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Abstract

This article discusses methodological, ethical, and epistemological issues that arise when research is conducted in a tight-knit network of respondents: in this case, artists in search of fame and recognition, while performing in a tribute band – a relatively downgraded form of music. The study was conducted in Switzerland and used qualitative methodology, consisting mainly of observations of concerts and semi-structured interviews with musicians, cultural intermediaries and audience members. With an aim to contribute to the reflexivity of sociology as a discipline and ideally provide methodological traces for future research in similar conditions, the article first presents the general methodology used in this study. Then, the discussion turns to the uses and difficulties of certain methodological elements such as Howard Becker's advice on 'playing dumb' for obtaining more subtle information, dealing with 'counter-interpretations' by study participants, or the extension of research relations to the online realm.

Introduction

This article discusses methodological, ethical as well as epistemological issues that arise when research is conducted in a tight-knit network of respondents: in this case, artists in search of fame and recognition, while performing in a relatively downgraded form of a musical act, a tribute band[1]. The study – a doctoral dissertation on the art world of tribute bands – was conducted in Switzerland with fieldwork between 2013 and 2016 (Nikoghosyan, 2018). The methodology used was qualitative, consisting mainly of

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observations of concerts and semi-structured interviews with musicians, cultural intermediaries and audience members.

The starting point of this article is my shared conviction with Pierre Bourdieu that methodological reflexivity 'is not a simple narcissistic entertainment²' (2003: 49), but a process inherent to the understanding of the subject itself, and sociology more generally. In the 1950s, Everett C. Hughes already advocated for methodological reflexivity in sociology, or what he called the 'sociology of sociology', especially with an inductive approach that alone could counteract, according to him, the seemingly more objective quantitative methods which were developing rapidly (Hughes, 1993: 506). Pierre Bourdieu (2003) has also emphasized the need for reflexivity by sociologists in their analyses for being able to 'objectify' their research subject. Contrary to Max Weber's notion of 'axiological neutrality' (2011 [1949]), which according to Bourdieu aims to erase the researcher's subjectivity, he calls for the analytical use of this same subjectivity and personal experiences, provided these undergo 'rigorous critical scrutiny*' (2003: 55). This article adds on to this sociological reflexivity of the discipline, ideally also easing methodological issues of future research in similar conditions.

A field of study involving concerts and musicians may initially seem easy in terms of access, contrary to 'difficult' fields in closed institutions or involving acute social problems. Listening to concerts often elicited amusing comments and jokes from colleagues and others who thought that the fun dimension of a musical evening could only supplant the heavy work required to produce data. Yet, the situation was, in practice, the opposite. Similarly, conducting interviews on 'just' music, a subject never considered difficult, did not reduce the difficulties of 'bargaining' (Hughes, 1959) before and during interaction. Indeed, certain 'social problems' are also at stake when discussing tribute bands: the threat of stigma, the quest for recognition, an uncertain professional status and a difficult socio-economic context (Nikoghosyan, 2021).

The article first presents the general methodology put to use in this study, how the observations and interviews were conducted. Then, the discussion turns to the uses and difficulties of certain methodological elements such as Howard Becker's advice on 'playing dumb' (1970) for obtaining more subtle information, examining the motives of study participants and their 'counter-interpretations' (Papinot, 2014), and dealing with cases of relations with research participants getting (unexpectedly) extended in time and scope via online social networks.

Observing and interviewing the art world of tribute bands

The first stage of the study consisted of observing tribute band concerts. These data were crucial for an in situ understanding of this type of music production. Howard Becker affirms that such a presence is the best qualitative research technique, because it allows to see how people do their work as well as witnessing the 'mistakes and false starts' along the way (Obrist, 2005). According to Anne-Marie Arborio and Pierre Fournier, being physically present in the situation and watching it unfold in real time is one of the privileges of sociologists (2008: 7).

In this study, the observations were more 'direct' than 'participant'. As Arborio and Fournier (2008) recall, the second refers to the more ethnographic methods used in

anthropology, involving regular and long-term participation in the daily life of a community, while the first implies a less participatory approach in the activity or social situation. The degree of participation of the sociologist calls for a clarification of his/her role or position, as physical presence implies interference with the lives of others or even intrusion into the course of events (Cluley, 2012). Will the observer remain incognito, without the participants being aware, or uncovered? This seemingly simple distinction is, in fact, difficult to apply to concrete situations. During my observations, for example, I was neither incognito nor fully exposed. Most of the time, I watched concerts as any other audience member. These concerts being public events without access restrictions, except an occasional ticket to present, my presence never led to issues with others. The need to work incognito or, on the contrary, to clarify my intentions and my research in order to access the venue never arose, except when I requested backstage access.

