

Qualitative Migration Research: Some New Reflections Six Years Later

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The main purpose of this article is a brief presentation of the most crucial stages of a research process concerning migration of foreign workers in Greece. The research (within my doctoral studies at Sussex University, Brighton, UK) was undertaken for a period of almost nine months (1995-1996) in Athens, Greece. In this article I present some important dimensions of the multiple methods used (semi-structured interviews with informational questionnaires, in-depth interviews and participant observation) to obtain information and data, mainly on the employment and housing conditions and situations of immigrants in the city, and take the opportunity to critically reflect on that research's methodology and findings today. Key words: Qualitative Methods, Migration Research, and Critical Realism

Research Context and Research Questions

Greece, together with other countries of Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal) have relatively recently – from the mid 1980s onwards – been transformed from major emigration to immigration countries (Iosifides, 1997). The origins of the new immigration flows are both in the Mediterranean area and further a field, although there is still a relative absence of accurate and credible statistical data. Immigrants into Southern Europe come mainly from developing countries – the Maghreb, Cape Verde, the Philippines, Eritrea, Somalia, Jordan, Egypt, Latin America, Gambia, Ghana and Guinea, and from some eastern European Countries such as Poland, Bulgaria, Albania, Romania etc. (Salt, Singleton, & Hogarth, 1994).

This major migratory transformation of Southern Europe to a destination area has been explained by a combination of interrelated factors such as the relative ease of entry, the tightening of controls in other potential destination countries, geographical, cultural and ex-colonial links, economic and demographic reasons and the demand for cheap labour in Southern European countries due to socio-economic restructuring and informalisation (Fakiolas, 1994; Iosifides & King, 1996; King & Rybaczuk, 1993; Pugliese, 1993).

Greece became a de facto immigration country in less than fifteen years. Despite its poor economic performance during the 1980s, Greece has attracted and received hundreds of thousands of foreign workers, and despite the imposing of stricter control measures during the 1990s, the inflow is continuing. Within this context the general topic of research was selected due to a series of reasons (Iosifides, 1997):

- First of all, it was considered to be a challenge to study some important aspects and dimensions of the migratory transformation of Greece and its impacts on economic, social and labour market systems of the country.
- Secondly, the phenomenon, at the time of research, was relatively new in Greece. There were limited studies at that time although the need for better understanding of the complexities and impacts of immigration into Greece were (and still are) great. Migration studies at the time of research were mostly descriptive and based on secondary data or census data about legally resided immigrants in the country, leaving the vast majority of foreign labour (the undocumented immigrants) unconsidered. Consequently, an in depth qualitative account of the important dimensions of the phenomenon of immigration in Greece, was missing.
- Finally it seemed to be extremely interesting to try to connect contemporary international socio-economic and migratory changes with the peculiarities of the Southern European countries in general, and Greece specifically.

Within the above general framework the specific *research questions and objectives* of the study were the following (Iosifides, 1997):

- The first research objective was related to the presentation and analysis of the general characteristics of the immigrant groups selected for the study (see next part) in order to highlight lines of similarity and differentiation between them. The analysis of these characteristics (gender, age, emigration motives, means and time of arrival, links with the country of origin, family situation, future plans etc.) was considered to be of great importance because of the possible links to the immigrant's position within the labour and housing markets in Athens and to the totality of their experiences in the city.
- The second research objective was to demonstrate the special nature of the Greek socio-economic formation and labour market and from this point to explore the labour market position, employment characteristics and conditions of the foreign migrants who operate within it.
- The third research objective had to do with the housing arrangements of immigrants in Athens, the character of their spatial organisation in the city and the interrelationships between their spatial and employment characteristics in terms of inclusion and exclusion.

Why Qualitative Methods

Despite my personal familiarity with quantitative and statistical methods and analysis, the methodological approach of the study was qualitative. Some of the reasons for this choice were merely practical but the most important were related to the general purposes of the research, to the research questions and objectives and to the kind of data, which had to be collected in the field. More specifically the main reasons for the selection of a series of qualitative methods in order to address the research questions were the following:

- At the time of research there was an impossibility to conduct a quantitative survey about immigrant groups in the Athens conurbation because of the illegal status of the vast majority of foreign workers in the city and in Greece in general. Legal status in combination with residential fluidity made almost

impossible to use a reliable and meaningful sampling frame and thus achieving representativity in a rigorous way.

