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Sociology Submission for Consideration

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“Off the methodological records: sample selection, institutional access, and ambivalent audit/ethical issues when investigating vulnerable people”

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Miranda Lubbers is Associate Professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain. She received her PhD from the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Her research addresses two main areas: migration and transnationalism, and poverty and livelihood strategies. Her research has been published in indexed journals like *Ethnicities*, the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, and *Social Networks*.

José Luis Molina is associate professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, and president of the Ethics Committee of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. He is an Economic Anthropologist interested in the emergence of socioeconomic structures, especially ethnic enclaves and transnational fields. He has conducted fieldwork in Romania and Spain, using a mix method approach, combining ethnographic methods and personal networks analysis. He has published extensively in these areas.

Published Articles

[insert an APA-style reference for any publications resulting from this research]

Abstract

This case study deals with some of the complexities that arose during the first stages of a research project on subsistence strategies of poor households in times of economic crisis in Catalonia, Spain. This case explains the implementation of a research with a vulnerable population and reflects on the ethical and methodological complexities that underlie the sample selection in both institutional and non-institutional contexts. It also illustrates the ambiguities or contradictions that arise when ethical and bureaucratic criteria compete, reflecting critically upon the new pressing requirements of modern research practices in public institutions: i.e., auditing and accountability.

Learning Outcomes

- By the end of the case you should have a better understanding of some of the challenges involved with research with vulnerable populations.
- **Be aware of the usefulness of pilot testing in order to design sound and efficient research techniques.**
- Be able to understand the complexities of research in institutional contexts.
- Be aware of the new demands and requirements of funded research in terms of ethics and bureaucracy, and of their contradictions
- Be able to think ethically when conducting research into vulnerable populations and be able to foresee and solve ethical dilemmas.
- Be aware that research strategies are sometimes adaptive and ductile to the contextual limitations.

Case Study

Project Overview and Context

Our main line of research, for the last decade, has applied a mixed-methods approach to analyze emerging socioeconomic processes in contemporary and urban contexts from an

anthropological standpoint. In this respect, the economic crisis arising from the real estate bubble in 2008 has undoubtedly opened up an urgent area of analysis of both new and old topics in the field of Economic Anthropology. In this line, during the last decade we have dealt with ethnic economies, economic enclaves, new tendencies in consumption and work, labor precariousness, downward social mobility, and transnationalism. This case study in particular is based on a larger research project on the subsistence strategies of poor households in Catalonia, Spain. By poor households we mean almost a 30% of the households, which have faced some type of economic difficulties that aggravated with the austerity policies applied by the Spanish government under the EU observation. Beyond the scientific aims of the project, since chronic and new poverty has become one of the major problems of our context, our study also aims to apply some of the results in line with a more engaged and reflective anthropology. In this context, we will discuss some of the inherent complexities of this kind of research, pointing out what we believe are some of the major contemporary challenges in the context of research projects financed by public resources: ethics and auditing.

The effects of the 2008 economic crisis has been profound and devastating, particularly in peripheral and southern Europe. In Catalonia, as in the rest of Spain, high unemployment rates, rising living costs and economic burdens (mortgages, rents, taxes...), coupled with the deterioration of public aid, have pushed many households to extreme economic situations to the point that they are facing difficulties to cover basic needs such as food or housing. Today, one in five Spanish households live at risk of poverty. The situation is still worse in the population under 16 and above 60 years old and for vulnerable segments of the population like single mothers, migrant families, or persons with disabilities.

