

LIFE STORIES IN SAHWA ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

by

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The objective of this document is introducing the life stories as tool to obtain qualitative data in the Sahwa project. The aim is to provide the reader an understanding of the technique in the project as a method to collect primary qualitative data to be used by every researcher in Sahwa project. The life stories are an important way to collect data about youth narratives and a way to understand their position in social structure as a whole. It helps us to clarify everyday life conditions, aspirations and trajectories of young people related to thematic perspectives of Sahwa project in the analysis stage. In the first section, the text provides a discussion about ethnography as research strategy and the view of ethnographic fieldwork research in Sahwa project. The next section contents the justification of using life stories to ensure scientific coherence for the complete data qualitative and quantitative collection and a short description of the technique and the selection method of the informants for life stories. Finally, the aim is to provide a general view of the video-recorded interviews forming part of the qualitative data collection and a short profile of the young protagonist of the video-recorded life stories.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK AND SAHWA PROJECT

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, at its most basic, we can understand ethnography to involve the sustained involvement in the lives of those researched. By living with, or through repeated visits to, those we research with, ethnography provides the principal means through which we as researchers can get close to young people and their ways of living, so as to know in detail and depth how they 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 ethnographic Sahwa perspective. The different tasks related to ethnographic fieldwork (focus groups, life stories and focused case study) will provide rich and meticulous data relating to the patterns, problems and complexities of young people's individual and collective perspectives. At same time, we can understand their experiences of multiple transitions (biographical, cultural, political...) and their engagement with civil and political society or extra-institutional manners of political and civic participation and the meanings and understandings they bring to this. How this sustained involvement in the lives of others is accomplished will necessarily be dependent upon the conditions encountered in each country. Each case study involve fieldwork undertaken over a minimum of three months although actual fieldwork 'days' may be undertaken in one block of time (e.g. one month's continuous fieldwork) or spread over several months. As a rule of thumb, each case study has involved between forty five days of fieldwork.

In Sahwa project, qualitative fieldwork points towards a multi-sited team work. In classical settings of multi-sited ethnography, the ethnographer travels from localizations and from countries to the other. In the SAHWA different local researchers are conducting fieldwork in different countries, and this original data is used also by other SAHWA members who have not personally done that fieldwork concretely. In multi-sited ethnography the researcher may follow for example 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). The Sahwa ethnographic focus is on the different spaces and times as well as cultures of the youth living in the Arab Mediterranean region. Different kinds of national and transnational groups of researchers have been working to produce primary data on the questions of youth in comparative setting.

LIFE STORIES AS ETHNOGRAPHIC TOOL

The life story is one of the older techniques used in social sciences for collecting personal and social data. It consists in a narrative of an individual about his/her personal experiences across 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 can be literary, the content is cognoscitive: reading a social history through a life story (Ferrarotti, 1980). The life story should be distinguished from the life history. While the second 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.

The narrative interview, the main technique used in Sahwa project to produce life stories, is a non-standardised interview technique which main goal 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 particularly relevant when it comes to the relationship between the 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 mean 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 in a different frame. While NIs reveal much of the interviewee's social background, values orientations and past experience; besides that, the rules that govern narration allow a great degree of control over the interviewee's narrative choices comparing to a usual open interview. From this point of view, a narrative interview becomes a life story when accomplish five criteria:

1. Interaction: must be the result of the interaction between researcher and informant
2. Globality: should give an overview of a biographical history
3. Oral: should reflect the transition from orality to writing
4. Multidimensionality: should collect objective and subjective aspects (values and practices)
5. Advertising: must have spread in public areas (academic, community, social).

In Sahwa life stories, the aim is to develop a holistic approach to obtain a general picture of life's trajectories and discourses about main issues in every-day lives as young people understand it. The method of selection of the life stories protagonists started in month 15 with the completion of holistic focus groups to identify those issues that matter most among young people. In every country, two young people (a boy and a girl) have been selected from among the participants in the focus groups to follow and build up a life story for each of them. As variables to choose these young people according with conceptual framework detailed in Concept Paper were: a) cohort between 20 to 29 consistent with the age groups of the survey; b) gender balance and c) taking into consideration the socioeconomic and familial background to achieve the necessary diversity. Through the implementation of these rules, the different ethnographic teams have collected 22 life stories write reports (6 in Algeria, 4 in Egypt, 2 in Lebanon, 4 in Morocco and 6 in Tunis). These life stories have been produced implementing the technique of narrative interview above mentioned. 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.