- A quantitative, survey-type study was not only very difficult to be conducted but it was also undesirable because of the nature of the objectives of research. My intention was to investigate social processes related to employment and spatial/housing organisation and characteristics of immigrants in the city analysing them simultaneously from two major perspectives: the structural and the individual perspective. I wanted to find structural causalities and patterns underlying the working and life experiences of immigrants in Athens and individual, collective or familial responses and strategies. Furthermore I wanted to explore the different meanings of the immigration experience to different immigrant groups and to answer questions about the “why” and “how” of functioning of specific phenomena occurring in the labour and housing markets related to their socio-economic and spatial features and organisation. The data I wanted to collect had mainly to do with information about processes, meanings, mechanisms and structures of inclusion and exclusion and the best possible way for achieving this was the application of a set of different, interrelated and complementary qualitative methods (Hay, 2000; Limb & Dwyer, 2001; Robson, 2002).
- The adoption of a multi method qualitative approach for this study became possible for another important reason as well. I was aware of some crucial limitations of qualitative migration research and tried to overcome them using various techniques most of which are mentioned and discussed later. These limitations are related mainly to the problems of generalisation of findings, of gaining access to the field, of the development of trustful field relations and of ethical and research-politics issues.

Research Design: Multiple Methods and Strategies

Selection of Site and Immigrant Groups

The selection of the research site (conurbation of Athens) was based at the fact that at the time of research (and currently) the majority of immigrants in Greece were residing in the city (Salt et al., 1994). Originally four major groups of immigrants were selected: Albanians, Poles, Egyptians and Filipinos. This selection was based on various official and previous research estimates. Although the exact number of each of these groups was unknown, several studies had confirmed that the above groups were the most numerous (Fakiolas, 1994; Fakiolas & King, 1996).

Apart from the quantitative dimension, the purpose of the selection was to capture the diversity of the migration situation in Athens and to ensure a degree of comparability. However the early stages of the fieldwork research revealed that one group – immigrants from Poland – had to be excluded from the study. They were more dispersed, and hence ‘invisible’, than the other groups and in addition, the majority of Poles in Athens at that time were only there on a seasonal basis – one estimate suggested that only 15% were all-year-round residents (Romaniszyn, 1996). As the purpose of research was to investigate the relatively stable features of the articulation of immigrants in various levels of the social life in Athens, the exclusion of immigrants from Poland became inevitable.

Sampling

For many migratory research projects and especially for projects about immigrant population that include a majority of undocumented workers, non-probability or judgment samples have been the rule (Bilsborrow et al., 1984; Cornelius, 1982). After locating and gaining access to immigrant communities – their spatial segregation in the city helped me to locate different immigrant communities in order to then try to gain direct access – I used the ‘snowball sampling’ technique in order to proceed with fieldwork.

Initial contacts were established with formal immigrant organisations (such as, for example trade unions) and other immigrant organisations (such as, community, cultural, political and religious organisations). Through all these sources, and after interviews and discussions with immigrant community leaders or representatives, I was able to be guided towards other individual immigrants. The role of kinship and friendship networks of immigrants in Athens proved to be very useful to the completion of research (Cornelius, 1982; Heer, 1990).

Within this context I tried to reduce the ‘biases’ of the technique and to increase ‘representativity’ through various ways. One way was to ask individual migrants to guide me to other migrants who had different characteristics than theirs (for example ‘long-stayers versus newcomers, workers with different employment type etc.). Another way was to disperse the initial contact points over as wide a geographical area as possible and broadening the sources of initial contacts in order to cover as much as possible of the population diversity.

The Pilot-Visit

The pilot visit in Athens took place during the early summer of 1995 and lasted for about four weeks. The aim of the pilot visit was to make some initial contacts in the area, to acquire useful information for the main fieldwork research, and to take a limited number of interviews in order to review and probably re-plan the interview guide.

Extremely useful contacts were made with various governmental and non-governmental agencies and with key informants from the immigrant communities. The establishment of these relationships enabled me to build an initial network of contacts and starting points in order to proceed to the main fieldwork research. Furthermore during the pilot visit twelve interviews with immigrants were conducted. This first experience of interviewing proved to be of great importance because the interview guide I had planned changed in a considerable manner. The main changes had to do with wording, with question sequence, with addition of themes of discussion and with efforts to reduce the question threat especially about sensitive matters.