I found concert announcements mostly online: social media or official websites of bands or venues. I observed more than fifty concerts amounting to about two hundred hours of observation and some two hundred and fifty pages of field notes. I usually observed the entire concert, ranging from sound-check to *encores*. Where possible, I gained backstage access and discussed freely with the musicians before or after the show.

The numerous observations revealed important details about tribute bands and I was able to identify a great variety of cases displaying common elements. More than being simply exploratory, these observations then resulted in analyses in their own right, particularly concerning the 'conventions' of this art world (Nikoghosyan, 2018). However, as Nicolas Jounin argues, observation can become a lever for the use of other methods, and establishing 'dialogue' between observations and interviews is yet the most fruitful research technique in sociology (2009: 251). Howard Becker, in turn, advises to rely primarily on observations, using interviews as a last resort and only if the former prove to be insufficient.

After a certain number of observations, the second stage of the study consisted in conducting interviews with individuals from the art world of tribute bands. Observations continued in parallel, though less intensively. The preliminary analyses of observations often served as support for preparing discussion topics. From the observed concerts and information gathered online, I made a list of tribute bands performing in Switzerland and nearby. Contact with most interviewees was established by e-mail, via their official website, or Facebook.

In *Art Worlds* (1982), Howard Becker advises conversing with a wide variety of individuals who perform different functions in the art world being studied, as each group holds information specific to it. Becker further develops this idea in *The Tricks of the Trade*, calling it 'the machine trick': to contemplate the research subject as a machine that engineers must design for it to do what it should do (1998: 39). According to Becker, this trick obliges us to reflect on our subject from the various perspectives of the individuals involved. Following this trick, I tried to talk to as many different people of this art world as possible. But given the time constraints, a choice had to be made and I only interviewed three categories of individuals considered essential in this 'network of cooperation' (Becker, 1982): musicians, cultural intermediaries and audience members.

Thirteen interviews were conducted with only one member of the band, others with several of them or with the band as a whole, usually before the concert. I spoke with

about sixty musicians from twenty-seven groups, with interviews lasting on average an hour. A third of the musicians were in their forties, sixteen were in their thirties, eleven in their fifties, and eight in their twenties. Only 10% of the interviewees were women, a figure lower than the average of 23% in contemporary music in Switzerland (Perrenoud and Bataille, 2017: 319) and 20% in France as opposed to 45% in classical music (Ravet and Coulangeon, 2003: 363). This is partly due to the fact that tribute bands usually cover pop and rock stars, of whom up to 90% are men according to certain estimations (Bellis et al., 2007).

Then, fourteen interviews were conducted with cultural intermediaries, particularly people in charge of musical programming where tribute bands perform: three bars, three festivals with mixed programming, two tribute band festivals, three concert organizing agencies, two managers, and one person from the legal division of SUISA (the Swiss musical rights and copyright management institution). Finally, I spoke informally with many audience members and conducted seven formal face-to-face or email interviews.

Tricks and techniques

Although my intention to conduct an interview was always clearly specified when making an appointment, the interviews mostly took place in an informal style of communication. The interviews were semi-structured, although the grid was never used during the exchange. Howard Becker refers to this type of exchange as 'just a conversation': if the interviewee with whom the researcher is 'chatting' is aware of the ongoing study beneath the conversation, there is no need to change styles and announce that now the exchange becomes a formal interview, hence changing the relationship (Obrist, 2005). This informal style not only facilitated conducting the interviews, but also gave rise to debates and exchanges between the musicians when the entire band participated in the discussion. Some elements related to tribute bands and other topics of discussion came out with more ease than had the interviews been conducted in a more formal style, with a series of questions and answers, or with only one member of the band.