LIFE STORIES VIDEOS

The life stories video collection is a complementary material of the life stories write reports. These recorded interviews were conducted through months 16 and 20 by a member of the Task Force member and a Ethnographic team member during the Transnational Ethnographic Visits. The idea has been film two conversations per country (a boy and a girl, keeping in mind geographical and socioeconomic variables), reflecting the option of establishing a generational story (of people of similar age), and set the focus on 10



players (10 young voices) when it has been possible. At same time, these young ones will be the life stories protagonist as it has been remarked above. In general view, the locations of the different conversations helped us to produce a good environment for the conversations. These locations are mainly the headquarters of the different partner institutions in Morocco, Algeria and Tunis. In Lebanon, the conversations were recorded in significant spaces of the young protagonists an excellent way to achieve confidentiality. But in any case, we are aware of the difficulties and limitations of this kind of data due to the presence of a camera and to get confidence. Thus, we recommend watch this qualitative material taking into consideration this limitations. To reflect the possible generational discourse in the region, in the video recorded interviews the same semi-structured questionnaire has been used, following eight main thematic areas: 1) presentation of young persons; 2) how they see their own generation; 3) how they see adults and generational relations; 4) presentation of their village/neighbourhood/city and their main activities; 5) a dialogue about the current situation in the world; 6) remembering childhood and adolescence; 7) a view of the current situation in the country; and 8) a view of the future. The aim is that every young person interviewed can show their worries, aspirations and opportunities. An account of the different young people profiles and environment of the interview is described by country, if it is possible:

Algeria:

The protagonist of video recorded life stories in Algeria coming from life stories reports. But of them, do not accept to be video-recorded. He/she only accepted to be audio-recorded.

The interviewee asked for maintaining his anonymity. He is 25 years old and lives in a rural area of Algiers province. He belongs to a modest family. The informant was interviewed in April 2015 by Carles Feixa, Kamel Bourcherf and Sihem Chayabdraa.

Tunisia:

In Tunisia, three interviews were conducted. Two video interviews were in Cawtar Headquarter, a new office building nearby the Sports Area in Tunis. The third interview was conducted in Medev Headquarter in Houmt Souk, Djerba.

Wajdi is an unemployed young male. He is 23 years old and lives in the Tunis Ibn Khaldoun popular quarter. His father is a home-based tailor. His mother has been working in a garment factory for many years. He is studying Commerce vocational training course, after being expelled of high school. He usually attends the Ibn Khaldun youth center. He plays rap, it is his only passion. The interview was conducted by Moussa Bourekba at CAWTAR Headquarter in Tunis in late July 2015.

Syrine lives in the Djerba Island nearby the capital Houmt Souk (Tunisia). She is 18 years old. Her father migrated from Sousse and her mother is Djerbian. She is enrolled at the fourth grade of Arts, getting ready for the Baccaalaurate exam to be held in June 2015. She loves to play theatre. Syrine was part of the representation of Djerba in the International Social Forum. The interview was conducted by Sihem Najjar at Medev Headquarter in Hount Souk (Djerba, Tunisia).

Fadma is born in Tunis and currently lives in Tunis. She is 27 years old and works as officer in a commercial agency. After 2011 events, she enrolled in a trade union. She obtained Baccaalaurate degree years before and she is studying different vocational training courses. Her father is barber and her mother works at home. The interview was conducted by Moussa Bourekba at CAWTAR Headquarter in Tunis in late July 2015.

Lebanon:

In Lebanon two interviews were recorded:

Mirna is 29 years old. She was born in Beirut Ain El Remmaneh quarter and currently lives there. She is Christian and not married. She holds a BA in Education but she work as office assistant in an electricity factory. She spends her leisure time going to the cinema or shopping malls. Mirna is member of a middle class family. The informant was interviewed in Ain El Remmaneh quarter by Hiba Hammoud in early September

Hekmet is 21 years old and he was born in Joun, a rural area nearby Saïda in Chouf area. He currently lives in Remeileh, and studies Sciences at the Lebanese University in Hadath nearby Beirut. He enjoys going to the cinema, listening music and chatting up friends. The informant was interviewed in Remeileh by Mohammed el Maouche in early September.



Morocco:

In Morocco two interviews were recorded:

Kaoutar is 22 years old and he was born in Rabat. Now, she lives in Agdal, a middle-upper class suburb in Rabat but she is moving to Casablanca to live alone. Her father is professor of Mathematics. She is studying engineering but, at same time, she runs a small-sized company related to water purification filters. She is member of Enactus, Youth and Younes and Entrepreneur Café associations. The informant was interviewed at HEM Center in Rabat by Hosni Almoukhlis in early September.

Ayoub is 23 years old and he was born in Hay Mohammadi, a popular quarter of Casablanca. He did not finish the bachelor degree. He is employed precariously in different informal jobs. He plays darabuka, rap and he loves playing theater in the Touria et Abdelaziz Tozy Foundation Cultural Center in Ain Seeba quarter in Casablanca. The informant was interviewed in Mohammedia by Hosni AlMoukhlis in early September.

Egypt:

In this case due to the current situation of the country, the Egyptian Ethnographic team suggest us not recorded any kind of conversation.