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# PRACTICING MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY: REFLECTIONS, STRATEGIES, AND TOOLS FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION

Francesco Della Puppa<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

### Practicing Multi-Sited Ethnography: Reflections, Strategies, and Tools for Qualitative Research on Transnational Migration

The article illustrates the multi-sited use of the ethnographic method and the narrative in-depth interview in research on transnational migration between Bangladesh and Italy. Assuming a Sayadian perspective, the author explores the ways of accessing the transnational research field, the dynamics of anticipatory socialization at the interview within the transnational space, and the opportunity for collective self-socio-analysis and construction of a family memory that an in-depth interview implies. Finally, the article deepens the implications that the use of linguistic translators entails in ethnographic work and interpretative research.

**KEYWORDS:** multi-sited ethnography, in-depth interview, transnationalism, translation, reflexivity

## IZVLEČEK

### Večprizoriščna etnografija v praksi: Razmisleki, strategije in orodja za kvalitativno raziskovanje transnacionalnih migracij

Avtor v prispevku predstavlja uporabo etnografske metode in poglobljenega narativnega intervjuja na več lokacijah pri raziskovanju transnacionalnih migracij med Bangladešem in Italijo. Izhajajoč iz sayadovske perspektive preučuje načine dostopanja do transnacionalnega raziskovalnega polja, dinamiko anticipatorne socializacije pri intervjuju v transnacionalnem prostoru ter možnosti za kolektivno sociološko samoanalizo in konstrukcijo družinskega spomina, ki jih ponuja poglobljeni intervju. Na koncu se posveti tudi posledicam uporabe jezikovnih prevajalcev za etnografsko delo in interpretativno raziskovanje.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** večprizoriščna etnografija, poglobljeni intervju, transnacionalizem, prevajanje, reflektivnost

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## INTRODUCTION

This contribution stems from a three-year research project aimed at analyzing the transformations in masculinity, the processes of gender construction, and the construction of adulthood of Bangladeshi male immigrants in an industrial suburb in northeastern Italy, as well as of their male relatives in Bangladesh. The aim was to analyze the multiple ways in which the process of the construction of male adult identity is inscribed into migration, as well as the ways in which migration contributes to its unfolding. To do this, I examine a pivotal event in the migration experience: family reunification following the stabilization of a migrant's work and residential status.

The research focused on people of Bangladeshi origin residing in Alte Ceccato, a small town in the municipality of Montecchio Maggiore, in the Province of Vicenza, Italy, which is close to the most important tannery district in Italy, and perhaps even in Europe (Della Puppa, 2015; Della Puppa, 2019). On January 1, 2021, Alte Ceccato had 6,802 residents, of whom 2,283 were foreigners, thus accounting for over 33% of the population. This is mainly due to the large number of Bangladeshi citizens who have immigrated there, with 1,484 living in the municipality and 1,206 just in Alte. As well as being by far the largest non-Italian national group represented there, they make up about one-sixth of the total number of residents.

Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor (Goffman, 1956) was adopted in the research process and the interpretation of the data. It proved particularly useful for multi-sited ethnography<sup>1</sup> (Boccagni, 2014; Marcus, 1995; Mikola, 2007), as it helped to "sew up" the scientific and epistemological divide between immigration societies and emigration societies (Sayad, 1999; Sayad, 2006) and to avoid stereotypical approaches when analyzing the *habitus* and strategies of the actors involved. The dramaturgical perspective, developed to analyze the ritualized moments of everyday life and the patterns of social interaction between individuals, is also helpful in framing global phenomena—such as migration and family reunification—which take shape within a complex web of transnational relations between the different geographical poles of migration (Tsuda et al., 2014). The destination society and the migrants' society of origin were understood as the front stage and the backstage of the same representation, alternating according to the positioning of the protagonists and the speaking subjects.

The research involved prolonged periods of participant observation, which lasted almost two years in Italy and more than two months in Bangladesh, and I carried out a total of 74 interviews between the two countries. In Italy, 25 men who had reunited with their wives and 15 key informants were interviewed, and in

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1 For the sake of brevity, here, it is not possible to delve into a reflection on multi-sited ethnography, therefore, please refer to Boccagni (2019) and Van Duijn (2020).

Bangladesh, 19 male relatives of those interviewed in Italy, 10 people whose families had had migration experiences, and 5 key informants were interviewed.

Following this brief introduction, I will discuss the theoretical and epistemological perspective used to “sew up” the split between emigration and immigration, inserting this discussion within the rich debate on the subject. Then, the different ways of accessing the transnational research field will be explored. A further section will explore the transnational dynamics of anticipatory socialization in relation to the interviews, as well as the opportunities for collective “social-self-analysis” and the construction of family memory that the methodology offered to the interviewees (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016). Finally, there will be a reflection on the implications of using language interpreters/translators in ethnographic work and qualitative research. In fact, qualitative researchers have rarely questioned the implications of using an interpreter/translator in the data construction process and in the empirical phase of research (on this, see, for example, Birbili, 2000; Edwards, 1995; Edwards, 1998; Edwards & Temple, 2002; Overing, 1987; Temple, 1997; Temple & Young, 2004).

## WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

The nature and subject of my research prompted me to take up Marcus’s (1995) call for a multi-sited ethnography (Boccagni, 2014; Clifford, 1992; Mikola, 2007). Inserting myself within that strand of research stretching from Thomas and Znaniecki (1920) to Sayad (1999), I made a journey across continents toward my interviewees’ context of origin. There, in a society “other” to my own (Clifford, 1992), I carried out a crucial part of my ethnography: after following the unfolding of my interviewees’ narratives in the country of immigration, where possible, I also traced them backward, looking for family relations played out in the transnational space. I thus ended up in Bangladesh to hear other stories told in male voices, which helped to illuminate further elements of the “family prism” in migration (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016).

The experience of the journey proved to be crucial to understanding various aspects of my research: the social action, trajectories, and aspirations of the interviewees and their family members; the way in which transnational and long-term historical and social dynamics played out (Saada, 2000); the civic and social stratification enacted through migration; and the social downgrading inherent in crossing the border from south to north and the ways in which this happens (Sacchetto, 2004).

In the study of migratory phenomena, social scientists agree that a perspective is needed that does not artificially separate emigration from immigration. Thus, in order to analyze the family reunifications of first migrant Bangladeshi men “here,” it is necessary to enter their family homes “there,” to “breathe” in their family story, to collect narratives from a perspective that considers that “before starting their immigration the immigrant is first and foremost an emigrant” (Sayad, 1999, p. 16). Thus, what is framed as “family reunification of the spouse following the husband”

in the country of immigration could be perceived in the family of origin as the loss of a daughter or a sister. The way in which the immigration society relates to the immigrant population's stabilization process could create a wound in the emigration context. I have attempted to bridge the political split in the academic work on the subject, in which the analysis of immigration is linked to the arrival society and that of emigration to the departure society, conceiving them as mutually independent. This split partakes in the same relations of domination and power asymmetries that characterize the relations between emigration and immigration countries and that are the underlying reason for migratory movements (Sayad, 1999; Sayad, 2006). It is thus possible to speak of a "boundary ethnography" (Fabietti, 1997) on both an objective and metaphorical level: on an objective level, because the research involved the actual crossing of (political and national) borders, resulting in a multi-sited ethnography (Boccagni, 2014; Clifford, 1992); and on a metaphorical level, because the subjects involved in the research—Bangladeshi migrants—constitute border figures, *atopoi* who are out of place everywhere (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000), and also because the focus of my research—family reunification—can be read as a collective process while also representing a transition in terms of an individual migrant's status within their biographical journey. In fact, family reunification leads us back to those particular political and social practices defined as "rites of the institution" or creative acts of "social magic" (Bourdieu, 1979) that are typical of borders and make each transition and each threshold into as many limits (which can be crossed only under certain conditions). These limits establish what is to be separated, divided, and defined: an inside and an outside, two groups, on this and that side of a line, "us" and "them," which in this case exists within a further designation and institution that acts on the broader "us-them" binary pair separating and hierarchizing native citizens and immigrants. Dealing with the family also means dealing with borders: limits that separate those who are included in the family network from those who are excluded; liminal constructions that define the status and degree of belonging, ways of having access to it, and the condition of those who are positioned outside it or where its borders are blurred. These borders can either be constructed by the feelings and actions of the members of the family or imposed by policies on family reunification.

## THE RESEARCH FIELD

My research field was the social and territorial context of Alte Ceccato—the town where a large number of Bangladeshi people reside, so much so that it is known as the "Bangla capital" by many Bangladeshis in Italy—and its network of relationships, as well as the social and territorial context of the interviewees' families of origin in Bangladesh (Della Puppa, 2015; Della Puppa, 2019).

My first observations were carried out in Alte Ceccato, traversing its spaces, taking advantage of its street furniture, going to its shops and bars, and hanging

out. I became a regular presence in the village, although I should mention some key “turning points” that facilitated my access to the field.

The first was through my participation, as a teacher, in an Italian evening course aimed at the immigrant population and organized by an association offering “inter-cultural” activities in the local area. In this capacity, I managed to create a positive image of myself as someone involved in projects that were of interest to the immigrant population. My involvement in the Italian course created a growing consensus around my presence in the field, giving me a recognizable and not necessarily intrusive identity. The inhabitants of Bangladeshi origin began to greet me in the streets even when I had never met them personally, and while walking through the village, it was normal for me to be asked to go for a coffee or invited into their homes.

My incorporation into the socio-relational fabric of the Bangladeshi “community”—on the borderline between *insider* and *outsider*, thus *inside* my field due to my relationship with the Bangladeshi migrants, but also an *outside* observer with respect to this relationship (Ranci, 1998, p. 51)—became partially apparent the moment my name started to appear on the leaflets of Bangladeshi societies telling their compatriots about the “programs”<sup>2</sup> organized on civil or religious holidays.

Other “turning points” in the construction of relations with potential interviewees were an interview with a teacher in a nursery who was interested in my research work and introduced me to a wide range of Bangladeshi fathers to interview—trying to comply, as much as possible with my request for heterogeneity in social “types”—and my participation as an observer during the presentation of the electoral lists for the establishment of a new Bangladeshi society in the province of Vicenza. This was not so much because of the event itself but because I met a Bangladeshi worker there, who, due to his similar educational and research path in his country of origin, had no difficulty identifying with me (and also agreed to be interviewed). As he explicitly said:

Look, first thing, you’re working for your education, so I support this. I support you. Also, because I wanted to do a PhD in my country, but I couldn’t finish my MPhil because of ... so ... For this reason, I’ve decided to help you, any kind of help. The second thing I talked to you friendly, frankly and friendly. So ... I’ve no problem. I feel better ... (Tahzeed,<sup>3</sup> Alte Ceccato)<sup>4</sup>

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2 The Italian word for public festival, *fiesta* (meaning holiday but also celebration and party), does not reflect the nature of those events, for which the word the Bangladeshis use *programma* (program) is much more apt.

