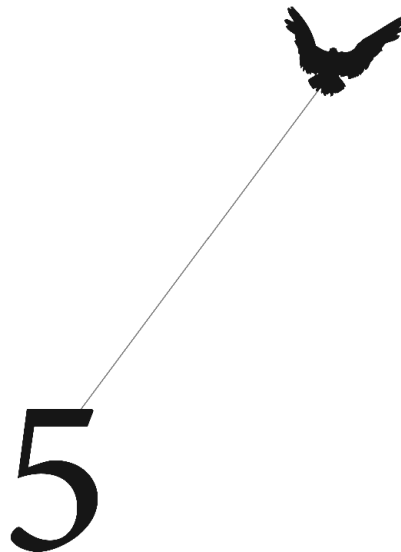


*The oral method applied to research
with transhumant shepherds*



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ager • nº 8 • 2009

Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

El método oral aplicado a la investigación con pastores trashumantes

Resumen: La comunicación oral parece hoy día una forma muy apropiada de realizar investigación acerca del mundo de la trashumancia. Lo que buscan los antropólogos es comprender la visión que las personas bajo estudio tienen de su propia existencia y la expresión de la misma en el campo social, es decir, la cultura. Por esta razón, desde la convicción de que ser un trashumante tiene una identidad que demanda ser estudiada, y apremiados por la urgencia que genera la pérdida o transformación de este estilo de vida, consideramos que recoger historias orales es la mejor manera de descubrir el universo del pastor. El pastor deja así de ser un objeto de estudio y se convierte en el protagonista de una vida que es única e irreplicable y, simultáneamente, es la voz del grupo social y cultural al que pertenece.

Palabras clave: trashumancia, entrevista en profundidad, relato oral, identidad, lenguaje no verbal.

The oral method applied to research with transhumant shepherds

Abstract: Oral communication seems nowadays to be a very appropriate way to carry out research on the world of transhumance. What anthropologists search for is an understanding of the vision that the people under study have of their own existence and the expression of this in the social field, that is to say, culture. For this reason, and stemming from the conviction that being a transhumant has as an identity that demands its study, and animated by the urgency that generates the loss or transformation of a lifestyle, we consider that the best way to discover the shepherd's universe is collecting oral stories. The shepherd is no longer a study object – he becomes the protagonist of a life that is unique and unrepeatable, and, simultaneously, he is the voice of the social and cultural group which he belongs to.

Keywords: transhumant, in-depth interview, oral account, identity, nonverbal language.

Recibido: 7 de enero de 2009
Devuelto para revisión: 4 de mayo de 2009
Aceptado: 30 de junio de 2009

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Introduction

In this article I defend the use of life stories as an instrument for studying the transhumant shepherds' life. We now avoid the beliefs which ignored qualitative methods in favor of quantitative ones as well as skepticism towards subjective knowledge. Anthropologists, sociologists and historians know very well the advantages of using live stories in social investigation. No questionnaire can offer a really *deep description* (in Geertz's expression). However, a life story is able to bring an in-depth investigation with the necessary shades that a serious anthropological analysis requires.

Of course, undertaking this kind of investigation means some risks that we assume. Sometimes it is very difficult to find a good informant, someone who is able to construct a precise account, who has time available to share it with us, someone who is representative inside his or her social world.

However, our experience says that life story as a qualitative method of social research responds faithfully to the prevailing necessity for the anthropologist, in the name of humanity, to get to know him or herself better through an encounter with another person. This technique does not leave any of the parts unaffected. The interviewed person initiates a process of introspection and self-knowledge that, inevitably, transforms him or her; and the interviewer becomes enriched as he or she discovers himself or herself in the light of other person. That is the magic of oral story.

This piece stresses the intensity and energy that the oral story has. Therefore I write using the first person as though this text would be my own life story with transhumant shepherds. Far from wishing to disappear, I agree with some authors who argue that, in order to obtain a richer and more complete text, (and, therefore, more reliable data), the researcher's presence must be shown in the report. And not only that – he or she must also make explicit the unavoidable subjectivity that he or she has. Portelli (1996) argues that it is not possible for the researcher to remain neutral because his or her very presence changes the testimony.