As general theory acknowledges, to fight poverty households tend to rely on formal and informal structures of social protection. By formal structures we usually mean the support provided by private and public initiatives or organizations. However, in our context austerity

policies and budgetary limitations have seriously reduced the State's ability to offer social assistance. In other words, the welfare state has experienced a significant reduction, affecting key areas like social assistance, health and education. Consequently, impoverished families have increasingly turned to charity organizations (soup kitchens, food banks...), civic associations or NGO's in search of material aid. It has been noted, however, that the way in which day-to-day organizations such as day-care centers, workplaces or neighborhood associations are structured effectively influence the opportunities of users or members of these organizations to get to know each other and create new links with both similar and different people. Consequently, these charitable institutions and civic associations could strengthen informal networks in an unintended manner: i.e., providing a network of services and favors, reciprocal assistance, emotional support, solidarity, social cohesion, etc. We considered that kind of unintended social networking deserved particular research attention.

By informal structures of social support we mean friends, acquaintances or neighbors. As classic studies suggest, these informal networks act as a safety net for households at risk of poverty, providing economic, material, affective and informative support (e.g., Adler de Lomnitz 1998, Domínguez & Watkins 2003, Edin & Lein, 1997; Stack, 1974). However, more recent studies argued for a revision of such an optimistic thesis, showing that the social networks of households in poverty are often seriously compromised and cannot deliver all the material sustenance they need in order to survive (e.g., Desmond, 2012). This may be, it is argued, because these households have smaller support networks that are likely homogeneous in economic terms (therefore equally vulnerable), and less suited for giving structural support in long-lasting conditions of poverty. In other words, these networks may contribute to what Robert Merton called the Matthew effect: households are trapped in a process of cumulative disadvantage (i.e., "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer").

In light of these hypotheses we aimed to analyze the effective mobilization of social support when situations of necessity really arise, particularly in a context of chronic poverty. In other

words, we aimed to know how poor families managed to make ends meet, and what the role of formal and informal networks is. To know in detail how people manage to survive on a daily basis and how they use social networks at their disposal are fundamental issues for informing and implementing public policies aimed at reducing poverty and its effects. To do this, we proposed a twofold, interconnected, analysis:

First, an in-depth analysis of the set of subsistence strategies effectively employed by the population in poverty, taking into consideration the full spectrum of survival strategies, including, for example, resources obtained via formal or informal networks (i.e., to attend a soup kitchen, to exchange used clothes, etc.), adaptation or modification of consumption habits (e.g., to purchase cheaper food brands, to eat less meat, to use leftovers, etc.) or resort to informal or illegal economic practices (e.g., to tamper with the electricity meter, undeclared work, etc.).

Second, the detailed analysis of the role played by formal and informal networks in both institutional and non-institutional contexts; with the ultimate objective to inform public policies on ways to empower the economically most vulnerable segments of society by capitalizing on the support generated by the informal, institutional and associative sectors.

Research Design

To attain the aforementioned objectives we adopted a mixed-methods design; i.e., the use of both quantitative (surveys, structured interviews, structured resource diaries) and qualitative methods (participant observation, semi-structured interviews). We started with a secondary analysis of the microdata of recent national socioeconomic surveys on living conditions and habits of the population, representative of the population of Catalonia and Spain. This

analysis gave us a first diagnosis of the most disadvantaged segments of society according to their position in reference to the national poverty threshold. It also allowed us to obtain a first assumption about the use of subsistence strategies in those households that register similar income and housing costs but that manifest different levels of material deprivation. That information served to contextualize the results of the study and structure the sample design of the primary data.

We then started our primary data collection. Our first step was to perform participant observations in different charity organizations, and in the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH), a grassroots organization that aims to help people who face evictions. The aim of the fieldwork was threefold: first, to gain a preliminary insight into the contexts. Second, to understand what type of help users or members receive from these organizations and how institutional conditions affect the creation and functioning of social relationships among users or members. Third, to select *suitable informants* for in-depth investigation, within the institutional contexts.