Fieldwork Strategies: Informational Interviews, In-Depth Interviews, Participant Observation

The first main fieldwork strategy was to conduct several semi-structured, relatively short informational interviews with immigrants in Athens. Through snowballing I interviewed 141 immigrants, almost equally divided among the three-selected immigrant groups. The main tool used in these face-to-face interviews was an

interview guide, which had the form of a questionnaire. The main feature of this guide was its 'factual' character.

The interview guide was divided into four main parts dealing with different sets of questions. The first part comprised general personal questions such as nationality, ethnicity, age and gender. The second part comprised a general overview of the migratory trajectory of the respondent – reasons for moving, reasons for coming to Greece and especially to Athens, route, means and date of arrival, family conditions, future plans etc. The third part contained employment and related questions like levels of education and training, working conditions in Athens, type of employment and employment history in the city, hours of daily work, way of payment, levels of satisfaction and questions about discrimination at the workplace or elsewhere. Finally the last part contained questions about the spatial organisation of migrants within the Athens conurbation and about housing conditions, like area of residence, type of accommodation, places of leisure, levels of satisfaction from housing etc.

With the one third of the above respondents, with key informants and community leaders, in-depth interviews were conducted right after or independently of the semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was equally useful for in-depth interviews but this time acted as thematic guide and it was more flexible. The first purpose of the in-depth interviews was to explore personal and collective experiences of immigrants regarding their relationships to employers, landlords and the native population in general. The second purpose was to investigate the ways of incorporation of immigrants in the labour market and the relationships of their housing and spatial organisation to work and life in the city. The third purpose was to interpret different and multiple individual and collective meanings of being an immigrant worker in Athens and Greece in relation with a series of features such as nationality and ethnicity, gender and age, family situation at home and Athens, social networks developed in the city, connections and networks with the country of origin, community organisation etc.

The fieldwork process in Athens included a strong component of participant observation as well. The settings of observation were mainly places that immigrants used collectively as leisure or meeting points, such as certain cafeterias or game houses, squares or places of living (hotels, flats etc.) and working places and sites. Through observation it became possible to increase my knowledge and understanding of certain practices and to make additional contacts. It must be noted here that the participant observation component was strongly and directly interrelated with the other fieldwork strategies, as the majority of the semi-structured and in-depth interviews were taken in places like the ones mentioned above.

Generally, during the field research in Athens, apart from anonymity and confidentiality assurances, every effort was made to reduce the potential of the questions to 'threaten' the respondents. The strategy was to adopt a causal everyday approach, to lessen the imputation of 'deviance' (for example, in the question about the holding of a work permit or about the way of arriving in the country), to decrease the specificity of the information required (e.g. a question about the area of living and not of the exact address of the respondent), and to place sensitive questions or discussion themes at the end of the interview process. All these techniques were adopted because in research situations like this one (with undocumented immigrants) the researcher can pose a political, legal or economic threat to the respondents, asking for information that could be used to harm them (Foddy, 1993).

Concluding Remarks: New Reflections Six Years Later

Given the time and budgetary constraints of research, rich information and data were produced from the study, which proved helpful to addressing the research questions. More specifically the general characteristics of the immigrant groups selected for the study were presented and analysed, and their socio-spatial, positions, relations and trajectories identified (see research questions at page 3). The main findings had to do with the exploration of the multiple functions of the labour market (and especially of the informal labour market) and the role of immigrant labour within it, with an analysis of the immigrant's local and international social networks (or 'social capital') and their centrality for everyday life, and with a deep account of personal and collective meanings and interpretations about work, housing, social life and relations with natives in Athens.