3 The interviewees’ names, like those reported in the extracts of the ethnographic diary, are pseudonyms.

4 I have reported the interviewees’ words as faithfully as possible, knowing that they will anyway be my interpretation (Bourdieu, 1993). I decided to report the interviews in the language chosen by the interviewee and leave minor grammatical errors untouched.

I thus now had two valuable “allies” who introduced me to other potential interviewees who saw me as having very high social credentials: a “cultural mediator” (Silverman, 2010) in the figure of the teacher and my first (I would meet others later) Bangladeshi informant with whom I could engage in so-called backtalk (Silverman, 2010), which is a form of dialogue around the appropriateness of my interpretations and observation techniques. As he himself made clear:

If you have any questions or if you want to know something, if you think “I have to know something” just ask me, and I will try to tell you what I think, anyway what people think is not the same. (Tahzeed, Alte Ceccato)

The more interviews I did, the more easily I could enter into the context—I needed increasingly less mediation, and my presence was not only accepted but desired, especially within the thriving Bangladeshi societies. Being a native, a university graduate, a PhD student, and a university “employee” gave me social standing in the eyes of a large proportion of the population of Bangladeshi origin. On the one hand, they saw me as having huge “reserves” of social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1980; Bourdieu, 1982; Bourdieu, 2003) and, on the other hand, as possessing information, contacts, and knowledge that were crucial for orienting themselves in the immigration society.

The relationships I built and deepened in the migration context made it possible later to carry out narrative interviews in the country of emigration. After completing my empirical work in Alte Ceccato, I asked some of my interviewees for introductions to their relations in Bangladesh in order to initiate similar interviews with them. In this way, I had easy access to the families *left behind* in Bangladesh, following an anticipatory socialization of the interview experience, as many of the interviewees themselves told me:

The day before yesterday, he called me, and he asked me to communicate with you and to talk to you without any hesitation. He explained to me about the interview. (Ahmed, brother,<sup>5</sup> Faridpur)

You see ... now also ... Yesterday, he called me; he told me about you ... Yes ... he shared with me so many things about you and your work. (Azam, brother, Dhaka)

He ... last night he gave me a call: “How are you? Are you fine?” He told me about you also: “Francesco will come, so please ...”, “OK, don’t worry, he’ll be my guest.” (Khan, brother, Chittagong)

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5 The family relationship written after each citation refers to their relationship with the migrant interviewee in Italy.



When entering the Italian homes of my interviewees, I was aware of being seen as a potential friend as well as a resource of social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1980; Bourdieu, 2003; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) in the sense of being an institutional representative who might improve their social credentials in the migration context. When being welcomed into the homes of those families who were left in the country of origin, on the other hand, I was both the foreign guest, a testimony to the family's migration story, and a representative of the distant family member: I was a thread linking them directly to their emigrated relative across continents and time, connecting the emigrant family member to the family in their country of origin. I would thus be a link to their brother or son who had been away for years, to the father of nieces and nephews who had never been seen, or to the sender of remittances that were often indispensable to the family. I constituted the "proven proof" and evidence of that person's presence elsewhere. The migrants' intermediation not only made possible my physical presence in their place of origin, but also enabled their brief symbolic return to the space-time before migration. My being in Bangladesh while at the same time being connected to Italy transformed the "doubly absent" status implicit in the migration experience (Sayad, 1999) into the synchronic and contingent condition of being "doubly present" (Riccio, 2007; Riccio, 2008). Family members who had emigrated to Italy were both present in the meanings and emotions of the families and presented through me, who, in my interviews, brought memories of them to the surface and located their biographies among those who had stayed behind. My being at that moment and place took family members in the country of origin back to the places and times before migration, making the absence less concrete and temporarily freeing the "presence of the absent" from its abstract or distracted dreamlike nature. This was added to the fact that I came from a context that was "other" to the daily lives of my potential narrators: I was a window onto unknown worlds (Olagnero, 2004). My being there at that moment also confirmed that their loved ones were elsewhere, so remote in space and time as to give an aura of sacredness to any news that arrived from there. By entering the homes of my interviewees in Bangladesh, my mere presence gave them control over the narratives they received from their relatives elsewhere. At the same time, what we called above the "anticipatory socialization of the interview experience" at a transnational level highlighted the trust underlying the relationships, which often became friendships, between me and the interviewees in Italy. Although I was crossing the "curtain" separating the "front stage" and "backstage" of international migration (Goffman, 1956), they were confident that I would not jeopardize their or their family members' reputations and social credentials in their country of origin. That is, they were sure that I would not have "unmasked" the "lies of migration"—constituted by the omissions and exaggerations that reproduce the illusions and idealized and idealizing representations around Italy in Bangladesh (Sayad, 1999; Sayad, 2006)—and neither would I have made any gaffes or behaved inappropriately, either in the private

dimension of the domestic sphere or in the public dimension, which could discredit them in the eyes of their relatives and discredit their family in the eyes of the *Shomaj*.<sup>6</sup>

