
Doing Fieldwork in Times of Multiple Crises: epistemological and ethical issues and methodological innovations

International Conference in tribute to Professor Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo

The empirical sciences in general, and the social sciences in particular, are increasingly faced with enormous challenges linked to physically inaccessible field and impossible/impractical face-to-face interactions (socio-political turbulence, terrorism, pandemics such as COVID-19, etc.). Indeed, the closure of borders, schools, production and sociability places, the imposed quarantine in some areas and the physical distancing between individuals have resulted in challenges for human relations and for research (Christin, 2020). Also, the situation of insecurity - due to political violence (Ayimpam and Bouju, 2015) or terrorist attacks (Kaboré and Kaboré, 2023) - makes some areas dangerous and inaccessible. Botanical, topographical, pedological surveys or biological inventories (plants, animals, insects, seeds, soil, etc.) as well as in situ (fieldwork) surveys (ethnographic observations, interviews and surveys through questionnaires, etc.) have become perilous explorations in some areas (Hagberg and Körling, 2015; Nwabueze and Onyima, 2020).

This situation weakens, even calls into question, the methodological posture of empirical sciences rooted in the production and analysis of factual data, according to both the deductive (empirical verification of theories) and inductive (generation of theories from empirical data - grounded theorization (Bachelard, 2004; Glaser and Strauss, 2017) approaches. In the wake of the pioneering work of Malinowski and then the Chicago School, intensive fieldwork was made a necessary a criterion of legitimacy for qualitative anthropology or sociology. *In situ* research - despite its unavoidable biases (de Singly, 2003) - appears to be a sine qua non of qualitative approaches that combine formal and informal interviews, observations, various review procedures and documents collected on site (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). How to produce data in inaccessible field contexts?

The aim of this colloquium is to initiate an interdisciplinary conversation on the methodological tools to be capitalized on, in a crisis context, for the future of research. The focus is on “generating methodological approaches” and the reliability and validity of the data collected, as well as on the problems of the investigator-respondent relationship, field negotiation and consent, which most often raise ethical biases that are difficult to overcome at a distance, i.e. outside the face-to-face setting. The symposium will focus on three topics, and will also include a tribute to Professor Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo.

1. Limits and advantages of remote surveys

For social scientists forced to adapt to these new realities, remote survey would be a credible alternative (Arita et al., 2023). Data collection processes/techniques sensitive to socio-political, climatic or health constraints (war, terrorism, natural disasters, epidemics such as COVID-19, etc.) have been developed using information and communication technologies (ICT). Social networks and digital devices (WhatsApp, Facebook, Tiktok, Zoom, etc.) make interactions with informants or certain monitoring/inventories virtually feasible. They help to reach social groups or environments that are difficult to get to and geographically dispersed informants conventional/classical survey approaches do not allow to meet (O'Connor and Madge, 2003). “Remote ethnography” (Ayimpam and Bouju, 2015), “algorithmic ethnography” or “virtual ethnography” (Christin, 2020), or “ex situ survey” (Kaboré and Kaboré, 2023), these innovative processes in times of crisis involve methodological, epistemological and ethical implications for the empirical sciences (Roberts et al., 2021). More than a simple transaction medium, even making verbal and visual exchanges like videoconferencing possible (Salmons, 2011), technologies directly or implicitly circumscribe the form of communication between researchers and informants. What

methodological, epistemological and ethical issues and perspectives does remote fieldwork raise today? Remote surveys and the use of digital tools highlight other ways of conducting research, enabling researchers to bypass the difficulty of having access to certain difficult or inaccessible areas.

2. Ethnographic traditions and distance research: issues and prospects

The researcher's physical absence from the field raises a fundamental epistemological problem: participant observation helps to capture unspoken and internalized realities that are not verbalized. What about the impossibility of verifying the results of the study directly based on daily interactions and immersion in the field? What about all the hypotheses constantly reformulated by the researcher in the field? The definition of a sample, even a random one, seems compromised as soon as a remote survey is implemented. These cumulative problems sometimes raise questions about the validity and reliability of research carried out online or remotely. How can scientific rigor be guaranteed in the absence of direct or participant observation data? How do remote working methods fit in with and upset conventional data production procedures? Do they challenge the foundations of qualitative research?

And how do researchers view the restructuring of their research activities?

Hagberg and Körling (2015) argue that it is dangerous to attribute the unquestionable authority conferred by “having been there” to fieldwork. By doing so, the ethnographer, for example, prevents himself from seriously considering other kinds of empirical material. One question, then, is what theoretical and methodological orientation is needed for a marriage between remote survey tools and the classic, conventional methods of ethnographic analysis?

3. Field survey: methodological innovations in times of crisis

When there is no field here, or when it's difficult or inaccessible there, it's elsewhere and accessible in another way. So, beyond the distance, researchers invent new ways of working in the field. They create survey conditions in secure spaces by relocating informants, delegating data collection or encouraging forms of review that give a more participatory character to data production. Sometimes, despite the risks, they go into the field under specific conditions. In these cases, the normally iterative and dynamic survey process is based above all on the vagaries of security.

What future do these innovations in the field hold for classic empirical systems? These new paths of research allow us to rethink the theoretical and practical orientations of the socio-anthropological field situation, while at the same time raising methodological challenges for science. We'll be sharing innovative, often attempted, investigative tools for dealing with the realities of inaccessible field.

4. Testimonies and stories from working with Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo

How can a researcher be determined not to give up when faced with difficult field? The second part of this symposium extends the theme of ethics, focusing here on the “moral basis of knowledge production”, which is forged in contact with a teacher for his pupils or a companion for his colleagues. This dimension is all the more important as it is undoubtedly inseparable from the practice of research in times of crisis, and is devoted to testimonials and accounts of work experience. Indeed, before being translated into techniques and procedures, forms of commitment to knowledge production depend on the value placed on knowledge. How does one come to like research for knowledge, acceptance of effort, resistance to easy solution, refusal of shortcuts, pleasure of slow and difficult progress towards a “knowledge effect”? These aptitudes may exist upstream of the commitment to the profession of research, as “pre-dispositions”, or they may be developed in the learning process, by the teacher and the learner. This section is a reflexive look back at individual and collective training academic careers in social science research, for students or former students, or colleagues, in the scientific adventure with Professor Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo, the man for

whom this colloquium is organized as a tribute. Frequently described by his students as a “workaholic”, in an African research world that can be seen as a context of various precariousnesses and permanent crises, Professor Ouédraogo appeared to his students as a professor whose demand for methodological rigor and hard work impacted them for life. How can we account for these conditions of training in research in times of crisis, if not by exploring the traces of these requirements in developing scientific and professional identities? In this way, we can ask:

- Effort in research practice: meaning, requirements and conditions;
- Faced with constraints, give up or persevere: the sources of discouragement and the significant supports to determination;
- Resisting to easy solutions: the moral economy of a well done job.

Practical methods

The conference will take place in-person, at the Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), with the option of videoconferencing. Papers may be presented in French or English. Discussions will be bilingual. To facilitate comprehension, PowerPoint presentations should, if possible, be in the other language. Automatic translation of oral presentations will be available via zoom. Paper proposals, in French or English, should be between 800 and 1000 words long. They should be sent to the following address:

laboratoire1@gmail.com

Deadline for submission: 15 November 2024.

Replies from the organizing committee will be sent on: 30 September 2024.

Deadline for submission of full texts: 30 November 2024

Conference date : 11, 12, 13 December 2024

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