

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Description

SAHWA Ethnographic fieldwork is one of the two main pillars of the SAHWA Project (the other one being the SAHWA Youth Survey: it consists in producing qualitative data related to the SAHWA Research questions to allow for the writing of many upcoming deliverables (scientific papers, policy papers, etc.). This deliverable is therefore the first part of the data collection on which the SAHWA relies.

This document offers an overview of the SAHWA Ethnographic fieldwork as part of the data collection. To do so, the following explanations discuss ethnography as a research strategy, its limitations and implications as well as its relevance for the SAHWA Project (i). A justification for each ethnographic research technique is then elaborated (ii) as well as a short description of each technique (iii). Finally, an overview of the work carried out per technique will help to classify each technique in each country (iv).

1. ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK AND SAHWA PROJECT

a) Ethnography as a research strategy

Ethnography is necessarily an open and dialogic mode of social investigation, and thus resists easy codification. Karen O'Reilly gives a 'minimal definition' of ethnography as:

"...iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study): drawing on a family of methods; involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures); watching what happens; listening to what is said; asking questions; and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience; that acknowledges the role of theory, as well as the researcher's own role; and that views humans as part object/part subject". (K. O'Reilly, Ethnographic Methods, 2005: 2)

Therefore, ethnography to involve the observation of those we are researching and writing about. By living with, or through repeated visits to those we research, ethnography provides the main means through which we - as researchers - can get close to young people and their ways of living. Ethnography allows us as researchers to know in detail and in-depth how they (young Arabs in this case) experience and understand their lives.

Talking, listening and observing young people in the places where they live, work and play, is the main aim of the SAHWA ethnographic perspective. The different tasks related to ethnographic fieldwork (focus groups, life stories and focused case studies) will provide rich and meticulous data relating to the patterns, problems and complexities of young people's individual and collective perspectives. At same time, it will lead us to a better understanding of their experiences of multiple transitions (biographical, cultural, political...): this includes their engagement with civil society (e.g. extra-institutional political and civic participation) and the meanings they give to their engagement.

The success of the methods and techniques used actually depends on the conditions in each country of study. Each case study implied doing fieldwork for at least three months (undertaken in one block of time or spread over several months. As a rule of thumb, each case study has involved between forty five days of fieldwork.

Within SAHWA qualitative fieldwork points towards a multi-sited team work. In classical settings of multi-sited ethnography, the ethnographer travels from localisations to localisations (country to country for instance). In the case of SAHWA, different local researchers conducted fieldwork in their own countries. Once data is collected, other members of the SAHWA research team will analyse and use this data, jointly with the ones who conducted fieldwork.

In multi-sited ethnography the researcher may follow for instance the people, the metaphor, the plot or story, the life or biography (as life stories has achieved), the conflict OR 'the Thing'(Marcus 1995: 105-111). Different kinds of national and transnational groups of researchers have been working to produce primary data on the questions of youth in comparative settings. Therefore, SAHWA Ethnographic fieldwork focuses on the different spaces and times as well as cultures of the youth living in the Arab Mediterranean region.

b) SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork

SAHWA Ethnographic fieldwork has been carried out following two main stages: on the one hand, conceptualisation and methodological approach and, on the other hand, completion of holistic focus groups so as to identify the issues which matter to young people in the region.

Stage 1: Conceptualisation

The UdL team, leading the Ethnographic fieldwork, delivered the conceptual framework and methodological approach (Deliverable D1.1 Concept Paper) for the SAHWA project to all partners in September 2014. This includes research questions, conceptual framework for the SAHWA Background papers (Deliverable D1.2) and significant bibliographical references (mainly in Arabic and French) about local specificities. On this basis, each partner from the countries of study drafted a research plan based on the SAHWA research questions and objectives.

Case studies were designed so as to take into consideration as much as possible all research questions (including cross-cutting themes such as gender, mobility or public policies and international cooperation). They may be unique in terms of their geographical location (rural, semi-urban and urban areas), substance or nature of the young people's multiple transitions involved. Research plans also elaborated specific approaches according to the fieldwork plan and techniques discussed and agreed during the Rabat meeting (June 2014)

The final step of this stage was the agreement on every research plan and the different qualitative techniques to be implemented in the next stage: this was done during the Tunis Seminar (February 2015).

Stage 2: Identification of Arab youth's topical issues and implementation

The second stage started month 16 (April 2015) with the completion of holistic focus groups to identify the issues that matter most among young people. This design established a minimum of three focus groups formed by 8 to 10 young people and one focus group formed by 8 to 10 stakeholders (people with professional or personal contacts with young people: teachers, NGOs, social workers, politicians, community managers...). SAHWA research questions were the basis for thematic discussions in these focus groups.