## NARRATION AS INTIMACY, THEATER, AND STORYTELLING

The word “interview” emphasizes the reciprocity of viewing and the object being viewed. This meaning presupposes a more or less symmetrical sharing between the two (or more) subjects involved, even though, during the conversation, the interviewer is often able to see something that the interviewee does not see or of which they only begin to become aware in the moment of its narration (Benjamin, 1962; Benjamin, 1969). In this reflexive process, the stranger and/or foreigner provide an ideal condition for ethnographic and dialogical activity (Hampshire et al., 2014). The stranger is the figure best placed to encourage people to open up, as they are predisposed to listening and can create intimacy based on the contingent exceptionality of the moment (Simmel, 1908). In fact, intimacy is possible between strangers precisely because they do not know each other, so they do not expect anything from each other, as they will presumably never meet again. We, therefore, arrive at the “oblivion of the interview” (Sayad, 1999) as, at the same time, a condition and effect of trust (Douglas, 1976; Silverman, 2010). This implies that the interview constitutes a moment of intimacy and complicity (Oakley, 1981), as seen at various times in my ethnographic work:

I feel a bit ... great. Freedom. I've talked to someone about my whole life. In that way ... in that way, I've never spoken to anyone. The words I have said to you I haven't even said to my wife. I am a person who always laughs, talks, and sings, but in my heart, there is this huge thing, everything I have told you [...], but I have never talked about myself with other people, friends ... if someone is with me I don't speak to them about ... they don't know all these things about me. (Maliq, Alte Ceccato)

In these fifteen years, frankly, I've talked to one person about everything. My imagination, my view, and my things now I told you: I shared all these things just with another person, and now I did it with you so ... I feel better. (Tahzeed, Alte Ceccato)

In Italy, too, my being a foreigner made it possible for people to share intimate experiences and personal secrets without fear of “losing face,” telling me things that would have been received negatively in their social world and community (Wolf, 1996). At the same time, however, the interviews were also pieces of theater in which the actor, ensuring he maintained his front stage position so as not to lose face,

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6 This term indicates the “community” and the entirety of social and family relations in your village or, if you are in an urban context, in your neighborhood.

chose which aspect of his social life to narrate. It is through this acting-narrative that the subject is able to alienate and distance him/herself from him/herself in order to create another (representation of) him/herself. Like in theater, in interviews, a relationship is established between (at least) one actor-narrator who acts live on the stage and (at least) one spectator-listener who follows their actions and narratives. Particularly in Bangladesh, the “theatrical” moment of the narratives was often acted out and followed by more people than just me and the interviewee. The rituals and duties of hospitality they enacted in relation to me, the expectations that their relatives in Italy had created about the research involving them, and their curiosity linked to my origin meant the interviews were meticulously prepared and collectively awaited (for days, weeks, or months), with many people belonging to the family and wider neighborhood wanting to take part. Thus, the actors in the interview were not restricted to the interviewer and the interviewee but were a multiplicity of subjects who contributed to the story’s construction through their glances, their consent, their ways of arranging themselves in space, their body language, or, simply, with their silences. On more than one occasion, therefore, the interviewee found himself addressing a composite audience and brought into play various facets of his own identity depending on the different discursive fields and relationships to which he referred. On the one hand, there was the confrontation with the stranger with whom it was possible to share “the most surprising revelations and confessions, even up to the character of the sacramental confession” (Simmel, 1908), while, on the other hand, they had to take into account that their family members, with whom it was more important not to lose face, were listening:

When I meet Shantu, the eldest brother and, therefore, the “guardian” of the family, I explain my research and suggest an interview, which is accepted with great interest. We arrange an appointment for the next day: I am invited for lunch, and in the afternoon, we would be able to talk and do the interview. The lunch would be attended by me, my interpreter/translator Zaeed, Shantu, Shkoat, with whom I am staying, and a friend and colleague of Shantu’s, and we would be served by Shantu’s wife and sister-in-law. His mother does not engage in the domestic activities delegated to her daughters-in-law. The interview takes place in the living room, which also serves as the entrance to the house, where there are armchairs, a sofa, and a small table. The room is separated from the kitchen by an archway closed off with a burgundy curtain that hides the space from view but does not block the sound ... Indeed, from beyond this curtain, laughter can be heard in response to the funniest parts of the story, and clarifications arrive from time to time from a *deus ex machina* with a female voice. (Field notes from the interview with Shantu, brother and nephew, Charmuguria)

The narrative told in the presence of the family by the “guardian of the family” thus also became an occasion for the establishment of a family historical memory and a family identity. Individual events thus became family events, and the authority of

the “head of the family” legitimized to narrate them, crystallized them in time, and presented them to the audience, transforming them into the officially shared history of the family (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016).