In order to keep the exchanges as 'just conversations,' I also made use of another 'trick' suggested by Howard Becker: formulating the questions in terms of 'how' and not 'why' (1998: 85). Instead of asking 'why do you play in a tribute band?' I preferred the wording 'how did you start playing in a tribute?' According to Becker, this has two advantages. First, the interviewees feel less compelled to justify their practices, as the word 'why' can often seem accusing and, therefore, trigger more cautious responses, even inclined to hide part of the truth. Second, the word 'how' usually leads to more narrative responses, like a story: first this happened, then that, and in the end we got to where we are now. It allows for the research subject to be considered more as the result of a process than of a cause. Becker argues (1998: 89) such an approach reveals more explanatory elements than does the search for causalities. This enquiry method has been used by sociologists like Robert E. Park, one of the founders of the Chicago School, to sociologically explain historical revolutions. This approach facilitated my own understanding of the tribute band phenomenon – a process originating from a specific socio-economic context, the rules of the game of which are still in the making, instead of it being a fixed object.

Finally, the last 'trick' I used, and which is related to the previous ones, is what Becker calls 'playing dumb'. It consists in forcing the individual to openly declare the implicit elements of his/her remarks (1970: 61). Sometimes this entails repeating the question asked or rephrasing the answer to receive confirmation. At other times, this leads to accentuating social differences and playing on the fact of not belonging to this art world, asking the individual to explain (once again) what may seem trivial or what has already been said. Methodologically, this may seem counterintuitive, since research techniques in sociology have for a long time been based on the anthropological tradition of striving to minimize such social differences (Papinot, 2014: 42). However, as Christian Papinot writes (2014: 142), the research participants do not always expect to see someone like them. On the contrary, they presume to speak to someone very different. Following this logic, these individuals will not be surprised to have to answer seemingly naïve questions asked by someone playing dumb.

The danger of this technique is crossing the line and no longer *playing* dumb, but coming across as one. The trick of recalling that the study is still in its infancy allowed me to ask questions that seemed trivial. But this art world being of limited size and the network relatively small, this technique could not be mobilized very long, as after only a few interviews many of the interviewees had already heard of my research through others. Furthermore, in order to obtain answers to more delicate questions, it was necessary to affirm my knowledge of other elements of this art world to give credibility to the question. After a certain number of interviews, and depending on the information sought, playing dumb can even be counter-productive and lead to the collection of superficial data, the sociologist giving the impression of understanding little about the subject.

Researching within a tight network requires more care when dealing with the individuals encountered, as most of them rub shoulders with each other, share the stage or play in several bands. Thus, as is commonly accepted in sociology and to facilitate exchanges, I always reminded my interviewees that their answers would remain anonymous and confidential. This reminder sometimes caused astonishment on their part; some of them claimed having nothing to hide and declared taking responsibility or being able to sign under their remarks. Reactions of this type are not uncommon in sociological surveys (Beaud and Weber, 2003: 211), but those encountered in my study can in part be attributed to the characteristics of the artistic field itself. Artists often seek visibility and recognition, not anonymity. They search for these through interviews and media or online appearances. The surprise of my interviewees was certainly related to the use of the word 'anonymous', which immediately suggests that what is at stake is a taboo subject or a hidden truth to be revealed. Given the lower or at least ambivalent status of tribute bands in the musical world, the guarantee of anonymity could even have had a perverse effect on the interviewees' responses. They might have felt uncomfortable, not because of 'truths to reveal', but because of the very idea that there would be something to hide or avoid mentioning – what could be, in their eyes, the reason for guaranteeing anonymity.

The interviewees frequently used half-serious, half-sarcastic remarks referring to anonymity – such as 'you can put my name on it!' – to emphasize their answers or, on the contrary, to distance themselves from certain elements. Similarly, while my request to record the interviews was never denied, the very fact of recording the conversation often

provoked amusing comments. The interviewees never forgot the recorder, as could have been the case since I was using a smartphone to record – more discreet on the table than a tape-recorder. On the contrary, it was often the subject of ironic comments like 'cut, cut!' and 'you might need to delete this part. . .', or gestures such as speaking exaggeratedly closer to the recorder, always followed by laughter.

These reactions are partly related to the field itself and the fact that the respondents regularly work with recordings. Moreover, these remarks and numerous jokes are a result of the relaxed atmosphere of the exchange. There was never a tension regarding the recording, and the removal requests were always ironic. Even so, having recorded interviews with individuals working in a small network could, most likely, have influenced responses and made them more cautious.

