'What has happened since the last time we saw each other?': Methodological challenges in an unplanned longitudinal qualitative investigation into binational couples in Spain

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Abstract

Based on the experience derived from a 12-year research process (2006–2018) on binational couples undertaken by a team of social researchers and financed by the Spanish Science, Technology and Innovation System, we discuss how our practice and our process of constructing results reinforce but also qualify and modify some aspects of classical ethnographic theory and Qualitative Longitudinal Research. Given the difficulties of securing funding for long-term projects in the context of short-term contract funding and the importance of longitudinal methodology for understanding phenomena associated with migrant populations, we had no choice but to resort to the "ethnographical imagination". In doing so, the fundamental question we address is: how can a longitudinal study be carried out on the basis of projects that were not originally designed with that end in mind and within the framework of a research environment determined by the standardised guidelines of a national research plan?

KEYWORDS: longitudinal qualitative methodology, ethnographical imagination, National Research Plan, binational couples, migrations

Introduction

Scholars are increasingly reflecting on the applications of longitudinal methodology in studies involving migrant populations (Coyocaru, 2016; Ryan et al., 2016; Winiarska, 2017; Hosnedlová, 2020). At the same time, interest in the institutional factors determining the hegemonic model of academic production is reflected, alongside a concern with strategies to intensify the impact and dissemination of social science research, in publications such as those of Donovan (2011), Ravenscroft et al. (2017), Reale et al. (2017), Torrance (2019), and Sordé et al. (2020). In this article, we combine these two strands to answer the question: how can a longitudinal study be carried out on the basis of projects that were not originally designed for that purpose and within the framework of a research environment determined by the standardised guidelines of a national research plan?[1]

Since our article aims to provoke methodological reflection within the framework of qualitative research design, we decided not to present our theoretical results in this paper (some of them may be found in: Roca, 2011, 2016; Roca et al., 2013; Roca et al., 2015; Djurdjevic & Roca, 2016; Roca et al., 2017). Instead, we explain the methodological choices made during four research projects, funded through competitive open calls and carried out over a 12-year period (2006–2018),[2] which focused on the phenomenon of mixed couples[3] in Spain from a gender perspective. We will start by looking at the first three projects, for which we used a qualitative methodology that could be termed "conventional" or "classical". We will then turn to the decision-making process and the adaptation of three standardised projects granted by a national research body for a single longitudinal qualitative project. The fact that this was longitudinal in nature adds another singular dimension to our research, given the difficulty of securing funding for

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[1] The Spanish *Plan Nacional de Investigación* (National Research Plan) is the central government's main instrument for developing and achieving its policy objectives and priorities for research, development and technological innovation. It includes financial support for three-year projects in all knowledge areas, awarded through annual competitive calls.

[2] Details of projects: 1. 'Amor importado, migrantes por amor: la constitución de parejas entre españoles y mujeres de América latina y de Europa del Este en el marco de la transformación actual del sistema de género en España' (47/05): 2006-2008 – 'AMORIMPORT'; 2. 'Amores transnacionales: constitución y desarrollo de parejas mixtas en España' (CSO2009-10187): 2010-2012 – 'AMORMIXT'; 3. 'Parejas mixtas residentes fuera de España: relaciones de género, dinámicas sociales y conexiones transnacionales' (CSO2012-33565): 2013-2015 – 'EXTRAMIXT'. 4. 'Roles de género e interculturalidad de las parejas mixtas en España: una investigación cualitativa longitudinal' (CSO2015-65531-P): 2016-2018 – 'LONGMIXT'.

[3] The concept of mixed or binational marriages, expressions which are used interchangeably in this article, is undoubtedly complex, as Williams has pointed out (2010). In the context of this paper, by "mixed" or "binational marriages" we mean those legal unions formed by two heterosexual people, one Spanish and the other of a different nationality of origin.

long-term projects 'in a context of short-term contract funding,' as accurately identified by Thomson and Holland (2003, p. 242).

Conducting research within the framework of government and academic grants involves going through a competitive process and adapting to a standardised structure that imposes specific deadlines and guidelines that are not easily circumvented. For instance, the application for an Research and Development and Innovation project requires the formulation of hypotheses and the creation of a detailed schedule that organises the different study phases to fit the hegemonic paradigm of the "hard" sciences.

Sharing fieldwork dilemmas and strategies for adapting theory to methodological practice contributes to the recognition of qualitative research, as argued by Koro-Ljungberg and Bussing (2013) in the case of Longitudinal Qualitative Research (LQR). With this initial intention, we present the problematisations and the decision-making process involved in the methodological design, discussing how our experience reinforces, yet also qualifies, some aspects of classical ethnographic theory and of LQR itself.