Subsequently, we proceeded with the in-depth analysis of Catalan households subsisting below the poverty line. We aimed at 50 cases, approximately 30 informants from households that sought institutional aid from the charitable and grassroots organizations involved in our research, and 20 from households that were not linked to these entities. For selecting the sample, we maintained the same definition of relative poverty that was used in the surveys we analyzed, for comparability. This implied that we aimed to sample households situated below the poverty threshold in Spain, i.e., households that had to do with less than 60% of the median income in Spain as registered in the year prior to the data collection. This threshold was situated at €8,011 per "unit of consumption", which we translated in a set of references that were easier to manage cognitively: approximately €667 per month for an adult living alone, €866 for an adult and a child of 13 years or younger, €1,000 for two adults and a child, and €1,400 for two adults and two children. Of course this was only a rough reference, as

from informal conversations with potential informants, the team members could not know exactly who would and who would not be situated below the poverty line, so we had to make informed guesses about the suitability of each informant for further interviewing. As the population under the poverty line is very diverse, we further intended to maximize the diversity and empirical variability. We wanted to include both female and male heads of household, unemployed and employed, with different family compositions, in different stages of life, with different positions below the threshold, different accumulations of problems and different timelines of poverty, et cetera.

For this in-depth analysis, we developed a set of mixed methods that allowed us to obtain exhaustive knowledge of survival strategies in general and the role of formal and informal networks in these strategies in particular. Specifically, this set consisted in interviews with a structured and a semi-structured part, and a diary of resources. The structured part of the interview aimed to gather, in the first place, comparable information on the current and past economic situation of the informant and his or her household, including systematic questions about sociodemographic attributes, household composition, the economic situation of the household, and formal and informal economic resources. To obtain a realistic and detailed account of the informal network, a personal network module was designed to elicit a list of network members who had actually given help in the past year and others with whom the informant socialized, and some information about their characteristics. The structured part of the network was administered using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). Once the structured interview is completed, we obtain a detailed visualization of the network that is usually shown in situ to the informant, to show him/her his/her own social world and to validate the information in the graph. Informants are often intrigued by the network visualizations and tend to learn new information about their social worlds. The semi-structured part targeted the narrative of the downward mobility of the informant, the access, use and role of formal and informal support, and their transformation over time. Finally, we

designed a structured "resource diary" that we aimed to ask them to complete for one month, that is a diary with one page for each day that registered domestic inputs and outputs in terms of economic income (monetary transactions), material support (e.g., food, clothes, furniture, etc.) and services (e.g., child care, favors, etc.), as well as other expenses or economic assets not mentioned before.

Research in Action

On paper the research design seemed coherent and realistic. The questionnaires were reviewed by peers and the criteria for sample selection were discussed among team members. Four research assistants (three doctoral students in anthropology and geography and a Master student in anthropology) were hired and trained for the fieldwork in the multiple sites. We also performed a couple of pilot tests for the interview before entering the field. One of the problems that these pilot tests detected was the definition of a household. We had initially defined household members as those with whom an informant shares housing, economic resources, and expenses. But what if a person lives with housemates for purely economic reasons, sharing only a limited part of their resources and expenses? We decided not to consider them as household members. Furthermore, we added the requirement of some sort of affective or kinship tie among household members. But the definition was still not straightforward. For example, what if an adult woman and her baby live with her parents since she became unemployed and could not cover the costs of housing alone? Is she now a part of her parents' household and should she no longer be considered to be in poverty, as her parents gain enough for the four of them? In some occasions, the use of the household as a unit of analysis obscured certain forms of poverty.

We started to have biweekly meetings to discuss sampling decisions and fieldwork experiences on a continuous basis. The meetings also helped us track the characteristics of the growing sample to ensure its diversity. And finally, they were important for creating a

team spirit and for academic discussions. With our diverse backgrounds, we looked at the same problem from different angles, which gave all of us an opportunity for learning.

A second decision on the basis of the pilot tests was to swap the order of the structured and the semi-structured interview, as during the pilot-tests this order felt more natural: the semi-structured part allowed to establish rapport with the informants that could then facilitate the structured part. The research assistants also felt more comfortable with this order.