During Sherif’s narration, I watch as his wife, in the shadows, nods at several passages of the story, legitimized by the fact that she experienced first-hand the facts being told by her husband. The rest of those present listen, murmuring under their breath, probably commenting on the story constructed by Sherif, who, heedless of this, keeps going, looking into the eyes of Zaeed, who is translating for me. In the meantime, darkness has fallen, and the room is lit by the usual gas lamp and embellished by curls of pyrethrum smoke. Outside, the sound of a motorbike engine drowns out our voices. Zaeed asks the interviewee to interrupt the story to wait for the noise to stop as the vehicle pulls away, and I sense that this request is met with the implicit approval of the small audience that has gathered there who are intent on not missing a single syllable of the past that is being fixed in time. (Field notes from the interview with Sherif, brother, and Gopalpur, uncle)

The construction of the story provided a perfect opportunity to act out a socio-self-analysis by both the narrator, the interview’s “actor on the stage,” and the listening group, the “audience in the stalls.” In other words, the possibility of narrating oneself and of recounting family events itself became part of the family’s experiences, constituting a meta-narrative that would be fixed in memory:

The interview is finished. I would like to make just one more question about the interview itself: what kind of emotions and feeling has the interview arisen in your heart and mind?

[The wife, who up to that point had listened silently and attentively to her husband’s answers and opinions, cannot contain herself. She lets her emotions out, speaking at length without interruption. Zaeed, somewhat taken aback, looks at me, and after I give a sign of assent, he begins to translate.] Just in a glance I have recalled and gathered my life. At one time, I recalled the past, I tried to imagine the future, and I try to understand the present. It has been an unprecedented experience for me in my whole life. I’ve never done this kind of thing before. As an experience ... this experience is unprecedented. It has given me, I should say, a sort of unspeakable feeling. So ... thank you. Thank you ... (Ahmed, brother, Faridpur)

I organized the interview to respect a chronological sequence that could run through all the topics of interest and direct the narrative, even though it would often change in relation to the context, the situation, and the interviewee. This chronological progression contained a partition that was different in the different contexts. While it was represented by the event of family reunification in the interviews conducted

with migrant workers in Italy, in the narratives of their relatives in Bangladesh, it was represented by the migration of the absent family member. The original outlines for the interviews often contained the request for episodes and anecdotes from which to start in order to then go into more depth on the details of their everyday lives and the meanings attributed to them through “relaunches.” The relaunches were aimed at going deeper, i.e., they constituted a bridge through which to restart the narrative, thus avoiding a “question and answer” dynamic. They could include expressions far removed from any conceptualization, such as, “And you in that situation ...?”, but which, as the narrative progressed, could contract into, “And you ...? In that situation ...?” to simply, “And you ...?”, even if, in the end, it was *silence* that created the best conditions for the narrative (Becker, 1998; La Mendola, 2009). Remaining silent in front of the interviewee creates an empty space between the two subjects, which can feel very awkward, but it is important not to be overcome by this awkwardness and to wait before moving on to the next question. Silence, in fact, may provide a moment of reflection needed by the interviewee for the elaboration of their memory and its articulation; it may represent an implicit request by the interviewer for them to go into more detail, or it may encourage the interviewee to continue with their narration in more detail in order to put an end to the awkwardness. Silence, therefore, may also be a subtle form of violence that renders explicit the power of the interviewer, who can use it in the course of their interaction with the interviewee.

## THE INTERPRETER/TRANSLATOR, AN ACTIVE RESEARCH SUBJECT

In Bangladesh, I used English with a small number of interviewees who were sufficiently competent in that language to use it to create narratives (Hampshire et al., 2014). With those for whom that was not possible, I made use of an interpreter/translator.

In the latter cases, each of my questions and each of the interviewees’ answers became such only through the filter of Zaeed, the interpreter/translator who guided me through the social, territorial, and cultural fabric of the country. Zaeed was, for me, a linguistic *medium* who, in the process, also provided me with an indispensable “cultural translation.” It was only thanks to his intervention that my voice was able to prompt the interviewees to tell their stories, but he did not limit himself to linguistic transposition. He had to move within two orders of discourse anchored in two different “cultural fields” (Simon, 1996), mine and that of the interviewees, whose rhetorical and discursive constructions often conveyed different “cultural meanings,” which, in turn, were continually being negotiated even within the same sociocultural context (Simon, 1996). Zaeed had to rework my question and convey the respondents’ answers by considering the way the language was linked to local realities, as well as constantly making decisions about the cultural meanings the language carried, thus necessitating the deployment of “a wide and diverse

spectrum of intelligences” (Simon, 1996). Thus, the interpreter/translator’s adaptation of my words to the cultural context did not remain at the linguistic level but also included the management of the context, engaging in a real work of mediation aimed at making the questions I formulated culturally accessible and normatively acceptable, often ignoring certain cultural constructions, as emerges from the ethnographic account:

About half an hour into the interview with Ahmed, I ask a question about the interviewee’s marriage; although the answers up to that point were not very narrative and dialogic, I have by then understood that the couple—unlike most of my research subjects in both Italy and Bangladesh—had come together after a long engagement and not as the result of an arranged marriage. At this point, something unusual happens: Zaeed suddenly stops, hesitates, and addresses the son in a firm manner. The latter suddenly gets up and hands him a glass of water poured from the jug placed on the desk not far from him. I, as well as the interviewee and his wife, observe the situation slightly surprised at the unusual lack of prior warning for this small interruption, but I do not dwell much on the episode and expect the translation to resume shortly after. It doesn’t. Zaeed seems disappointed by the ease with which his request for a drink of water was granted, and he suddenly stands up decisively, walks from one side of the room to the other with confidence, and to the desk on which are placed next to the recently emptied jug, some books, and notebooks. He starts flipping through the pages of one of them without fear of being intrusive or inappropriate. Zaeed asks the couple’s son something, who promptly replies to him. He, in turn, politely responds with a smile. The boy’s mother adds a sentence in a calm and composed manner, and the son obediently stands up and goes out of the door. Then Zaeed says to me as if nothing had happened: “Yes, we can go on ...” I stammer a little, embarrassed. Zaeed, unperturbed, presses on. “The last question ...” Trying to hide my surprise, I rephrase the question, trying in vain to contain a smile that comes out spontaneously without me understanding why—“Now it’s OK.” We resume the interview normally, and from now on, the interviewee’s answers will become much more conversational and wordier.