Even at the end of the previous century, several authors were finding that ethnographic fieldwork had still not been subject to a thorough review (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992); it is fair to say that the place of ethnography had been put to one side as a methodological problem (Ferguson & Gupta, 1997). One of the first and most influential contributions to overcome this stagnation in ethnography was that of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). The epistemology on which multi-sited ethnography is based simultaneously sets out two dichotomous poles of the local/global or daily life/system type, going beyond the classical tendency towards localism and particularism in order to confront the problems that arise in a mobile, changing, and globalised world. It is one of the escape routes that modern anthropologists are seeking in order to free themselves from the constraints of a methodological practice devised for the study of exotic and small-scale community societies but little-suited to the study and representation of contemporary realities.

As Marcus emphasises:

> any ethnography of a cultural formation in the world system is also an ethnography of the system, and therefore cannot be understood only in terms of the conventional single-site *mise-en-scène* of ethnographic research, assuming indeed it is the cultural formation, produced in several different locales, rather than the conditions of a particular set of subjects that is the object of study. (1995, p. 99)

It is a practice less marked by fieldwork in its classical conception as a long-term stay by the ethnographer in a single small-scale site. This type of approach is characterised by a delocalisation of ethnography, incorporating as ethnographic material both direct field observations and interviews, as well as other materials and sources.

As for the contextualisation of our object of study, mixed or binational couples went from representing 4.13% of the total number of marriages celebrated in Spain in 1996 to 16.6% of marriages in 2009, the year in which the highest number of unions was reached (INE, n.d.). In this context, we, as a multidisciplinary team of researchers, presented a qualitative research project on this subject to the Spanish National Research body. Our purpose was to investigate the motivations and expectations of the partners in mixed heterosexual couples comprising a Spanish man and a non-Spanish woman (the predominant mixed-couple model in Spain), as well as the search formulas they used for their partners and the resulting gender relations, together with their internal management of interculturality.

In the second project, we were interested in the same questions but addressed to binational unions formed of Spanish women and non-Spanish men. As a result of the economic crisis that began in the first decade of this century, from 2009 on, a slight but continuous decline in mixed marriages began in Spain (INE, n.d.). Among those who decided to emigrate were many mixed couples who opted to start afresh in their foreign partner's country of origin. At this point, it became interesting to initiate a project to discover if these couples' expectations, gender relations and social dynamics had been altered and to delve into the reasons for their decision to set up their homes outside of Spain. Throughout the second and third projects, true to the flexible and work-in-progress nature of the qualitative methodology, we conducted a round of second interviews with some of the informants. While these might not have corresponded to the aims of each of those two projects, they did afford us insights into the development of some of those couples beyond the static image we possessed of them due to the previous interview. We quickly realised the immense value that this practice contributed to our knowledge of our object and subjects of study.

With this record of three projects carried out on the same topics but with differently composed and/or located groups, with a powerful and extensive database of informants and interviews (and a well-founded intuition about the potential value of revisiting the interviewees), we proposed requesting funding for a fourth project that would incorporate the application of the longitudinal dimension to the informant database compiled over the ten years of the three previous projects.

The application of the longitudinal perspective to our object of study was particularly relevant in that it allowed us to incorporate the temporal dimension, which is fundamental to understanding and evaluating the processes of transformation and continuity as regards the couple's gender relations and the impact of the presence/absence of children in their relationship. Several authors, for example, have noted the impact of migration and length of time spent in the destination on key aspects of female gender roles, such as the private domain, family relationships, affections and emotions (Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007); and on processes related to interculturality, pointing to the efforts families make to establish strong ties and achieve cohesion transcending separation and long distance, as well as the importance of issues linked to belonging and the transmission of the migrant spouse's culture to the children (Delcroix & Guayaux, 1992; Le Gall & Meintel, 2011).

Methodology: Use and adaptation of classical qualitative techniques

Due to the nature of the questions posed, which require the informants to share with our researchers material related to private and intimate aspects of their lives, we resorted to two main ethnographic techniques: the in-depth guided interview and the observation.

Interviews

During the three projects, different types of interviews were carried out: individual, double (with both members of the couple separately) or joint (with both members of the couple at the same time). The informants' availability and preferences determined the choice of interview mode. The interview guides varied with each project, although the central themes always included gender relations and their experience of interculturality. Informants were selected using the snowball technique (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994). The initial group was formed from the researchers' social network and from contacts with intermediary agents, including immigrants' associations, language learning centres, heads of marriage agencies, consulates and embassies, and similar. A sufficient number of interviews was conducted until a satisfactory level of information saturation was reached.