Third, the pilot-tests and discussions with team members made us change the length of time we asked informants to maintain a resource diary. A fundamental part of the information is related to the whole economic spectrum of the individual. In order to collect such information we designed a diary in which the individual was asked to specify all kind of economic transactions (inputs and outputs) of the household. However, the volume of economic transactions of poor people is usually limited, by definition. A resource diary for a month was an unrealistic strategy: none of the respondents would be able to fill it in daily for a month, especially as we did not have shared contexts with them where we could naturally follow up on them or remind them of it. Therefore, we reduced their spectrum (items to be included) and their time frame to one week. This issue also connected with ethical concerns as we will see below.

Beyond the usual methodological issues that must be taken into consideration when conducting any research project, the enquiry of vulnerable people, and research in institutional contexts entailed some added difficulties that must be addressed. We will mention some logistic, methodological and ethical pitfalls which emerged during the course of this research.

At the logistic level we soon faced some of the difficulties involved in multi-sited fieldwork both in and outside institutions. As explained before, the sample was split in two parts: an "institutional" sample, consisting of households assisted by charity institutions, and another

sample of households that did not resort to the institutional assistance circuit. Data collection in large and hierarchical charitable institutions involved dealing with various levels of actors (users, benefactors, volunteers, technicians, administrative staff, social workers, etc.), settings (soup kitchens, childcare centers of charity organizations, urban gardens...), and rules (tacit, formal, and informal rules and procedures). Sometimes social workers and volunteers acted as gatekeepers of the study population, so gaining free access (at least free enough to carry out participant-observation and interviews) implied several previous steps: first of all, we contacted formally with the institution in order to establish a contact with a representative, usually a senior manager who could take decisions. We subsequently arranged a formal meeting in which we explained the research project and objectives. If they agreed to be involved in the initiative, we settled a date for the signature of a formal agreement between the institution and the university. When the agreement was signed by both parts, we finally gained access to users in specific spaces and projects with the explicit approval of the social workers. In some cases the process that led to the agreement was fast and in others it took months.

Being aware of these complexities, and bearing in mind that the research project aimed to be an engaged project in nature, we had included the institutional representatives from the outset. So, although the research core team consisted of senior and junior researchers and research assistants, we also favoured active partnerships with representatives of the third sector through cooperation agreements. The representatives provided valuable feedback to our research at different stages and allowed us to check if our plans and procedures were realistic. On the other hand, including the institutional representatives did not compromise our scientific freedom and favoured a faster and more direct communication. Thanks to this strategy we gained access to the institutional spaces and carried out intensive participant observation. After carrying out a few weeks of fieldwork we started with the interviews outside the institutional settings and, in some cases, in the informants' homes.

For instance, in the case of a soup kitchen, after gaining access the first author informally explained the role and objectives of the project to social workers, volunteers and users. In this case he visited the place a couple of times a week and used the facilities just like any other user. Soup kitchen's users attended between 13:00 and 16:00. During that time, the anthropologist socialized with them, helped out the volunteers serving food and engaged in conversations obtaining both qualitative information and relevant clues that later could lay the foundations for exploring the possibilities for intervention and action. The researchers also identified suitable informants during fieldwork. By *suitable informants*, in these institutional contexts, we meant individuals whose domestic unit was below the poverty threshold. However, in charity organizations - such as soup kitchens (see Glasser, 1988) - the conditions of some of the users were quite severe, and economic poverty was often related to, or even determined by, other social problems: drug addiction, alcoholism, mental illness, etc. Besides, quite often users of these institutions live in solitude, with hardly any family or social ties. This fact enriched the theoretical standpoint of the project (i.e., it proved that poverty is frequently linked to other social problems), but forced to reconsider some methodological assumptions on sample selection: what kind of informants were we looking for? Should we include these cases in our sample? In what proportion? We decided that we should, as these cases form part of the same spectrum as "newer types of poverty" (the working poor, long-term unemployment). In poverty, problems tend to accumulate and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish cause and consequence. Also, some of the more severe cases had experienced downward mobility themselves, only much longer ago than the newer cases of poverty. On the other hand, we did not want our sample to be dominated by these (or any other) cases; rather, we wanted the sample to be diverse.

