

Migration, Unemployment, and Lifeworld: Challenges for a New Critical Qualitative Inquiry in Migration

Qualitative Inquiry
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Abstract

Migration is an issue for many countries. It affects several areas of social problems, for example, work and unemployment. A relevant issue to study in the context of unemployment and social welfare is, “Which are experiences of migrants with different language backgrounds in finding work and support?” For a running study with episodic interviews and mobile methods with migrants from the former Soviet Union to Germany, several issues are discussed in a “new critical inquiry”: Critical issues in the studied area (help, control, normative claims); applying (familiar) qualitative methods (interviewing in various languages and cultural backgrounds or mobile methods); triangulation in a new critical migration research.

Keywords

critical migration research, episodic interview, mobile methods, triangulation, migration and unemployment

The Problem

Qualitative inquiry should take into account the specific contexts under which the phenomenon under study occurs. This applies especially if the research topic is immigrants and their encounter with the immigration country’s welfare system and its particular regulations. Our case is a research project about specific problems immigrants in Germany face when they become needy and thus welfare recipients under the rule of the so-called Social Code II established in 2005 and commonly known as “Hartz IV.” Linked to any support, the (new) welfare law fosters obligations to work related to a philosophy of activation and self-responsibility in the sequel of the European agreement codified in Lisbon (2009), replacing a more considerate post-War welfare policy. Its implementation in Germany was very much inspired by U.S. discourses on adverse effects of provisional welfare policies labeled as “welfarization” of the needy. It is also influenced by the accompanying discourses about the allegedly doubtful moral qualities and deficiencies of welfare recipients (Wacquant, 2009; for the German debate, see Butterwegge, 2015). Being a welfare recipient thus means to live under increased scrutiny of the welfare authorities, especially of the then established institution named “Jobcenter” (In Germany, this English term is used officially and in everyday language). In public and political discourse, welfare recipients are quite commonly talked about as a rather homogeneous group being somewhat at risk not to cooperate as they are supposed to and having an

affinity for what is considered to be an underclass lifestyle. In other words, being a welfare recipient is related to a high risk of stigmatization, increasing with the duration of this status (Fohrbeck, Hirsland, & Lobato, 2014).

At the same time, the institutional system is oriented toward supporting welfare recipients to find their way into the labor market—which turns out to be sometimes more, sometimes less successful. Statistically, welfare recipients with a migration background run a higher risk to become long-term recipients (Achatz & Trappmann, 2011; Barrett, Riphahn, Sander, & Wunder, 2013) and to stay unemployed for a longer period of time than others (Uhlendorff & Zimmermann, 2014). In a considerable number of cases, this seems to be due to low vocational qualification and language barriers. But also the opinion is quite prevalent that immigrants’ problems in entering the labor market are seemingly related to their insufficient efforts to become integrated (Solms-Laubach, 2009). This assumption shadows a xenophobic layer in parts of German public and politics making immigrants a possible twofold target of discrimination and rejection as welfare recipients *and* citizens with an immigration background. The latter refers

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