Most of the interviews were conducted in person, but when that was not possible, we used Skype[4] or the telephone. In certain cases, we used email, WhatsApp, or Facebook

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[4] The Skype interview offers certain possibilities: a very high-quality recording and management of the interviewee's intimacy within their control at all times, allowing for a relationship and interview situation that is neither intrusive nor invasive (assuming that the "appearance" of an anthropologist in the life of a person "converted" into an informant always involves a degree of "intrusion" or "forced situation") given that the interviewee chooses what and how they wish to reveal.

Messenger to complete information or maintain contact. The interviews were always recorded, with the permission of the interviewees, who also signed a consent form stating the purpose of the project and the use to which their information would be put.

In many cases, the very nature of the methodology meant that the interviewers' relationship with their interviewees extended beyond the formal interview context. The continued contact brought us information about the vicissitudes of the couple's lives. Information also came to us from other sources since some of these couples had first been approached within the relationship spheres of the interviewers themselves. All these factors minimised the risk of negative answers when we negotiated for a second/third interview. Consequently, we checked 'at each stage that participants still want to be part of the research,' as proposed by Warin (2011, p. 807). Likewise, of the nine members of the research team who conducted interviews throughout the different projects, four belonged to mixed couples (a Spanish woman with a Cuban man, and three female researchers (a Serbian, a Chilean and a Guatemalan) married to Spanish men). This facilitated empathy between researchers and interviewees regarding the possibility of sharing experiences and establishing processes of reciprocity (information on the steps required to validate university qualifications or about bodies and organisations serving migrant groups, among other things).

Moreover, it also helped reduce the impact of the so-called 'crisis of representation', as researchers from the group studied and from outside it were involved in obtaining and subsequently analysing information, thus achieving a good articulation between the *emic* and *etic* perspectives. We argue, with Romocea (2014), that emotions do not compromise the scientific standard of research but rather add new tools and opportunities. In our case, this was the perfect invitation to do more interviews. Furthermore, in some cases, we did so even before we had begun to think about undertaking a longitudinal study.

The initial typology of informants/mixed couples that we intended to cover emerged from the intersection of the variables that we considered most important in each case, based on the statistical data and literature: the spouses' ages and the age difference between them, their educational and income levels, the national origins of the foreign partners, the previous marital status of both spouses, the time spent cohabiting, the presence/absence of children from previous and/or current relationships, and the country of residence. Over the course of the three projects cited, we conducted 138 interviews, which meant speaking with 165 informants.

Observation

Given the nature of the project and the object of study, the observation technique turned out to be rather problematic. Even so, we established the following observation units: the countries of origin of both partners and the virtual environment as one of the privileged ways for these couples to search for, meet and get to know each other.[5] We conducted most of the fieldwork in Spain, especially in Catalonia, the research team's home base and the region with the highest rates of mixed marriages in Spain. We also undertook six trips to some of the main countries of origin of foreign wives: three to Brazil, two to Mexico, and one to Ukraine.

In Brazil, a researcher conducted five group interviews with four to seven heterosexual couples formed of a Brazilian and a Spanish person, and carried out participant observation among Spanish and Catalan associations in São Paulo. Two more researchers did fieldwork in Natal (NE Brazil), where they carried out four semi-structured interviews and six informal interviews with binational couples, Spanish businessmen in relationships with local Brazilian women, and with marriage agencies. At the same time, they undertook participant observation in prominent tourist enclaves and nightlife complexes in Natal. Finally, another researcher conducted fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro, leading six semi-structured interviews. On two occasions, trips to Mexico by a member of the research team for other professional reasons provided the opportunity for interviews and observation in local Spanish associations, with six interviews being conducted.

The stay in Ukraine came about as the result of contacts with various marriage agencies. Two agencies—Interdating[6] and Chicas del este[7]—were willing to receive us and explain the business to us. Daily observations were carried out in the agency over a month, with a total of 15 interviews conducted with Ukrainian women subscribers, plus some informal interviews with four Spanish clients; there were also visits to marriage agencies in the city and a Spanish-Ukrainian couple living in Kyiv (Roca, 2011, 2016).

As for the virtual environment, our fieldwork consisted of searching for and analysing the websites of marriage agencies offering to find transnational partners through travel and internet searches and observing some specialist forums for mixed couples, from where some future informants would emerge.

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[5] The other means we have documented by which mixed couples search and form is travel to the destination country under the rubric of leisure, sentimental, or sex tourism and as the result of a previous non-amorous migratory process.

[6] See their website http://www.interdating.es.

[7] See their website http://www.chicasdeleste.com.