Although the institutional processes took time, finding suitable informants within the institutions was relatively easy once access was gained. In contrast, for the selection of cases outside the institutional settings, finding suitable informants turned out to be more difficult

than initially expected, despite the high percentage of people living below the poverty threshold. Several facts may explain this difficulty. First, being poor can be experienced with grief and shame – i.e., to accept that one has become poor in a society that, until relatively recently, has lived with high socioeconomic expectations and with a firm faith in upward social mobility can be difficult to digest. That may explain the difficulty to find informants outside the institutional circuits. Second, the majority of the volunteers who offered to take part in the survey were of foreign origin. While it is true that a high percentage of impoverished inhabitants is of foreign origin, and therefore we aimed to include people of foreign origin in our sample, we wanted to make sure (again) that the sample included a diversity of backgrounds, and over-representing them in our sample would have introduced a bias toward their subsistence strategies and social support networks, if they differed in these aspects. Cultural and socioeconomic habits, in the first case, and transnational realities, in the second, could offer a totally different picture. Third, it would have been easier to use snowball sampling (i.e., a technique where a set of initial study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances). Various informants told the interviewers that they had friends, family members or acquaintances in similar situations who might be willing to participate. However, since we intended to analyse precisely the importance of social networks and social support, snowball sampling would have led to cases that overlap at least partially in social networks, so that the effective diversity of cases would decrease. For example, if 5 respondents have strong ties with each other, researchers might get valuable information about this group of people and their strategies, but they would in fact be one larger case, instead of 5 separate cases, because their support networks would overlap. In only a few cases, we admitted a sister or a friend of a respondent, because their situations seemed important to us. However, these needed to be exceptions. In the end, we used different strategies to access this type of households: secondary contacts of organizations, local callings, Temporary Work Agencies, etc.

Ethics and Auditing

Over the last decades, ethical questions in social research have become an urgent issue, and for good reasons. This is especially the case with so-called *vulnerable populations*, segments of society that are disadvantaged in one or multiple aspects and that require augmented protection in research (cf. Shivayogi, 2013). In the 1979 Belmont Report, the economically disadvantaged were already mentioned as one such population, because they can be easily exploited. Our research project was submitted to an ethics committee that approved its objectives and procedures.

Of course, economic strategies and practices included formal, informal, but possibly even illegal operations. In this case, trust and commitment was regarded as a fundamental and non-negotiable criterion. All personal information was always anonymized and never transferred to third parties. All data (records, pictures, transcriptions, etc.) was saved in a secure server to which only the researchers had access, and all researchers were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement before participating in the project as interviewers and/or analysts.

In this particular research, we conscientiously prioritized the well-being of the informants and the attention to their needs and demands. Establishing rapport and an empathic and trusting relationship were fundamental goals before proceeding to the interview. All informants were explained the nature of the investigation before the interview (which was recorded if they consented with it) and they were told that their participation was voluntary, that they could interrupt the interview at any time without having to give explanations and ask the researcher to delete their data. They were also explained that their information was confidential and that no one but the interviewer and the researchers had access to data that could be uniquely linked to them. As a standard procedure in modern-day social science, they were asked to

sign an informed consent that mentioned all these aspects, and they also received one copy signed by the principal investigators.

But perhaps the most sensitive issue in this regard was related to a small financial compensation we gave the informants for their effort and time. The full administration of the techniques explained above implied between two and four hours of interviewing in one or two sessions, and we also asked respondents to fill in a resource diary for a week. This required a considerable time investment and patience on behalf of the informants that needed a fair return. One of the basic principles of ethical research is *beneficence*. Researchers need to find a balance between the benefits and burdens of research. We had considered a non-financial compensation (a small gift), but preliminary discussions showed that people preferred a financial one. In the training of research assistants we made very clear that no mention of the compensation could be made *before* the interview, it could not be used as an incentive. This is particularly important given the vulnerable population we are dealing with, because a financial incentive would be an undue inducement. The compensation was only given after the interview.