Study conditions

Generalization is certainly an essential tool for any empirical study, but it must be reminded that each studied case remains unique and the reproducibility of a qualitative methodology – very weak. As Nicolas Jounin points out, this is due to the methodology itself, 'as it is linked to the opportunities that the field provides and to the very personality of the investigator*' (2009: 243). Olivier Schwartz similarly argues that 'investigative materials should be treated as effects of the investigative situation, and not as immediate representations of a "natural" reality, pre-dating observation*' (1993: 274).

Marie Buscatto recalls the four criteria of the 'hypothetico-deductive' or even 'positivist' model: the neutrality of the investigator; the reliability of the data selected and based on certain criteria; the reproducibility of these; and, finally, the representativeness of the sample (2010: 21). She immediately adds that this is an 'epistemological ambivalence' for the social sciences, because the sociological or ethnographic field survey is 'impossible to achieve in the same positive context*' (2010: 22). Based on the writings of Daniel Bizeul, Buscatto insists that 'the researcher can not follow a predetermined path*', because a human relationship is established between the researcher and the participants, the research relationship and the data produced will be unpredictable (*ibid*.). Christian Papinot goes further to affirm that 'whatever the survey configurations, in practice the investigator is never absent*' (2014: 237). Similarly, Serge Paugam writes:

> "Sociologists almost inevitably project part of themselves into the research they do. They are not different in this sense from the ordinary person who tries to put his actions in harmony with the world around him while trying to understand it better.*" (2010: 11)

Max Weber (1991 [1948]) famously advocated for respecting 'axiological neutrality' or 'freedom from values' (*Wertfreiheit*) in research and called on sociologists to recognize their own part of subjectivity in any study rather than ignoring it and claiming to have eliminated any 'value relations' (*Wertbeziehung*). Jacques Coenen-Huther speaks of 'leashing subjectivity' – keeping it under control rather than denying it (2012: 168). Sociologists can collect and have different perspectives on a given subject, but as ordinary individuals, they can only interpret these in their own way – from an admittedly subjective viewpoint, though mastered, as Coenen-Huther recalls:

"In sociology, the subject-object relationship thus consists of a subtle dialectic between individuals capable of influencing each other.*" (2012: 191)

This urges us to think about how the social attributes of sociologists may affect the survey. Howard Becker argues that individuals will respond differently to the same question based on the identity of the person asking it (1970: 45). In turn, Christian Papinot further insists on taking into account not only the researcher's social characteristics, but also 'the identity that will be attributed to the researcher by the group being studied*' (2014: 148). The latter will certainly impact the researcher's access to the field. The author suggests that social distance can serve as a lever rather than a problem or an obstacle to apprehending the research subject:

"The social distance between interviewer and interviewee, through the interplay of differences and similarities in which the survey is constructed, offers a privileged way of understanding the social logics at work.*" (Papinot, 2014: 183)

In my study, too, this game of differences and similarities has been a constant, beyond having to 'play dumb' (Becker, 1970). In my fieldwork, the handling of these differences and similarities came into play from the outset, during what is commonly called 'access to the field' or 'entry bargaining' (Arborio and Fournier, 2008; Papinot, 2014). My access was generally easy, with very few refusals to my requests, but the 'bargaining' continued throughout the study and in the course of the interviews. The term 'research bargain' introduced by Everett Hughes (1959: 410) is a good illustration of this process or the 'game' that Papinot refers to, because the negotiation does not stop at gaining physical access to the field or at an interview request being accepted. Each interview, like all interaction, requires a reciprocal 'bargaining' throughout its duration: respondents and researchers alike are worried about what (not) to express, how to formulate it and how it may be perceived. Explaining one's research, asking the right questions and, as an interviewee, giving proper answers result from 'bargaining' during the interview based on differences and similarities between identities and expectations of the individuals involved in the exchange.

Inter-subjectivity and counter-interpretations

Such 'bargaining' obviously involves working on oneself as a sociologist. Especially in the beginning, when first entering the field, it pushes to 'break with the common sense, to free oneself from preconceptions [. . .], to take a new look on the reality by questioning it otherwise*' (Paugam, 2010: 21).

In a field like mine, marked by value judgments, this requires multiplied care and efforts to put aside aesthetic judgments related to one's personal musical taste. It was not uncommon for me to leave a concert with a real sense of dislike for the music, one I would otherwise not listen to. All this was accentuated by a personal distaste for loud music, especially in bars, as well as the fatigue of the day which complicated late-night observations.