Given that our object of study was mobile and in multiple locations, that one of our aims was to empirically trace the thread of cultural processes (Marcus, 1995), and that our subjects participated in transnational processes and had intrinsic mobility (both physical and virtual), we were proposing a research project that could be termed multi-sited or multi-local ethnography—or even virtual ethnography (Hine, 2004). Moreover, a diversity of sources was used during each project—statistical, legal and media Our work describes a global community of women and men involved in dating and couple/marriage relationships (Roca et al., 2015) and asks, among other questions, how the development of the internet and diverse forms of electronic communication have allowed the emergence of new types of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Appadurai, 2001) and how qualitative researchers might best undertake their study.

An unexpected turn: an unforeseen longitudinal qualitative research project

When we applied for our first project on couples comprising Spanish men and non-Spanish women, we aimed for a three-year research project. The exciting process of proposing an LQR project on the basis of three projects carried out over ten years without any initial longitudinal intention triggered continuous decision-making and reflection on the most suitable methods for harmonising our ethnographic starting base with our longitudinal aim.

If we had proceeded on the basis of deductive logic and equipped the project with the most standardised instruments, it would probably have run its course by the end of the three years, and we would then have embarked on another one. However, the use of a flexible methodology and a diversity of sources (feasible due to the existence, among other things, of an interdisciplinary research team) soon made us aware of the relevance of continuing with the same object of study but applied to different groups. It became our first link in a chain of three projects which, though they had different reference subjects, maintained the same object of study. This led us in an almost "natural" way to consider the possibility, and to have the capacity, of taking on a longitudinal project. The nature of the research pushed towards this prospect, given that in the previous projects we had collected accounts of recently formed couples, who were generally recently formed, childless, with few instances of divorce, and so on. As envisaged in the interview guides, their accounts contained the description of a recent past in which the couple had formed. It was delivered from a present installed in the initial phase of the relationship (often euphoric and unproblematic) and an outlook brimming with plans that conjured up visions of an intercultural family, imagined gender roles, desired family re-

lationships, and similar. As noted above, the fact that the first informants were part of the researchers' social circle and that many of the interviewers were themselves partners in binational couples favoured the establishment of relationships that transcended the "typical" researcher-informant one. These circumstances paved the way for the conducting of a second or third interview with many of them.

It all amounted to an opportunity to attempt a longitudinal study, as the philosophy of LQR predominately focuses on providing information on the changes in individuals and groups over long periods and observing how those people and groups respond to social change and identity management (Saldaña, 2003; McLeod & Thomson, 2009). It is precisely these roles connected with gender identity and the negotiation of cultural identity by the couple itself (and by the mixed family that might ensue) that are the main units of analysis we have dealt with from the outset. For their part, time and the emphasis on change form an unavoidable part of LQR design, taking our research beyond a simple follow-up.

There are various approaches to LQR design, but the predominant one is based on successively repeated interviews with the same person over time to construct life accounts that can be studied at the individual or comparative level (Thomson, 2007). That the interviews from these previous projects were not originally conceived with the aim of "returning to the interviewee" has not proved an impediment because the topics and focuses of interest have been maintained over all the projects.

Composition of the informants' sample to be revisited

In order to establish the informant sample to work with, we compiled all the interview material from the three previous projects. Once the interviews with incomplete informant data had been set aside, we had 128 textual interview transcripts with individuals/couples that could eventually be "revisited".

All of the nine interviewers who had conducted those interviews over the course of the different projects were asked to recover the relevant contact details. We then asked this same group to choose those interviews that they thought would be interesting to repeat, based on the "open" topics, they remembered having dealt with in the earlier interview/s (the couple's plans (or lack thereof) for having children, their desire to learn their partner's mother tongue, their families' roles in their children's education, among others). An initial sample was formed on this basis, resulting in a pre-selection of 70 interviews conducted with a total of 82 informants (four of whom were interviewed twice). Although we were not seeking a statistically representative sample, we attempted to in-

clude spouses from the main countries of origin of foreign partners in mixed couples in Spain when they did not appear in this pre-selection. As a result, we managed to conduct 34 interviews distributed as follows (Table 1):