At the same time, for reasons of transparency, the management of economic expenses in research projects has been exposed, in recent years, to a growing control and accountability both by funding agencies and by the Spanish university administrative system itself. So, for example, if a researcher conducts an interview and that involves some economic expenses (transport or simply a small economic compensation), it must be stipulated and detailed accurately by means of a form that must also be endorsed by the principal investigators. Any cost of transportation, food, or office supplies, even for less than five Euros, is exposed to a long and heavy protocol of auditing that sometimes desperately slows down the pace of research. So, at the practical level, here arose one of the biggest obstacles of the research: the ethical question of the compensation and the administrative pitfalls to make it effective, two demands that seemed to be contradictory indeed. The university administration forced us to

provide evidence of payment to the informants: another form for them to sign, this time with personal data. Even though the data of this form would never be linked with the confidential information given in the interview, it seems contradictory to have informants sign one form about anonymity and another with identifying details.

As Marilyn Strathern has put it, “this is how the financial and the moral meet in one turn of the century rendering of accountability” (2000:1). Furthermore:

"(...) procedures for assessment have social consequences, locking up time, personnel and resources, as well as locking into the moralities of public management. Yet by themselves audit practices often seem mundane, inevitable parts of a bureaucratic process. It is when one starts putting together a larger picture that they take on the contours of a distinct cultural artefact (...). Where audit is applied to public institutions—medical, legal, educational—the state’s overt concern may be less to impose day-to-day direction than to ensure that internal controls, in the form of monitoring techniques, are in place. That may require the setting up of mechanisms where none existed before, but the accompanying rhetoric is likely to be that of helping (monitoring) people help (monitor) themselves, including helping people get used to this new ‘culture’". (Strathern, 2000: 2-4)

Accountability, or the incursion of the private corporative practices into all other spheres of social action and thought – i.e. privatization and the expansion of neoliberalism – is currently a global phenomenon. And **new** researchers should be aware of that, because audit is a pervasive reality that currently enmeshes every research practice. Audit culture is expanding everywhere, and science is not an exception, but in Spain it has taken ridiculous dimensions, possibly because of the same policies of austerity and limitation of public expenditure that the State has applied since 2008. It is important for young researchers to learn about the economic management of funded research projects and the legal dimensions of contracts,

agreements and accountability, and also to take these time-consuming aspects into account when developing time management plans.

Practical Lessons Learned

This case study provides several practical lessons:

- Pilot tests are essential for preparing fieldwork.
- Persons first: be aware of sensible issues when dealing with vulnerable people and always try to put yourself in their shoes. In other words, do not give priority to research objectives over the people you are studying.
- It is important to know the demands of IRBs or ethical committees and of auditing in your university; know what your responsibilities are and what the responsibilities of the university administration are (and what they are not).
- Adaptation to the context is a necessity sometimes, as we show in this example.

Conclusions

This case study shows the procedures, challenges and difficulties of a research project as well as the close relationship between methodological, ethical and bureaucratic issues. We consider that this example illustrates the challenges of funded research in public institutions nowadays. The case study proposes some interesting reflections for advanced PhD students and for other researchers that carry out research on vulnerable populations in institutional contexts.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- Discuss the pros and cons of being personally involved in this kind of research in terms of objectivity.

- Propose some imaginary research situation with vulnerable individuals and try to list at least five ethical cautions that you would observe.
- Discuss the issues you expect to arise when investigating vulnerable populations in research. What measures would you take?
- As we have seen, research strategies are sometimes adaptive and ductile to contextual limitations. Please, discuss strategies that could guarantee objectivity and methodological rigor in view of these unexpected changes.
- What is audit in research? Discuss how that might affect the course of your research. Do you think these questions are important? Why or why not? Do you feel you are well prepared to deal with these questions?

Further Readings

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Web Resources

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