The purpose of the present part of the article is not to present the findings of the study. These findings have been published and discussed in much detail elsewhere (Iosifides, 1997, 2001; Iosifides & King, 1998; King et al., 1998). The purpose of this part is to reflect today on methodological issues of that research in order to raise some questions, which may be proved useful to other researchers (and to myself) about future endeavors in the field of qualitative migration research. This reflection takes place today (six years later) due to a series of interrelated reasons. The most important are related to the growing interest on migration research in Greece today, to the plethora of studies (both qualitative and quantitative) on the matter and to the lively scientific, social and political debate about the issue.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Through the whole research process a relatively large amount of data was collected. Those data were quite messy and comprised mainly questionnaires, field and observational notes and interview notes. The data collected from the field were complemented by various other secondary data such as press articles, reports from governmental and non-governmental agencies and material provided from immigrant organisations and communities. It took a lot of time and effort to analyse the data in order to produce meaningful results and in order to answer the research questions as satisfactory as possible. Data were read and studied several times, and then they were segmented and coded according to central themes, until categories and patterns started to emerge making some sense.

One basic consideration during the research and analysis process was to meet some standards of validity and trustworthiness, which had mainly to do with descriptive and interpretative validity (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Seale, 1999). In this respect, I paid much attention to the correspondence of data to interpretations and to limiting the ambition of interpreting and theorising according to the empirical material available. It is not the purpose of this part to present the process of data analysis in detail. The point I want to stress here is that the whole process of analysis was conducted in the traditional, manually way. This had two negative effects. The first was related with the speed and time of data analysis. The second effect, which was to my opinion more important, was the inability to take under full consideration and detailed analysis the whole set of data collected from the field.

One of the best ways for overcoming similar problems in much extent, is the use of a qualitative analysis computer program (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis - CAQDAS). The various capabilities of these packages are developing impressively, offering high levels of data organisation and handling, analysing large amounts of data much faster than traditional techniques and helping the researcher/s to take into account all available data.

Nevertheless, using computers for qualitative data analysis is not without dangers or possible disadvantages. One major danger is one to develop the misconception that using CAQDAS alone increases somehow the validity and reliability of qualitative research and gives it credentials of rigorous scientific research. There is also a fear of development of a new 'orthodoxy' in qualitative research through the uncritical application of computerised analysis techniques (Kelle, 1997; Marshall, 1999). Furthermore "there may be difficulties in changing, or reluctance to change, categories of information once they have been established. Particular programs tend to impose specific approaches to data analysis" (Robson, 2002, p. 462). Because of the above potential dangers or disadvantages computer programs have to be chosen with great care and according to the theoretical and empirical character of the specific research project and used critically in the analysis of qualitative data.

'Practical' Problems

The fieldwork research in Athens faced many problems of 'practical' character. Nevertheless, those problems enabled me to better understand the work and life situation of immigrants in the city. The most important of these problems was the reluctance of many immigrants to talk openly (and some even to talk at all). The reluctance, and sometimes the suspicion of immigrants (mainly those coming from Albania) to talk openly to a native, asking personal and sensitive questions had to do with their legal status in the county, with socio-cultural differences and with the relatively uneasy (especially at the time of research when deportation operations were taking place or had taken place) relationships with natives and especially with authorities. Every effort was made and much time consumed in order to try to establish a 'normal' and trustful relationship with individual immigrants.

I think that in situations like this the researcher has to do some compromises about the extent and depth of information and data she or he wants to collect in the field, in order to reduce the pressure for the respondents, which in many cases bring them in difficult and stressful positions. These compromises are necessary if we want to maintain a strong dimension of ethics in qualitative research. I developed a relaxed, everyday conversational approach, giving in every instance assurances and information about the real purpose of research to potential respondents. Furthermore I used to skip sensitive questions and themes when I was feeling that the interviewee was pressurised and she or he did not want to give specific information about those matters. Finally I opted for note - taking instead of recording the interviews or conversations, in order to reduce the 'formality' of the process and avoid additional sources of respondent's stress.

Generally speaking, doing qualitative migration research, presupposes in most cases the adoption of some important ethical and research-policy stances. These are related mainly with informed consent, with guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality and with efforts to reduce possible risks and dangers for the

participants (Punch, 1986). As showed earlier and for the case of this research, those stances played a valuable role to the completion of the research process, to the development of trustful relationships with participants and to the collection of rich and meaningful data from the field.