Table 1: Interviewees profiles

	Alias	Origin females	Origin males	Interview type	Relationship	Children
1	Berta	Spain	Central African R.	Individual	Same couple	A son
2	Blanca	Spain	1-Italy, 2-Italy	Individual	Ended	No children
3	Charity	Spain	1-UK 2-Argentina 3-UK	Individual	New couple	Two daughters by the first husband and a son
4	Charo	Spain	Morocco	Individual	Ended	No children
5	Charo and Ed-	Spain	UK	Joint	Same couple	Two daughters
6	Chivis	Mexico	Spain	Individual	Same couple	A daughter
7	Corina	Romania	Spain	Individual	Ended	No children
8	Djordjevic	Serbia	Spain	Individual	Ended	One son
9	Eduard and	Russia	Spain	Joint	Same couple	One daughter
10	Esteban	Portugal	Spain	Individual	Same couple	One daughter
11	Francisco	Mexico	Spain	Double	Same couple	Two sons
12	Georgina	Mexico	Spain	Double		
13	Hamid	Spain	Morocco	Individual	Same couple	A daughter & A
14	Iker	Brazil	Spain	Individual	Same couple	A son
15	Javier	France	Spain	Double	Same couple	No children
16	Nelly	France	Spain	Double		
17	Josep Ramón and Mayra	Ukraine	Spain	Joint	Same couple	A daughter
18	Josep and Selma	Brazil	Spain	Joint	Same couple	No children
19	Juanjo	1-Brazil 2-Spain	Spain	Individual	New couple	No children
20	Liz	Cuba	Spain	Individual	Same couple	No children
21	Marcia	Ecuador	Spain	Individual	Same couple	Two sons
22	Ma. José and	Spain	Honduras	Joint	Same couple	A daughter
23	Marisa	Peru	1-Peru 2-Spain	Individual	Ended	A daughter by first husband
24	Marita	Spain	1-Domician R. 2-Domician R. 3-Colombia	Individual	New couple	No children
25	Miquel and	Japan	Spain	Joint	Same couple	Two daughters
26	Nieves	Spain	1-Guatemala 2-Guatemala	Individual	New relationship	A daughter by first husband
27	Núria	Spain	Mexico	Individual	Same couple	Two daughters and two sons
28	Sara	Spain	India	Individual	Same couple	Two daughters
29	Simeó	Russia	Spain	Individual	Same couple	A daughter
30	Sonia	Peru	1-Spain 2-Spain	Individual	New couple	One son by first husband
31	Valeria	Spain	1-Brazil 2-Brazil	Individual	Ended	No children
32	Xuelin	China	Spain	Double	Same couple	One son
33	Pol	China	Spain	Double		
34	Yadira	Mexico	Spain	Individual	Same couple	Three sons

*'Joint' is the term for an interview carried out with both spouses simultaneously, and 'double' for one done with each separately, underlining indicates that the origin of the interviewee.

Contacting potential informants

We then attempted to contact the 82 informants who had been interviewed years before to see if they would be amenable to being revisited. We established the criterion that, if possible, the same person who had interviewed them the first time would do so again. The idea was to control the evolution of emotions during the research project and to boost emotional reflexivity when sharing interpretations among team members (McKenzie, 2017). As regards the type of interview (individual, joint or double), it was agreed that we would attempt to repeat the original formula but leave it up to the interviewees' free choice. There were only five people who, for various reasons, preferred not to be interviewed again, rendering the dropout percentage almost irrelevant. However, we had to rule out 37 informants due to their proving impossible to contact (out-of-date telephone numbers, changes of address, failure to respond to our requests for contact, etc.). As a result, we managed to conduct 34 interviews with the remaining 40 informants. In this final sample, a good part of the nationalities most commonly found in mixed unions with Spanish partners is represented; 27 of the people interviewed were still in the same couple relationship as they had been in the first interview. In seven cases, the informants had ended their previous relationship; of these, two had formed a new couple. The average time between the first and the second interview was six years and three months, with 11 years and one month being the maximum and two years and six months the minimum. The number of first interviews used for each project turned out to be well balanced: ten for the first project (2006–2009), fourteen for the second (2010–2012) and ten for the third (2013–2015).

Thus, in the final sample, the variables relevant to the project's thematic axes (gender relations and interculturality management) are well represented in terms of different types of couples and their situations: the presence of the main nationalities of non-Spanish spouses; 80% of couples remaining together and 20% having gone through a breakup process by the time of the second interview; and almost two thirds of couples with children and one third without.

Preparation and development of the interviews

Owing to the longitudinal nature of the methodology used in this project, it was not possible to prepare a general interview guide, but rather we had to write an *ad hoc* one for every person/couple interviewed.

Once the interview had been agreed upon, two team members (the researcher who had done the first interview plus another researcher, whom we called the "reader") would

carefully read the informant's file and the file transcription of the earlier interview. Once this had been done, they had to fill in a "pre-interview form" detailing topics present in the earlier interview (to be resumed in this new encounter with the informant) as well as new ones still to be tackled. During this process, they also had to bear in mind the contents of a generic guide that we drafted on gender and interculturality, which included the most important topics to cover in terms of the longitudinal project aims. Once they had completed the pre-interview forms, the researchers would compare their two versions and merge everything into a single form that would then be used as a guide for this specific interview.