The task was even more difficult in cases where my knowledge of the original artist was too limited to be able to grasp certain subtleties of the tribute band performance. On several occasions I had to study the biography and repertoire of the original artist before the concert or the interview with the tribute band. Given the diversity of the covered artists, and the gap with my own musical taste most of the time, these 'negotiations' of knowledge during the exchanges required a special effort. It was not rare for the musicians to check my knowledge of the covered artist, at least for knowing in how much detail to explain the elements of a song, for example. The game of differences and similarities was particularly tricky in these cases, as it was necessary to bargain and find a balance: to show a minimum of knowledge about the artist, but also 'play dumb' to gain more precise clarifications of certain elements. Despite the effort, this exercise may not always have been successful. As Howard Becker (2013: 139) points out, any research relationship involves different degrees of 'superiority' and 'inferiority' among the individuals involved in the exchange, according to their level of knowledge of the subject. The resulting challenges vary depending on the circumstances.

Moreover, my respondents often sought to verify certain elements of my research, including my own interpretation of the term 'tribute band'. Practical reasons might be behind these questions (double check the question to give a proper answer), but they can also be attributed to the research subject itself. Concerns related to possible misunderstandings were occasionally apparent, as in this example:

> "For you, a tribute is. . . a band or a musician doing covers or. . . just one artist and one artist only? You have to be careful with that, because sometimes people don't understand very well." (Festival programmer)

The interviews were filled with examples of such remarks, which is what Christian Papinot calls the 'counter-interpretation' of the respondents who try to understand who the interviewer is and what is being studied (2014: 139). Very often, the interviewees asked questions about myself: my musical preferences, knowledge of the covered artist, musical skills, or whether or not I played in a band.

Often, these interrogations concerned the study itself, not without surprises: is it for school or university? Is it for a Master's or a PhD (with repeated confusions despite clarifications)? Why having chosen this topic, and what do the professors think? Since when do people write theses on rock, and what would sociology have to say about this music? Is there 'enough to say for a thesis'? Or remarks like, 'But is your work *really* on this topic?' University graduates went further and sought to know more about the hypothesis, the methodology or the sampling technique used, and they immediately added advice: what categories of people to interrogate, what other question to ask. On the one hand, all these remarks stem from a simple curiosity. On the other hand, they reveal questionings or even misunderstandings related to the interest that a socially devalued musical phenomenon can arouse for a doctoral student who should be conducting a supposedly 'serious' university study.

Motives and mutual expectations

Like 'counter-interpretations' (Papinot, 2014), the motives that respondents may have for participating in the study reveal interesting elements about the research subject. In

addition to ironic remarks like 'So, you will circulate your work and make us famous!' the respondents tried to make out how this study might serve their interests. Some of them wanted to find out if the survey was going to shed light on audience opinion, and would have liked to learn about it. Inspired by my work, a festival programmer wondered if it would be possible to conduct a small survey at the end of concerts with audience members, while others did not hesitate to ask the study results directly – requests sometimes disguised as jokes:

> "It would be interesting to see the audience's point of view. We haven't thought about what people think! When you come to see us at the City Bar, maybe you can ask what they think about us [laughs]*". (Singer and lead-guitar, tribute to Oasis)

Regarding the motives of individuals to participate in a study, and based on the writings of Jean Peneff, Christian Papinot (2014: 146) recalls that while interest out of sympathy or curiosity shall not be excluded, more 'involved' motives are also to be taken seriously. This includes opportunity for propaganda, possibility of intervention as a mediator of conflicts, or even, quite simply, free labour. . . The author illustrates this argument by several situations encountered during his survey of workers in the transport sector in Madagascar (2014: 195). For example, his respondents – drivers of different types of vehicles, in the private as well as the public sector – regarded him as a potential employer or, at least, as someone who might possibly know others who were looking for such services. Hence the exchanges sometimes resembled a job interview where the respondent presented himself in his best light, especially as regards his professional skills.