Researching with transhumant shepherds

About a year ago, I completed the final report in a piece of research that I had written on transhumant shepherds from the Spanish province of Teruel who still move livestock to and fro the Sierra de Espadán mountains. The first challenge involved in this research for me was to justify its meaning: that is, why should I want to study transhumant shepherds? What does the twenty-first century shepherd have that appeals to me as a social researcher? I remembered something López (1996: 111) wrote: "Researchers choosing and demarcating their field of study are quite often influenced by psychological factors involving many interweaving projective and therapeutic self-repair aspects: what we 'like' is very often what we need". To what extent was this true in my case? What were the psychological factors pressing me to clamber up mountain passes in Teruel in search of shepherds? What could this "therapeutic self-repair" consist of (through interviews with men and women who spend most of their time in silence)?

The method which I would use to carry out my research was something that I had grasped very clearly right from the start. Because I was particularly interested in the mental picture that shepherds themselves had of their own lives (that is, of their self-image as a shepherd), I concluded that the most appropriate tactic would be to use in-depth interviews. This choice proved successful for attaining my objectives, but it also involved certain difficulties.



Shepherd taking his flock out of the pen

Hence, on more than one occasion I came up against long silences which threatened to frustrate my intention to use a fully open interview. I planned to avoid the questionnaire approach as far as possible, but shepherds were sometimes expecting to hear specific questions in order to have something to tell me. This occurred above all in the first encounters. Conversations were much more natural and smoother after a certain rapport had been established.



A female shepherd

I remember one of these first encounters with one of the shepherds. I wanted to go into the hills with him and the sheep, so we went to the fold where he kept the livestock, accompanied by his wife (a shepherdess) and my husband, who was acting as our photographer. The shepherd explained everything he was doing. I was keen about the idea of spending the whole day with him, accompanying him, leading the sheep to graze over the Sierra de Espadán. Both my husband and I were properly kitted up for the occasion: long trousers, hiking boots, cap, backpack with water and a hefty sandwich. The shepherd, surrounded by his dogs and sheep, went along by our side "*enmoñigando*", which means smearing the more tender branches of the fruit trees that we encountered on our way with droppings, in order to discourage the sheep from eating them.

After we had been walking for only a few minutes, we reached a crossroad. The shepherd stopped and looked at us. We didn't know what to do, as we could not understand why he was stopping. After some very long silent seconds, the shepherd told us that he would go on alone from that point as he considered that the rest of the way was not fit for us. He showed us the road that would lead us to where our car was parked and said goodbye. There was nothing we could do to go on with him – he had simply decided that he did not want any more company that day! So my first experience as a shepherdess was just that. What was it all about? Why did the shepherd refuse to let us go on with him? If the situation is analysed this will be seen to constitute a clear example of lack of rapport. On this occasion the shepherd did not even consider the possibility of taking anyone else along for the whole day. He hardly knew us at all, and this was his way of setting the first limits, which are quite normal in any similar situation. As time has gone by and we have got to know each other better, this lack of empathy was gradually overcome and now we have a friendly relationship.

Another of the difficulties that I came up against in my intention to use the oral account as a research method was in transcribing the interviews that I had recorded. While I was doing this, I was always gnawed by the doubt (and sometimes the fear) as to whether I would be able to materialise the knowledge provided by each of these, knowledge which in my opinion is exclusive to the oral narration and not found in other methodologies.

In spite of being persuaded of the usefulness of the oral account in my research, I started to be aware of that "extra something" contributed by oral narration as soon as I started the fieldwork stage. Earlier on I had of course researched the subject of my analysis. I read a great deal about shepherds, types of shepherds, objects connected with shepherding, transhumant life cycles, routes, anecdotes, data, materials, forms, and more. When I started the interviews, I realised that all the information

I had read was somehow thin and watery compared with what I was discovering. The oral account enabled me to plunge into something much more essential and unfathomable, allowing me to discover the person that lay behind each of the informants, unique and unrepeatable individuals who were letting me share their memories and experiences – memories and experiences so full of enthusiasm, frustrations, happy times, hopes, fears... testimonies so full of "truth" that they make social research something deeply enriching and character-developing.