Despite this preparatory process, we attempted to begin each new interview with a general open question: "What has happened since the last time we saw each other?" Only when the interviewee did not expand on the topics we had identified as important were more precise and directed questions asked, with an emphasis on matters concerning the transformations and continuities in the field of gender relations and interculturality.

Analysis

We thus found ourselves with 70 interviews to analyse (34 from the longitudinal project, plus the 36 done with those same people/couples in the earlier projects, as on two occasions the informants had been interviewed twice). Therefore, we then proposed that a project member read each of the new interviews, compiling an "index" of content logging items related to the topics that appeared in each interview and their frequency, which would show the recurring topics. The entire research team read the 70 interviews, adopting well-grounded theory resources (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) and analytical induction (Denzin, 1978; Katz, 1983). That meant seeking to discover and generate theories and concepts relevant to the studied reality, on the one hand, and verifying or testing propositions about them, on the other. The aim was to carry out an analysis based on specific topics, making it possible to set up various sub-groups within the team, which could devote themselves to studying only those interviews addressing the chosen topic rather than the whole corpus of 70 interviews, thus encouraging depth of analysis. The team's lead researcher, however, had to guarantee co-ordination of the whole and therefore be involved in all the groups.

Based on the above and aware of the two central themes of the previous projects, the three thematic focuses of the analysis were established. The first was gender, paying attention to the resistances and transformations in the couple's gender relations, with empowerment and female agency, management of masculinities, and role reversal as sub-

topics. The second was interculturality, the processes of its construction and management; as sub-topics, we paid attention to the children, to cultural and national identity, to the processes of adaptation, assimilation, integration, segregation, hybridisation and, finally, to cosmopolitanism. The third focus of the analysis concerns the management and transformation of love and intimacy, with the divorce process as a sub-topic.

Discussion

We see below how the research we have presented explores and applies the flexibility of the basic assumptions of LQR. We maintain, along with Koro-Ljunberg and Bussing (2013), that 'methodological modifications and shifts are commonly not well documented or discussed by researchers. However, avoiding or masking indicated methodological changes can adversely impact the validity of research and trustworthiness of findings' (Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing, 2013, p. 425).

For several authors (Corden & Millar, 2007; Elliot et al., 2008; McLeod & Thomson, 2009), the design of an LQR project should have the following characteristics: planning, use of qualitative methods and techniques for the obtaining and analysis of data, a focus on the analysis of time and change, and having (though not necessarily) the individual or group as a unit of analysis.

The main stumbling block in carrying out our work in accordance with these requirements would, undoubtedly, be planning. In this regard, our research allows us to qualify this premise and show that it is possible, in certain circumstances, to carry out longitudinal research on the basis of data collected from several projects not planned for that purpose. It is our understanding that in such a case, the key requirement is for the projects to have a time sequence of a certain scope. Saldaña (2003), for example, states that the minimum period of fieldwork time for an investigation to be considered longitudinal is nine months, although what matters above all is the number of rounds conducted. In our case, the period elapsed between the start of the first project and the end of the last one was 12 years, with the average period between the first and second interviews being six years. However, with an investigation not planned as LQR but repurposed as such, it is also essential that the various projects or interview rounds are focused on the same central core of topics, as happened in our case.

The concern with/emphasis on time and change was already present in the origins of the first project and continued to be maintained in the two subsequent projects, despite their not having been conceived as longitudinal. In our first interview guide, for exam-

ple, we had provided for the gathering of data on the interviewee's gender relations in their previous couple relationships, as well as an initial evaluation and description of the changes or continuities in their current gender relations with their binational partner. Moreover, as stated, our planning for the second interviews was initially based on the question: 'What has happened since the last time we saw each other?' That means we completely fulfilled one of the premises that Johnny Saldaña (2003) lays down for determining whether an investigation qualifies as LQR, namely, to establish a "then" and a "now". Lastly, our unit of analysis was individuals in binational couples.

In LQR, there is often a differentiation between research carried out with a single sample interviewed on different occasions and that carried out with a different sample for each round of interviews (Botía & Jurado, 2018). Not having initially planned a longitudinal investigation, we adopted the second type. It is also important to remember that the majority of couples in the first round had been formed relatively recently, being of just a few years' standing and with the non-Spanish spouse having been resident for a short time in their partner's country, as this phenomenon only became significant in Spain at the beginning of the 21st century. This characteristic proved to be very important because it enabled a clear tracking of the changes that occurred between the two rounds of interviews. As our focus was on the formation process, dynamics, and development of the couple, the importance of working with three samples are mitigated. For the second interviews, all carried out in 2017, the impact of this diversity of samples was only evident in the longer or shorter lapse of time from the first to the second interview.