After about two hours, we decide to take a break. The couple does their prayers, Zaeed takes the opportunity to smoke a cigarette and, in the meantime, explains to me about the interaction with the couple’s son: He first tried to get him to leave by asking him to serve him a glass of water, hoping that he would have to leave the room to do so. When, however, he realized that the jug was at hand, he sought another diversion and asked him if the notebooks on his desk were his schoolbooks. Once he received an affirmative answer, he complimented him on the tidiness of his books and then told him that they would have a chance to talk about his progress at school after the interview and that, therefore, he could (or, rather, should) leave and come back later. The boy took the hint and left the adults alone, and his father was

free to speak without censorship due to his presence. I ask Zaeed why he decided to make him leave since the question about marriage seemed “legitimate.” He explains to me that the question showed—as both he and I had understood—the non-arranged nature of the boy’s parents’ marriage, something that is socially looked down upon, a “love marriage” being considered a less legitimate union since it is seen to be the result of the reckless and irrational desires of a young couple who did not respect parental authority, the fruit of a sensual and irrepressible impulse and, therefore, repeatable (with another partner is possible to fall in love with). (Field notes from the interview with Ahmed, brother, Faridpur)

This practice of “cultural translation” is directly relevant to the issue of ethnographic writing. Reflecting on ethnographic writing entails reflecting on the transformation of facts into text (Larsen, 2014). Often, the thoughts, interpretations, symbolic references, and attributions of the meaning of the interviewees socialized according to sociocultural norms and values considered legitimate and hegemonic in Bangladesh did not coincide, in form and content, with my own, as a researcher with a different cultural and social background. Thus, this translation required a language—and, therefore, a writing—that was appropriate for expressing the various reference systems in which the different interviewees were placed in the world (Larsen, 2014). This language adapted to interpretation—which, as will be seen below, would become more complex through Zaeed’s contribution—has meant that ethnographic practice has frequently been defined as a “literary genre” or “a particular genre of writing” (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 2002). This goes hand in hand with the question of reflexivity, i.e., the relationship between the researcher and the object of their research, thus with the subjects involved in the research, their representations and their practices, and the ways in which the researcher situates themselves in these relationships and in their biography (Bourdieu, 2003; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Larsen, 2014; Melucci, 1998), taking into account the inevitable, political, social, and power dynamic (Bourdieu, 2003; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Inevitably, reflexive practice cannot but condition ethnographic writing (Larsen, 2014). In this text, I have maintained my positioning without fear of using personal pronouns and without attempting to “purify” my research practice by removing subjective elements from the empirical results (Crapanzano, 1977; Marcus & Cushman, 1982; Larsen, 2014). Just as the ethnographic method does not lend itself well to “objective” procedures, so too ethnographic writing cannot be considered a “neutral means” for representing the reality objectivized through the method (Larsen, 2014).

In my ethnographic work in Bangladesh, it was more difficult to collect the narratives of those who, although knowing some basic English, had not mastered the language sufficiently to construct complex discursive plots. This type of interviewee, driven by enthusiasm or the desire to enter into direct communication with the Italian researcher, often responded directly without the use of the interpreter/translator, thus exhausting the potential of their answers, resulting in a tendency

to generalize and an inevitable reduction in the complexity of their narratives. On these occasions, therefore, it was necessary for me to lose eye contact with the interviewee and, through my body language and the continuous redirecting of my gaze, to push the interpreter/translator—with whom, from time to time, I made arrangements—into center stage, weakening my positioning within the interaction in order to favor the use of Bangla.

In the course of each interview, my position as a researcher had to shift, as I had to move to the margins of the communicative process and intervene only at the moment in which the questions were being formulated. In fact, in order to give continuity to the interviewee's voice, it was Zaeed who had to manage the use of relaunches and continuators. Since I could not rely on relaunches as I was unable to insert myself in the concatenations of the narrators or pick up the expressions they used in real-time—except after the lengthy translations that almost never reproduced the exact lexical form of the signifiers—this might have resulted in a more structured interview, forcing me to formulate the questions exactly as they were written in the original interview outline.

This “dialogical triangulation” could result in the loss of the emotional nuances with which the narrators accompanied their narrative: not having the linguistic channel used by Zaeed and the interviewees (Bangla), it was not always possible to match the voice tones, facial expressions, and non-verbal body language to the discursive constructions that were reported to me by the interpreter/translator, inevitably in the form of a homogeneous, flat, continuous narrative flow.