Daniel Bizeul's (2003) survey of National Front (FN) activists in France presents another interesting example of when the research relations undergo a change of status. The author describes several cases of 'forgetfulness' of his role as a sociologist by the interviewees, particularly when a party member invited him to run for election. This, although he had clearly expressed his intentions of a sociological study of this party, and despite his left-wing political orientation and other personal and social characteristics that would have, in principle, prevented him from going up the ladder of a right-wing political party (Bizeul, 2007). However, according to Christian Papinot, interpreting this as simply 'forgetting' the role of the sociologist would be too naive. In fact, we are dealing here with the 'committed motivation' of the members of a 'party in search of legitimacy and in a deliberate strategy of 'de-demonization'*', seeking to take advantage of the researcher's presence to come across in the best possible way (Papinot, 2014: 145).

Similar situations occurred in my case, with different attempts to make use of the research relations, far from being signs of 'forgetting' my role as a sociologist. First, musicians and programmers alike frequently questioned me as an audience member, as if seeking feedback and my opinion of the concert, the festival, or other bands:

> "Where did you see us play? Did you like the show?*" (Guitarist, tribute to Deep Purple)

> "Did you know Police before seeing us? What did you think of the concert? As a spectator, would you like to see more visual elements or you think it's enough even though we don't have the full gear?*" (Singer, tribute to Police)

"What do you think of what you heard today? But be honest, because we don't often get to have the people's opinion.*" (Singer-guitarist, tribute to The Who)

"I imagine you have seen many tribute bands. Did you already know this Beatles tribute that we invited this year? How do you find them? [. . .] It really interests me to know what you think of the festival. We are now restructuring it.*" (Festival programmer)

Second, many questions presupposed my familiarity with the local music network and sought to take advantage of it. Musicians asked me not to hesitate to recommend their band if and when the opportunity arose. In their eyes, I had good contacts in well-known places or, at least, would be able to organize some concerts, for example at the university. At other times, it was a question of discreetly seeking to know if I knew of places where tribute bands played, in order to later inquire about future possible dates. A French band went even further to ask me to become their manager and help them find gigs in Switzerland.

Another musician sent me a message a few months after our interview asking me to share links to online videos within my network. Having changed their name, the band no longer performed as a tribute, but their own songs. The first album was soon to be released and the musicians were busy spreading the word. This particular young musician was a newcomer who did not yet have an extensive professional network in music. He was trained in medicine, but was in the midst of changing professions to become a singer-songwriter.

These repeated requests often led to both ethical and methodological reflections as to my position as a sociologist and the degree of my 'involvement and detachment' (Elias, 1987) in relation to the field. Promoting a band would undoubtedly have affected my neutrality compared to other interviewees and would have given a promotional or even commercial dimension to the study. On the other hand, these requests reflected perhaps a hidden agenda behind the acceptance of the interview by these musicians. The price or 'counter-gift' of the interview would have been my contribution to their search for artistic recognition or, simply, professional contacts. In this sense, my role as a sociologist was almost transformed into a mediation between musicians and cultural intermediaries. Organizing concerts or becoming the manager of a band would undoubtedly unearthed other dimensions of the research subject, allowing for the production of other types of data stemming from a direct experience working with tribute bands. These options, however, were quickly dismissed because of the ethical issues raised by such a commitment.

This potential mediation induced musicians to take more precautions in their remarks. During the interviews, some mentioned their intentions or preparations of forming a new band, whether a tribute or not, but refused to say more, claiming the information was confidential. This quest for confidentiality undoubtedly resided in the fact that they considered talking to someone well located in the local music network and who could potentially reveal their secret to rivals or other professional contacts. In a competitive market such as live music and local tribute bands, the untimely dissemination of such information could be damaging.

Indeed, musicians also tried to obtain information on other interviewees: 'Who else do you know? Whom have you seen? Do you know the band called Black?' When I asked a musician if there were other tributes to the same artist he was covering, he replied half-seriously and laughing: 'No, I don't know any. Do you?' Apart from curiosity or for purposes of clarification, these questions again blurred my role as a sociologist. Responding positively would have partly disclosed other respondents' identities, breaching the anonymity that I had guaranteed them. But, to answer in the negative would have been a sign of non-collaboration on my part, and even limited knowledge of my own study, devaluing my work. In a small network, both of these options had pitfalls and required special attention to maintain a balance. Sometimes other questions followed, seeking my opinion in technical or aesthetic terms, about this or that band – questions I tried not to answer.

Extension of research relations or Facebook contingencies

Throughout the survey, various sources were used for research and data collection, including newspaper articles, music web sites, posters and concert programs. As much as possible, the information found online was saved through screenshots while flyers and printed posters were stored in boxes. Added to this are the data produced by myself – photos, video and audio recordings. This entire material has been fruitful for the understanding of the research subject, but systematic analyses of these have not been carried out.