Among the many elements requiring attention when adopting the LQR approach, the problem of attrition is considered one of the biggest challenges (Ruspini, 2002), even more so in migration studies (Winiarska, 2017), with several authors having published reflections on the matter (Cotter et al., 2002; Seed et al., 2009; Farrall et al., 2016). Our investigation underlines the importance of having strategies to maintain contact with the subjects interviewed. In studies of the lives of migrants, monitoring the sample so as to be able to "revisit" the subjects is rendered especially complex due to the very nature of their international mobility. While in our initial intention, as we have emphasised, we did not consider the possibility of conducting a second round of interviews, various factors contributed to our maintaining continuous contact with a good part of the interviewees beyond the initial interview. This was possible due to the very nature of the subject treated, operating as it does in the sphere of privacy and intimacy; to the quality of the research team interviewers and their ability to create trust; the empathy derived from the fact that some of them are also partners in mixed couples; the possibility that the

same person who conducted the first interview might do it a second time; the maintenance of communication and relationships beyond the interview setting; the continued contact with the people who facilitated contact with the interviewees; and so on.

LQR is a strategy that seeks to avoid some of the traditional limitations of qualitative analysis (Thomson, 2007), for example, by overcoming the static, "snapshot" nature of non-longitudinal research or by taking account of the mismatch between what people say and what they do. In ethnographic research, this duality is solved through the use of the interview technique (what people say) and observation (what people do). Ethnography, according to Caïs, Folguera, and Formoso (2014), is a useful methodology for carrying out LQR due to the space-time dynamic of the observation and the "temporal condensation" of the facts and meanings attributable to the research question being disentangled. However, the observation of realities comprising mobile subjects and of issues that unfold for the most part in the private sphere is not always fully possible or satisfactory. In contrast, the repetition of successive interviews in two or more different periods allows for the contrasting of continuities, transformations, and ruptures in the informants' discourse on the same topic (Ruspini, 2002).

Final considerations

In this article, we have illustrated the process of carrying out LQR within the framework of several research projects that were awarded through official competitive calls drawn up on the basis of strict and rigid criteria for the approach to and development of the research. With these projects, some of the initial obstacles lay in the requirements to formulate hypotheses, form a research team and draw up a detailed work schedule. That is not to mention the conviction among some researchers that ethnographic research cannot be programmed or designed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994). The culmination of a research process lasting over ten years in an LQR project that had not been featured in the original planning added further apparent difficulties to our work, even accepting the premise that longitudinal studies can be understood as an ongoing and creative process (Yates, 2003).

The analysis of the data required attention to the "time of the account", basic to any research founded on qualitative data but even more so with the analysis of LQR data (Caïs et al., 2014). The recounting of life trajectories goes beyond simple linear narrative. The longitudinal nature of the information gathered has afforded us an understanding of the chronology and the contexts for the emergence and development of individuals' social

interaction and points of view. Aware of the importance of key transitional events in the construction of identity in longitudinal studies (González-Fuente & Pérez-Ortega, 2016), attention to relevant episodes of "crisis" or "crucial facts" marking an essential moment in the individuals' lives and the construction of their identity became a primary analytical reference point (Pujadas, 1992; Roca & Martínez, 2006). In this regard, it is important to take into account that the three projects preceding the longitudinal one were developed in significant periods for the reality of mixed couples in Spain.

The first (2006–2008) coincides with a period of major growth in the number of bi-national couples in Spain; the second (2010–2012) with the start of a downward trend in mixed unions; and the third (2013–2015) in the midst of a full-blown economic crisis, with a consequent decrease in the number of binational couples and/or their emigration to the countries of origin of non-Spanish spouses.

The longitudinal methodology has also allowed us to document highly significant "omissions" of content from the first interview by some of the interviewees, especially when that was conducted very early in the couple's relationship and residence in a new country. It likewise enabled us to trace at a profound level the development of identities and the sense of national belonging of many of our informants, as well as take stock of their "gains" and "losses" resulting from the migration process and from comparisons between "here" and "there".