According to the conceptual framework, the main variables to choose the young people were: a) cohorts consistent with the age groups of the survey (15-19; 20-24; 25-29); b) gender balance and c) socioeconomic and family background. These dimensions aim at reflecting the diversity of young people in the region.

As a result, 25 focus groups were conducted (see Table 1 for details). After the focus groups were conducted, some young people coming from these focus groups were selected to build up a life story for each of them. Such a task consisted in following up the

young person in their everyday environment. As a result 24 life stories reports were obtained concerning young people aged 16-20 years; 21-25 years; 26-30 years (see Table 1 for details).

From month 16 (April 2015) to month 18 (June 2015), ethnographic work focused on one group of young people to compose a Focused Ethnographies. Focused ethnographies include the implementation of participant observation, field notes and narrative interviews as additional methodological tools. The result was 11 focused ethnographies (see Table 1 for details) of several young groups. The selection of these young groups took into consideration formal organisations (activists or NGOs workers) and informal peer groups as rappers or *Hittistes*.

2. SAHWA ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA COLLECTION

The qualitative data collection entails a variety of ethnographic fieldwork reports (Focus Groups, Life Stories and Focused Ethnographies on Youth Groups) as well as different techniques (Narrative Interviews, Go-along method and Video-Recorded Interviews) in each country. Each type of ethnographic fieldwork report takes into account a specific/various specific objective(s) related to research questions.

Focus groups for instance help to determine representations and self-representations, and young people's values in the five countries of study. On the other hand, life stories (implementing the techniques of narrative interviews, the Go-along method and video-recorded interviews) help to clarify young people's life conditions, aspirations and trajectories. Finally, the focused ethnography tackles youth agency in Arab Mediterranean countries. Each of these methods is better described and elaborated hereafter.

a) Focus groups

Focus groups have become an important research tool for social scientists as well as those working as evaluators, in the fields of public policy, advertising and communication. There are many definitions of a focus group in the literature, but features such as organised discussion, collective activity, social events and interaction identify the contribution focus groups make to social research.

Powell et al define a focus group as "a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research" (1996: 499). Hence, the key characteristic that distinguishes

focus groups is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants. Posts to be clarified, the focus or discussion groups is usually considered as 'a specific technique within the wider group interviews aimed at obtaining qualitative information (Morgan, 1988: 12). The technique of focus groups or discussion occupies a place somewhere between the two main ways of obtaining qualitative information in the social sciences: individual interview techniques and observational participation techniques.

As a form of qualitative research, focus groups are group interviews, although not in the sense of an alternation between the researcher's questions and answers of the research participants. Instead, there is a dependence based on the interaction within the group, based on the themes provided by the researcher, who typically takes the role of moderator. Fundamental data produced by focus groups are transcripts of group discussions. In social sciences, focus groups allow interviewers to study people's perceptions and self-perceptions in a more natural conversation pattern than typically occurs in a one-to-one interview. They can be used for learning about young main issues, conflicts and perceptions.

b) Life Stories

The life story is one of the older techniques used in social sciences for collecting personal and social data. It consists of an individual's narrative about his/her personal experiences over time, normally based on successive oral interviews between the interviewer (a researcher) and the interviewee (a member of the social group under investigation). The autobiographical imagination is the creative cooperation between a subject and a researcher who are engaged in the construction of writing on subjectivity (Feixa, 2006). Even if the form may be literary, the content is cognoscitive: reading social history through a life story (Ferrarotti, 1980). The life story should be distinguished from the life history. While the first refers to an objective trajectory of an individual in a particular space and time, expressed in verifiable facts and events, the second refers to the subjective elaboration of this trajectory, expressed through an interpersonal dialogue, a personal narrative that includes self-consciousness and reflexivity.

In SAHWA, the aim of these life stories is to develop a holistic approach to obtain a general picture of life's trajectories and the discourses about the main issues in everyday life as young people understand them. The method of selection of the life stories of protagonists started in March 2015 (Month 15) with the completion of holistic focus groups to identify the issues that matter most among young people.