Another problem was the language barrier. While for the Filipino group the barrier was relatively limited because of the use of English as a medium for communication, for the other two groups (Egyptians and Albanians), in many cases, the language problem proved to be more serious, especially for the newcomers in Greece and Athens, whose knowledge of Greek was limited. In most of these cases informal interpreters helped me to somehow overcome the problem and proceed with interviews and conversations. The interpreters were key informants whose proficiency in Greek was quite sufficient for the purposes of research, because they were residents in Athens for many years. Furthermore, in many cases, the presence of an interpreter of the same nationality to that of the respondent made things easier and the whole process of interaction more meaningful and fluid. This remark leads us to the insider/outsider debate, which will be discussed briefly in the next part.

The Insider/Outsider Debate, Power and Cross-Cultural Research

I was a complete outsider to the social, cultural and lived world of all the immigrant groups, which took part in the field research. It is extremely difficult and some times even impossible for an outsider to see and understand fully the world we live through the eyes of 'others', although this was my intention. This means that every researcher involved in qualitative projects of similar character has to be aware of the insider/outsider features of her or his research (Mohammad, 2001). Being aware means that one recognises the existence of multiple meanings and truths and the necessity to reach a level of understanding of the experiences and interpretations of the lived world of 'others'.

There is always the danger of imposition, intentionally or unintentionally, of the dominant version of truth or meaning to the participants of research or of the use of the asymmetrical power relations between the researcher and the participants, in order to gain more information and data (Dowling, 2000). These dangers lead us to the problem of power and power relations in cross-cultural research. In many cross-cultural research cases there are power differentials and the best approach is an application of a policy that

“...acknowledges, respects and works with difference; recognizes and takes responsibility for differential power relations that may exist between the researcher and those participating in the research; chooses methods that empower the ‘researched’ and that allow depth of analysis and complexities to come forth; and challenges and transforms unequal power relations...” Skelton (2001, p. 90)

The notion of empowerment of the participants in research makes us think and reflect on the action dimension of qualitative research.

The Action Dimension

In a follow up research or in future field research endeavors concerning immigration, I would consider seriously to strengthen the action dimension or even to place it at the centre of the fieldwork approach. An action research is

Research which is oriented towards bringing about change, often involving respondents in the process of investigation. Researchers are actively involved with the situation or phenomenon being studied. (Robson, 2002, p. 545)

The action dimension in qualitative research, depending on some preconditions, can increase the knowledge and understanding of the specific phenomenon which is studied and thus to have theoretical and scientific value, and at the same time to help solving practical problems in favor of the participants and empower them through the active involvement of the researcher (Schwandt, 2001).

If we consider the specific case of qualitative research with immigrants in Athens, we could identify some areas of interest, where the action research approach could be central and useful. One of these areas could be the active cooperation of the researcher with immigrant communities, organisations and NGOs in order to improve the relationships between locals and immigrants and against social prejudice, discrimination and racism. Another area of action could be the involvement of the researcher with efforts of improvement of the level of organisation (political, social, religious organisation, foundation of immigrant trade unions or participation to existing trade unions etc.) of immigrant groups.

A Final Note on Theory in Relation to Methods

The purpose of this article is to raise some issues and discuss briefly some new reflections based on a specific case of qualitative migration research presented here. A last, but equally important, reflection has to do with theoretical background and thinking, in relation to qualitative methods and strategies applied in the field. The adopted view, as it became clearer today, was that of *critical realism* (see Bhaskar, 1986; 1989; Sayer, 2000).

Let me discuss this notion a bit further, although the debate on this would require another article (or better a whole book!). As noted previously (see Part 2) my intention was to investigate simultaneously structural causalities and individual responses and meanings and thus to avoid purely objectivist or subjectivist explanations. *Critical realism* provides the framework of integration of these notions, and allows the formulation of critical and emancipatory approaches and strategies in qualitative research, avoiding both positivism and relativism (Robson, 2002). Within this framework the multiple meanings of different immigrant groups or individual immigrants about their working, housing or life situation in Athens are not sufficient to explain social reality. They have to be considered and investigated along with social structures and specific contexts and with certain mechanisms, which produce and reproduce social reality and phenomena. I view meanings and interpretations not as 'construction of social reality' but as specific responses, according to the position and/or role and function of an individual or group in a specific structured social context, in a system of social, status or power hierarchy etc. Thus adopting a *critical*

realist approach allows the reconciliation of rigour and validity with critical, action and emancipatory dimensions and strategies within the qualitative research paradigm.

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