The benefits of a longitudinal approach to the research are even more evident when compared with other research on the same objects of a study conducted without this perspective, such as Refsing's (1998) work on gender identity and gender roles in Danish-Japanese marriages. This research presents a static X-ray image of these couples at a given place and time based on the informants' perceptions and experiences, but the only processual dimension it can offer is via recollection from a fixed point in the present looking towards the past. Thus, Refsing's (1998) main contribution is to assert that:

> Danish female gender identity has no place in contemporary Japanese society, and that male Japanese gender identity cannot survive intact in Danish society. This puts a great strain upon those Japanese-Danish marriages in which the man is Japanese and the woman Danish. Marriage between a Danish man and a Japanese woman, on the other hand, stands a far better chance of dealing successfully with cultural discrepancies in the perceptions of male and female identities. (p. 206)

In our case, by contrast, we can appreciate Thomson's (2007) point that data obtained in longitudinal studies help to go beyond the simple chronological description of events and changes by allowing a more dynamic exploration of how the individual is involved in the creation of that change in a specific temporal and social context. Interviews conducted on two or more occasions with different mixed couples including one Spanish spouse make it possible to collect a good number of life events experienced by the couple and trace their evolution over time. In doing so, we better capture the logic of personal trajectories and events, with their reasons, causes, intervening factors, and so on. Thus, to take the example of one of the couples in our sample (comprising a 56-year-old Spanish man, Eduard, and a 25-year-old Russian woman, Tania) whom we interviewed on three occasions over 11 years, we can observe how in the first interview, the Spanish man presents himself as an archetypal representative of traditional masculinity seeking a relationship based on traditional gender roles. These motivations can hardly be complemented by Tania's because her participation in the initial interview is practically nil, as she adopts a passive role of supposedly uncritical conformity, though her knowledge of Spanish was at that time limited. In the two subsequent interviews, we see ever stronger growth in the process of Tania's agency (Crockett, 2002; McNay, 2013) being expressed, based on her studies, work, motherhood, obtaining nationality, and similar factors, and manifesting in her increasing contribution to the interviews and her critical attitude towards her partner. As if they were communicating vessels, Eduard provides a counterpoint to Tania's "rise" from a position of weakness to one of "empowerment" (Kabeer, 1999) in a "crisis of masculinity" (Synnott, 2009), resulting in a role reversal that is antithetical to those initially pursued by Eduard: he goes from being the male provider, both materially and intellectually, to taking care of domestic matters and raising their daughter. He experiences this as a failure, although it could also constitute an example of the slow-motion changes in masculinities (Segal, 2007).

Certainly, the features of the research we have carried out do not constitute a "pure model" of qualitative research, basically because it is not completely inductive. It is even less an example of ethnographic research, among other reasons, because the participant observation did not have a fundamental character due to the very nature of the object of study and the project type, formulated on the basis of research teams with a schedule. If this were the central question we were posing, we would perhaps do well to recall Marcus and Fischer's (1986) and Appadurai's (2001) point that ethnography faces the challenge implied by a methodological tool that has shown a potential lack of suitability for the contemporary socioeconomic context. It can be difficult to grapple with problems

that originate in a mobile, changing, and globalising world using a methodological tool such as fieldwork, purpose-built for the analysis of small-scale societies spatially circumscribed within a specific territory (Perret, 2011). However, our main objective in this article has been not so much to contribute to the promotion of methodological anxieties (Marcus, 1995) but rather to demonstrate, through the application of "ethnographic imagination" (Willis, 2000), the possibilities of taking on projects framed within the logic of current hegemonic knowledge production and adopting an approach that does not betray the essential nature of the qualitative methodology.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Povzetek

Na podlagi izkušenj, pridobljenih v 12-letnem raziskovalnem procesu (2006–2018) nacionalno mešanih parov, ki ga je izvedla skupina raziskovalcev in financiral Španski sistem za znanost, tehnologijo in inovacije, razpravljamo o tem, kako naša praksa in naš proces konstruiranja rezultatov okrepiti, pa tudi kvalificirati in spremeniti nekatere vidike klasične etnografske teorije in kvalitativnega longitudinalnega raziskovanja. Glede na težave pri zagotavljanju sredstev za dolgoročne projekte v okviru kratkoročnega pogodbenega financiranja in pomembnosti longitudinalne metodologije za razumevanje pojavov, povezanih z migrantskimi populacijami, nam ni preostalo drugega, kot da se zatečemo k "etnografski imaginaciji". Pri tem je temeljno vprašanje, ki se ga lotimo, kako znotraj okvira raziskovalnega okolja, ki ga določajo standardizirane smernice nacionalnega raziskovalnega načrta, izvesti longitudinalno študijo na podlagi projektov, ki prvotno niso bili zasnovani s tem namenom?

KLJUČNE BESEDE: longitudinalna kvalitativna metodologija, etnografska imaginacija, nacionalni raziskovalni načrt, nacionalno mešani pari, migracije

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