In the communicative relationship structured around the simultaneous presence of three subjects, the management of silences and the resulting awkwardness that I often use in my empirical research became more complicated. As well as having to think about my own awkwardness and that of the interviewee, I also had to reckon with that of the interpreter/translator, an additional actor who, unable to manage his own positioning, sometimes ended up breaking the silence, causing the emotional effervescence and consequent awkwardness to disappear. Whereas in a conversation between two actors, silence and embarrassment remain locked in a bipolarity that stimulates speech, in a communicative triad, the actors may feel deprived of the responsibility of resolving the situation of suspension, retreating from the relationship, avoiding going into more detail, transforming silence into muteness and preventing the narrative from continuing. Obviously, this is not only a prerogative of multi-sited research, but, more in general, it is an aspect that concerns qualitative research that makes use of an interpreter/translator.

My accounts based on narrative interviews are in themselves narratives of narratives, a double *verstehen*: both the questions and the answers are interpreted. The narrative and the resulting research, therefore, are embedded in a *double* hermeneutic that becomes *triple* when a third “gradient of interpretation” intervenes (Edwards & Temple, 2002, p. 11). This is the “triple hermeneutic” that dominates in the research's restitution/dissemination phase, which—even though



I have chosen to report the words of the interviewees as faithfully as possible—obviously entails a profound work of interpretation and re-writing (Bourdieu, 1993). The “betrayal of translation,” the “dilemma of translated words” (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 162), the linguistic slippage and the elaboration of a third subject who (inter)acts in the data construction process with their “categories of the intellect,” in fact entail a further interpretative double-passage of question and answer and another linguistic slippage. This dynamic clearly emerges in the interview passage and field notes below:

During the interview with Shantu, who has already demonstrated a conservative socio-political attitude, I ask the following question: “What do the people think about people leaving the country and going abroad?”

The interviewee, who has only a basic use of English, uses his native language to answer. The interpreter/translator, attentive to what he considers to be my expectations of his linguistic and ideological performance, steeped in university and progressive culture and imbued with historical-materialist categories, translates the answer: “All the impressions of those who live abroad in mass perception are not that, in most cases usually people from the lower classes use to go abroad ...”

Suddenly, however, the interviewee—who is following Zaeed’s words—interrupts the translation and gently but firmly emphasizes: “No lower classes: I said, ‘poor families.’” Zaeed, disguising his embarrassment, resumes his translation: “People from poor families used to go abroad ...” (Shantu, brother and nephew, Charmuguria)

Zaeed, born and raised in a rural village, socialized in a very religious middle-class Bangladeshi family, but now living in the capital, where he got a university education, also belonged to the national community (the Bangladeshi one) of the interviewees (or a part of it) with whom he shared a universe of meanings and dispositions—albeit with sometimes conflicting interpretations. At the same time, however, he shared a vision of the world and, above all, a set of signifiers used to describe it with me, the researcher. He thus found himself in conflict with the multiple actors in the field for hegemony over authorized languages.

## CONCLUSIONS

A theoretical approach aimed at redialing the political and scientific rift between emigration and immigration, often taken as mutually independent phenomena, necessitates a suitable methodological approach: an epistemology and a methodology that go beyond dichotomously attributing the analysis of immigration to the destination society and the analysis of emigration to the departure society.

Multi-sited ethnography is a research practice—and, at the same time, a scientific stance—that can be used to “sew up” this split and to observe the global scope of social transformations connected to international migration, along with the transnational unfolding of the biographical trajectories of migrants and their families (Boccagni, 2014).

If ethnographic and qualitative research already continually highlights and reminds us of the changing character of the field, the researcher practicing multi-sited ethnography must be aware that this changeability crosses national borders, reverberating through and becoming magnified in transnational space. It is the research field itself, in fact, that is transnational, tracing migratory networks, reconstructing social relations, and embracing family ties that extend across continents, linking, in this case, Bangladeshi villages and metropolises to the industrial peripheries of the urban sprawl of northeastern Italy. Thus, access to the research field in Bangladesh was influenced by my initial *gaffes* and missteps but also by the relationships of trust built with the interviewees and the sudden acceleration of my research in Alte Ceccato. For the Bangladeshis in Alte Ceccato, I was a potential resource of social capital, a possible friend or institutional representative. For their family members back home, on the other hand, I represented the distant brother or son, shortening the space-time of migration. As a consequence of this reminder and, above all, of the anticipatory socialization that migrants enacted at a distance on their relatives in relation to my research, the interview took the form of an event that was waited for and prepared: a moment of (a piece of) theatre that could last a whole day.

Given the situation, I did not follow the methodological guidelines often found in the literature regarding the absence of additional listeners during interviews. Unlike in Italy, the interviewees’ narratives in Bangladesh, in fact, frequently took place in the presence of several people—friends, family members, and relatives—thus becoming an opportunity to establish a shared family history. These narrated representations thus offered the opportunity for collective self-social analysis, allowing them, perhaps for the first time, to recount and order the events of migration and the family history, above all to themselves. A shared family history is often taken for granted by all members of a household, but, in reality, there are rarely opportunities to compare the family perceptions and representations about the family itself of each member and even of each generation or gender within the family. The notion of “shared family history” has been used to delve deeper into biographical trajectories and autobiographical narratives of the self, marital and family trajectories (Bietti, 2010; Buyukkececi & Çineli, 2023; Fivush, 2013; McAdam et al., 2023), but it has never been observed as a process emerging from ethnographic and narrative interviews in the migratory and family context.