An important source of this type of data was the social network Facebook, which has nowadays become one of the main communication channels for artists. Most of the tribute bands I saw live had an online presence through Facebook pages. These pages serve almost as official websites allowing musician's to announce news or upcoming concerts as well as share photos and videos from previous concerts. Above all, these pages facilitate the communication between artists and their audiences, allowing to write public comments as well as to send private messages. The public information on these pages has nourished and complemented my documentation material – the number of concerts and venues played, the identities of the members, the history of the band and its self-presentation on the Internet.

I often used the private messaging tool to contact musicians and request an appointment. For some bands, this was the only way to contact them. I used my own personal account for this and sometimes added a link to the summary of my thesis on the university's official website for more credibility. My account revealed minimal information about my identity to strangers (as opposed to 'friends'): name and profile picture.

In some studies that have made similar use of digital social networks, sociologists have favoured the creation of a special account as part of their research. In her study on members of the Socialist Party (PS) and the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) in France, Anaïs Théviot (2014), for example, created a professional account separate from her private account for sending 'friend requests' on Facebook to potential survey respondents. She then used these 'friendships' to invite these individuals to complete an online questionnaire as well as for observing their political uses of this network. Others, like Claire Balleys and Sami Coll (2015) in their study of online teenage sociability practices,

created fictitious accounts with a pseudonym and a landscape image as a profile picture to become 'friends' with other fictitious accounts that were at the centre of large networks of youngsters. This allowed them to access information visible to 'friends of friends' – access that users can allow or deny by modifying their account settings. None of these options were considered in my study. For me, Facebook represented only an initial stage and a direct means of contact, not a medium for observing the activity of musicians on Facebook, and even less so as a way of extending the research relations with study participants.

However, the situation quickly changed when, with my first appointment made with a band, the musician who answered the message immediately sent a friend request on Facebook. After some hesitation, I accepted the request, considering it being a sign of collaboration even before the interview. These requests multiplied with time. Soon afterwards, in order to separate the private account from research, I opted for the creation of a special list of 'friends' for the study participants, allowing for more control and restriction of access to certain news or information.

These invitations are partly a sign of quest for visibility by musicians, as a significant number of 'friends' increases the chances of getting noticed in this vast virtual network. When a 'friend' comments the images (concert photos, flyers, programs) shared by a musician, these automatically become visible to their own 'friends' who are not in direct contact with the band. For the same reason, musicians do not hesitate to address their contacts, including myself, with requests of sharing links and other information.

For my part, these 'friendships' made it easy to keep contact with the musicians and remain up to date with their latest news. This is how I found out, for example, that one of the tribute bands had changed styles and now only played original compositions, or that another band was looking for a new singer when the former quit music. In addition, the connections within the music network were also reflected online and I was able to identify mutual contacts between various bands: musicians who know each other and/or play together in different formats. The possibility allowed by the site to see mutual connections with any individual may have even added credibility to my role as a sociologist in my initial messages, because my musician 'friends' were visible to others, testifying thus to a certain status of being initiated to the community. This same tool could, however, have resulted in communication problems had some of the musicians been in conflict with others among my 'friends'.

This prolonged contact with the interviewees is an ambiguous research tool that pushes to consider the ethical issues arising from it. On the one hand, this allowed me to extend my observations and data collection (such as concert announcements) to online platforms. On the other hand, even though these musicians usually have hundreds or even thousands of 'friends' on Facebook, some of the information displayed on their page is only visible to their contacts. As a 'friend' of these musicians, I thus had privileged access to data, which I would not have necessarily had as a sociologist during the interviews. We must not forget that these were the private accounts of these musicians where personal information was also displayed, along with family photos or exchanges with acquaintances and relatives. The dilemma behind the status of information taken from Facebook is constant, not least because this virtual network oscillates between private and public. How far can we make use of an exchange between relatives, a photo, a

comment or a concert poster as part of a sociological study without risking crossing the line that separates respect of private life from curiosity?

