions, that may pertain to scholarly debates alien to participants, into interview and conversational questions that generate discussion. By so doing, I renounced the comfort and relative power of posing "my questions" to venture into the taxing terrain of negotiating and adapting them to those of the participants. Had I not done so and posed questions employing the policy categories of the return program to migrant participants, I would perhaps have had the illusion of control, but participants would not have opened up and contributed anything significant. Similarly, I had to abandon the assurance of audio recordings because they were neither ethically nor practically feasible, which facilitated building trust. All this does not mean that power asymmetries are neutralized, but that I reduced them by limiting my "directive" role in setting the conversation's format, roles, topics, and vocabulary.

Informal conversations point to the fundamental continuum between interview and observation and even question the border between them. To become intelligible, the verbal messages of an interview need to be integrated with the tone, the pauses, and the gestures, all of which can nuance or reverse the meaning of uttered words. Hence, verbal and observational data cannot be easily disentangled. This is even more the case when participants are not proficient in the language they are using; their parlance mixes idiomatic expressions and communication codes of their language of origin, and they are rooted in worldviews different from those of the researchers. Integrating different types of data (speech and action), methods (interview-based and observation-based) and formats (structured and unstructured) is crucial to shed light on the complexity of social realities, such as the return decision and the return migration scheme.

Undoubtedly, informal conversations also require considerable effort from the researchers. Exercising less directionality can feel unsettling or disorienting, as I sometimes felt when balancing adaptation to the participants and pursuing research objectives in a dialogue. Maintaining informal conversations also requires mastering a repertoire of context-specific and culturally savvy ways of asking and dialoguing, and adapting a broad interview canvas (canevas d'entretien) (Olivier de Sardan, 2008, p. 59) to each interlocutor. To achieve this, I dedicated protracted time to familiarize myself with participants and engage in more informal conversations to imbue or "impregnate" myself in local views and practices (Olivier de Sardan, 2008), similar to what observation does. Being unable to audio record meant my doubling

between listening-participating in dialogues and detecting-remembering the salient elements to take notes on later. This demanding effort is not guarantee of the complete accuracy of the notes. However, taking detailed notes as soon as possible after the conversation, triangulating sources and information, reiterating conversations, and reaching the saturation point ensure building the necessary rigor for qualitative social research.

Section Summary

- In some social contexts, for example those marked by violence, precarity, or vulnerability, informal conversations are the only practicable methods to generate meaningful data.
- Informal interviews can reduce power asymmetries if they enable participants' spontaneous expression through a culturally appropriate, ethically respectful, and dialogic interaction.
- Despite the advantage of generating rich data, exercising less directionality in informal interviews can be unsettling or disorienting for the researcher.
- Being unable to audio record conversations entails the researcher's effort to listen and participate in dialogues, while remembering the salient elements to record in notes as soon as possible.

Conclusion

This case study has discussed the benefits of using informal conversations and conversational interviews as methods in qualitative research and some of the ethical and methodological complexities involved. It illustrates how they can be employed to enable data generation in naturalistic settings by focusing on the example of a doctoral research study in Morocco with a particular group of vulnerable and marginalized people—migrant men and women in irregular condition and wishing to return home. It encourages a greater use of these methods in qualitative research in general, not only in ethnographies.

Informal conversations are a flexible method and have the advantage that they can take place almost anywhere (e.g. walking back from a market to a refugee centre). However, they can be challenging as they require high involvement with participants, adaptability, reflexivity, and in-the-moment decision-making about when and where to engage with participants, which areas to probe and which questions to use.

One of the repercussions of using informal conversations is that it complicates obtaining prior informed consent. Asking participants to sign a prepared written consent form is often

insensitive and impracticable. Still, the researcher must inform people about the research, be as transparent as possible, ensure safeguarding, accountability, and confidentiality, treat participants with respect and dignity, and offer them alternative ways to express consent (e.g., oral consent procedure) or rectify it (consent as a process).

Ultimately, employing informal conversations will depend on the research questions, methodological approach, context, and participants' circumstances. Informal conversations can be used to complement other research methods. They do not unvaryingly produce more authentic or richer data than formal interviews. However, by getting closer to individuals' experiences, values and perceptions, they frequently do so. Most of all, sometimes informal conversations are the only way to generate data, especially with people who are vulnerable and marginalized, wary of official authorities, and who distrust formal recordings of their words.

Discussion Questions

- What are the main ethical concerns involved in conducting research when using informal conversations?
- What particular methodological issues do informal conversations pose?
- What are the advantages of using informal conversations over more formal interviews?
- What are some of the challenges of using informal conversations?
- What contexts, or participants' circumstances, are informal conversations particularly well suited for?

Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. How can informal conversations be recorded?
   A. Write them down in fieldnotes. - CORRECT
   B. There is no need, as the researcher can memorize them.
   C. Have a secret digital recorder running during the conversation.

2. What are adequate ways of obtaining participants' consent to take part in the research?
   A. There is no need to obtain consent.

B. Explain the research in ways that the participants can understand, clarify what they consent to, and then ask them to consent in writing or via an oral procedure if they are uneasy with written documents. - CORRECT

C. Explain the research in ways that the participants can understand, clarify what they consent to, and ask them to sign a consent form; otherwise, they won't be able to participate.

3. Are informal conversations rigorous enough for scientific research?
   A. No, because they are not audio-recorded, nor a verbatim record.
   B. Yes, because any information the researcher can extract and remember is useful.
   C. Yes, in so far as they are described and summarized as soon as possible after taking place, and give an accurate summary of what was said. Preferably they also include some quotations of the participant's direct words, although this is not essential. - CORRECT

4. Are conversational and informal interview forms "easier" to carry out compared with formal or structured interviews?
   A. Yes, because the researcher does not need to prepare them.
   B. No, because they suppose the researcher's effort to improvize.
   C. No, because they require the researcher's ability to adapt to the participants' context and express questions in culturally sensitive and meaningful ways for them, while maintaining a conversation—all of which requires on-the-spot judgement and adaptation. - CORRECT

Further Reading

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