In every country, two young people (a young man and a young woman) were selected from among the participants in the focus groups to follow and build up their life story. Variables for choosing these young people according with the conceptual framework detailed in the Concept Paper were: a) age of between 20 and 29, consistent with the age groups of the survey; b) gender balance; and c) taking into consideration the socioeconomic and family backgrounds to achieve the necessary diversity. Through the implementation of these rules, the different ethnographic teams have collected 22 life stories to write reports on (6 in Algeria, 4 in Egypt, 2 in Lebanon, 4 in Morocco and 6 in Tunisia). These life stories have been produced implementing the technique of narrative interview mentioned above. At least four narrative interviews have been conducted to obtain the data and, at same time, follow up the young person in their everyday environment to build up the life stories.

c) Narrative interviews

The narrative interview (NI), the main technique used in the SAHWA Project to produce written Life Stories, is a non-standardised interview technique the main goal of which is the reconstruction of the interviewee's experience, according to his/her subjective system of values. The interviewee builds a story, a narrative, of her/his experience; these stories reconstruct the time and space of the interviewee's everyday life, his/her orientations and his/her projects and strategies. The NI reveals aspects that are particularly relevant when it comes to the relationship between individual experience and the social world.

In short, the specificity of this interview technique is linked to the characteristics of the narration as a fundamental and social means of communication with specific traits. Its effectiveness is based on the interviewee's ability to narrate – an activity usually practiced in daily life, albeit under distinct circumstances – which is here inserted into a different frame. While NIs reveal much of the interviewee's social background, values orientations and past experience, beyond this, the rules that govern narration allow a great degree of control over the interviewee's narrative choices when compared to a usual open interview. From this point of view, a narrative interview becomes a life story when it meets five criteria:

1. **Interaction:** it must be the result of the interaction between researcher and informant;
2. **Globality:** it should give an overview of biographical history;
3. **Orality:** it should reflect the transition from speech to writing;

4. **Multidimensionality:** it should bring together objective and subjective aspects (values and practices);

5. **Advertising:** it must have extension into public areas (academic, community, social).

d) Focused ethnographies

The focused ethnography on groups of young people improved the traditional techniques of ethnographic fieldwork: observation, participant observation, informal chats and conversations and fieldnotes. The main source to produce a focused ethnography is fieldnotes as core tool of ethnographic studies and should be kept by field researchers for the duration of the fieldwork period. There are many different ways of recording fieldnotes and writing styles will differ substantially from case to case and researcher to researcher. But fieldnotes depends on participant observation, a type of data collection method typically done in the qualitative research paradigm.

It is a widely used methodology in many disciplines, particularly in cultural anthropology, less so in sociology, communication studies, human geography and social psychology. Its aim is to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals (such as a religious, occupational, sub cultural group, or a particular community) and their practices through an intensive involvement into people's cultural environment, usually over an extended period of time. The method originated in the field research of social anthropologists, especially Bronisław Malinowski in Britain, the students of Franz Boas in the U.S.A., and in the later urban research of the Chicago School of sociology.

The main objective of the Focused Ethnographies is to introduce people to the everyday life of young peer group in their locations taking into consideration the main activities of the group. The groups are representative of youth agency in the region and allows us to discover other important issues related to young people in Arab Mediterranean societies which are not necessarily part of the SAHWA objectives, research questions or hypothesis.

3. DIFFICULTIES

The main difficulty to carry out an ambitious research plan as SAHWA Ethnographic fieldwork is the coordination of the different ethnographic national teams. Reaching an agreement on methodologies, techniques and main research questions between scholars with diverse backgrounds have been achieved through a fluent and continuous

communication via e-mails with the National Coordinators. In addition to that, the edition and internal publication of a SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork Handbook was of crucial help as it led to clarify conceptual differences between the teams.

On other other hand, one can notice the difference in the final number of the reports of the dataset from country to country: this has to do with differences of budget and human resources of every team. Beyond that, the agreement established in Rabat meeting (June 2014) was that every team were formed of 3 researchers - one of them as coordinator-, every team was made of different numbers of researchers (Algeria: 5 researchers, Egypt: 3 researchers, Lebanon: 3 researchers, Morocco: 6 researchers and Tunisian: 3 researchers).

Another important difficulty is related with two main aspects of current socio-political situation in the region. On the one hand, some important topics were so sensitive that they could not be mentioned during certain interviews, especially in Focus Groups. Political participation, gender or religious issues triggered several inconveniences during the research both for young informants and researchers. This led some fieldworkers to forget about these topics in order to be able to keep on conducting fieldwork. On the other hand, administrative and bureaucratic difficulties have impeded the implementation of some ethnographic techniques as Google Engine Map, photography or video.

Other difficulties were related with the innovative character of the project. The diversity and ambiguity of the ethnographic approaches joint with the diverse backgrounds of the researchers involved has hampered the equality of the reports.

Table 1: Reports in data set by country and partners

Number of reports in data set by country				
	Focus groups	Life stories	Narrative interviews	Focused ethnographies
Morocco	4	4	4	3
Tunisia	4	6	-	3
Algeria	9	8	3	1
Egypt	4	3	4	2
Lebanon	4	3	-	2
TOTAL	25	24	11	11