The mixed nature of information displayed on Facebook – from private photos to concert announcements – make it difficult to categorize or qualify these data. In her analysis of data visibility, Malin Sveningsson (2009) suggests that there are four types of websites: public, semi-public, semi-private and private. A public site is open and accessible to all. A semi-public site is also open to everyone, but requires registration with a username. A semi-private site (such as an organization's intranet) requires registration based on prerequisites. Finally, a private site is invisible and inaccessible to the general public, access being restricted to the creator of the page and invited guests, like online private photo albums. But information posted on Facebook falls into all four types, depending on the security settings set by the individual. Some data is visible to everyone, others only to 'friends' or a list of these.

The ambiguous status of this information did not prevent me from consulting it, without having specifically sought after it. Unexpectedly, I ended up conducting what has been called 'online ethnography' (Garcia et al., 2009) or 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000). In this sense, Facebook has become an important tool for what Howard Becker calls 'field work evidence' (1970: 39), which can only be guaranteed through a long presence among the study participants, without them being aware of the continuation of the study, because they forget or get used to it. Since my meetings with the musicians were only occasional and for short periods of a few hours, Facebook allowed me to extend these contacts and discover other aspects of their musical activities: the ones online.

Information extracted from Facebook, as well as communication within these frames, may be considered an extension of the face-to-face exchange during the interview. But quoting such data without their authors' knowledge seemed to me rather to avoid. This information greatly nourished my study, but without ever being systematically analysed, presented or quoted.

The situation became complicated when, for example, one of the musicians I had interviewed posted on his private account a fierce criticism of another musician who played in a tribute to the same artist and whom I had also met. This message was only visible to his contacts, so rather 'private' in nature and invisible to the individual being criticized. It prompted many compassionate comments from other musicians. Openly fierce criticism of this type was rare in my study, but any such evidence could have been fruitful for my analysis, as in the interviews the musicians generally denied all competition between tribute bands. Rivalries as well as friendships among musicians and tribute bands were more visible online than during the interviews. This may have been due to the ease of virtual communication on the one hand, and a somewhat self-censorship during the interview on the other.

This example illustrates well my tacit use of information available on Facebook, raising several dilemmas. The criticism formulated by this musician was not formally considered as a material for analysis, nor quoted, but undoubtedly nourished my thinking. It would have been possible to ask him for permission to quote his criticism as part of the study, but that might have jeopardized my relationship with him, his band and his 'friends' as well as the criticized musician. The criticism was not intended to be published elsewhere than on Facebook, although its 'confidentiality' could easily be

questioned by the large number of his 'friends' (nearly two thousand). Online and in the field, I often found myself in situations where 'the researcher is engaged, most often without his knowledge, in a network of alliances and oppositions*,' as Christian Papinot notes (2014: 210).

In addition to ethical issues, the extension of contact with respondents on Facebook also contributed to the assessment of the degree of 'saturation' of my data, while complicating or even preventing delineation of the field. Even after the end of the study, new information continued to attract my attention and invitations to concerts via Facebook never ceased. My difficulty in 'leaving the field' (Arborio and Fournier, 2008) became more acute because of these Facebook 'friendships', even after having formally stopped data collection. Leaving the field is not necessarily easier than entering it, and even less so when contact with respondents continues well beyond the study, especially with the extension of research relations onto online social networks.

Conclusion

Core methodological tools and issues in sociology change little through time and remain predominantly relevant to all studies: data production, verification, saturation, and interpretation; the sociologist's role and status vis-à-vis the respondents; motives of both sides; ethical considerations, and so on. Modern technology and emerging communication channels such as virtual networks and social media, while providing new tools and perspectives for qualitative research, pose new challenges and questions not only methodologically, but also in terms of ethics and epistemology. The extension of research relations to the online realm, as discussed above, is an illustrating example of this.

This article sought to discuss the main methodological issues when dealing with a tight-knit network of respondents who, furthermore, are in search of notoriety while having limited and fragile career prospects, and whose livelihood is a downgraded form of art – local musicians of tribute bands. The challenges brought upon were sharpened by these study conditions, a closer examination of which not only helps to understand the research subject itself, but adds on to the reflexivity of the discipline and expands the methodological toolkit of qualitative sociology that may serve future studies in similar conditions.

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Notes

1. A tribute band plays covers of one specific artist or band during the entire concert, hence paying tribute. Most performances by tribute bands have a strong visual dimension: costumes similar to that of the original band, wigs, make-up, stage decor, dance movement and more (Homan 2006, Gregory 2012).
2. Translated by myself, as all citations below marked with an asterisk (*).

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