Ethnographic practice demands flexibility and the ability to adapt to the aforementioned changing nature of the research field and the relationships that unfold within it, and also an awareness that the suggested methodological devices, which

are often difficult to apply, might need to be subverted (Hampshire et al., 2014). This resilience and ability to cope with unpredictability seem all the more necessary in the course of multi-sited research, as made clear by the dynamic whereby an interview that was meant to be individual becomes a collective event, or as revealed even more clearly by the collaboration with a linguistic interpreter/translator. This increases the uncontrollable aspects of the ethnographic experience and calls into question pre-planned methodological practices. Especially in a sociocultural context that is “other” to that in which the researcher has been socialized, the figure of the interpreter/translator necessarily becomes an active subject in the research process, adding a further degree of interpretation to the interpretations, modifying the methodological practices proper to the qualitative interview, engaging in a cultural translation—and not a mere linguistic transposition—of the artifices from which the interviewees’ narratives take their cue.

At times, it seems that telling a family story and a story of migration from a safe position has a therapeutic benefit. I could not discuss this aspect here, but it could be the subject of further work.

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## POVZETEK

### VEČPRIZORIŠČNA ETNOGRAFIJA V PRAKSI: RAZMISLEKI, STRATEGIJE IN ORODJA ZA KVALITATIVNO RAZISKOVANJE TRANSNACIONALNIH MIGRACIJ

Francesco Della Puppa

Članek je nastal na podlagi triletnega raziskovalnega projekta o migracijah iz Bangladeša v Italijo. Avtor se je v raziskavi osredotočil na Bangladeševce, ki živijo v mestecu Alte Ceccato v italijanski pokrajini Vicenza, pri čemer je uporabil metodo daljšega opazovanja z udeležbo ter opravil 74 intervjujev v Italiji in Bangladešu.

Za teoretični pristop, katerega cilj je preseči politično in znanstveno ločnico med izseljevanjem in priseljevanjem, ki sta pogosto obravnavana kot medsebojno neodvisna pojava, je potreben ustrezen metodološki pristop: epistemologija in metodologija, ki presegata dihotomno pripisovanje analize priseljevanja ciljni družbi ter analize izseljevanja družbi izvora. Večprizoriščna etnografija je raziskovalna praksa in znanstvena usmeritev, s katero lahko presežemo to delitev ter opazujemo globalni obseg družbenih sprememb, povezanih z mednarodnimi migracijami.

Čeprav etnografsko in kvalitativno raziskovanje že samo po sebi stalno izpostavlja in opominja na spreminjanje tega raziskovalnega področja, se morajo raziskovalci, ki uporabljajo večprizoriščno etnografijo, zavedati, da spremenljivost presega nacionalne meje ter se odraža in krepi tudi v transnacionalnem prostoru. Tako so na dostop do raziskovalnega polja v Bangladešu vplivali odnosi zaupanja, ki jih je avtor vzpostavil z intervjuvanci, ter nenadna intenzifikacija njegovega raziskovanja v italijanskem kraju Alte Ceccato. Za Bangladeševce v tem mestecu je bil avtor potencialni vir družbenega kapitala, potencialni prijatelj ali institucionalni predstavnik, na drugi strani pa je za njihove družinske člane, ki so ostali v Bangladešu, predstavljal oddaljenega brata ali sina, ki skrajšuje časovno-prostorski okvir migracije. Zaradi tega opomina in predvsem zaradi anticipatorne socializacije, ki so jo migranti na daljavo izvajali pri svojih sorodnikih v zvezi z avtorjevo raziskavo, je intervju dobil obliko dogodka, ki so ga pričakovali in se nanj pripravljali.

Glede na te okoliščine avtor ni upošteval metodoloških smernic glede odsotnosti dodatnih poslušalcev med intervjuji, ki so pogosto navajane v literaturi. V nasprotju z Italijo so pogovori z intervjuvanci v Bangladešu pogosto potekali v prisotnosti več oseb, kar je bila priložnost za vzpostavljanje skupne družinske zgodovine. Te pripovedne reprezentacije so tako ponudile priložnost za kolektivno socialno samoanalizo, saj so migrantom omogočile pripovedovanje o migracijskih dogodkih in družinski zgodovini ter njihovo časovno umeščanje.

Zdi se, da sta pri raziskavah na več lokacijah še toliko bolj potrebni prilagodljivost in sposobnost soočanja z nepredvidljivimi situacijami, o čemer priča dinamika intervjujev, ki so se iz prvotno zamišljenih individualnih spremenili v skupinske dogodke, še bolj jasno pa se kaže v sodelovanju z jezikovnim prevajalcem. V

družbeno-kulturnem kontekstu, ki je »drugi« od tistega, v katerem je bil raziskovalec socializiran, prevajalec nujno postane aktiven subjekt v raziskovalnem procesu, ki dodatno interpretira interpretacije, spreminja metodološke prakse, značilne za kvalitativni intervju, ter sodeluje pri kulturnem prevajanju konstruktov, iz katerih izhajajo pripovedi intervjuvancev.



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## TEMATSKI SKLOP / THEMATIC SECTION

DUŠEVNO ZDRAVJE V KONTEKSTU MIGRACIJ /  
MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

*Sanja Cukut Krilić*

Mental Health in the Context of Migration: Introduction to the Thematic Section

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