One of the interviews that changed my perception of transhumance most, and which therefore definitely changed me, was on a summer day when I went up Javalambre to meet some shepherds who had already retired. I talked to two of them for a long while at a table in a bar in one of these villages. They spoke to me of the hardships of the shepherd's life, which of course I was familiar with from reading about them. But when I started to hear all that information told in first person, accompanied with their shrugs of resignation and sadness, how they used the term "survive" to refer to their youth, while their gaze was lost in their memories... I listened to them almost breathlessly! Then I understood that a mental exercise like the one these shepherds were performing was making them relive all these past experiences and also make me part of them.

Why did I not feel so caught up in their lives for all those months that I was reading about shepherds as when I started to interview them? I could assert that I knew more about the world of shepherds from just a few interviews than after reading several books. So where does the magic of the oral account lie?



Shearers

One of the most fertile sources opened up to me by the oral account was the language in which the shepherds told their life stories. Let us not forget that all the shepherds that I interviewed came from the Sierra de Javalambre, and although many had been away from their villages just as long as they lived in them, all of them had the characteristic accent of the zone which made their words so expressive. While it is not my intention to make an analysis of the shepherds' language, since that would require a separate article in its own right, I will only mention the frequent use of Aragonese words throughout their talk, especially those referring to paths, the weather or actions proper to shepherds' work, such as *boira* (mist), *rosada* (frost), *refrior* (intense dry cold), *esbarizar* (to slip); *encanarse* (to be in a place with difficult access), *ternasco* (young lamb), *paridera* (fold), *esquila* (cowbell), or expressions such as "*equilicua*" ("that's it!"), "*antiayer*" (the day before yesterday), "*enantes*" (before)... among many others. This type of knowledge is obviously only obtainable through oral accounts. The spoken word lets one find out to what extent the shepherd has undergone a certain acculturation process, what subjects appeal to or sadden him most, what he considers that does not matter, or what the most frequently told anecdotes are. This is an extremely interesting field that the oral account enables us to investigate and which should doubtlessly be taken advantage of.

Molano (1998: 102) asserts that "the life story as a methodology involves the advantage of always being kept alive". This idea could lead us to think that it means that the subjects studied are realities with a constant topical significance which thus have the ability to transform anyone faced with them.

On the other hand, is being a shepherd an identity? Does the shepherd consciously take part in that supposed identity? Does he have that self vision beforehand, or am I conjuring it up through my presence? What is quite certain is that the shepherd reencounters himself in the interview, performing a major exercise in self-observation, introspection and memory. And doubtlessly "memory is the item constituting identity" (Joutard, 1999: 160). At the same time I, as the interviewer, gradually encounter the image of a person (in this case that of the shepherd) which grips me, and forces me to ask myself questions about myself. (This is the field in which man's wishes, expectations, frustrations and intrinsic search for happiness come to the fore.) Again we find here the essence of anthropology, the encounter with what I myself am (essentially speaking) through the encounter with another.



A shepherd

On one occasion I was able to interview a shepherd's daughter who had accompanied her father for years in his comings and goings over the mountain ranges. I remember that we "connected" straight away and the conversation was very soon flowing smoothly. Her language, her view of things, her tendency to stress details and pass value judgments meant that this interview was very different to any previous ones (until then I had only interviewed men). In spite of my having asked her to tell me about her transhumant life (as I always did in the interviews), she ended up talking about things like the meaning of life or genuine happiness. What more could I ask for in an interview on the transhumance tradition! The shepherdess went from a mere informant to become a witness who, by looking over her own life, reinterpreted the life of the transhumant shepherd and his family.

The interview was a technique which enabled me to get to know and establish a relationship with people whom I would otherwise never have met. Through their accounts, I was able to come into contact with a world hitherto unknown for me and many of my contemporaries, thus gaining access to realities and world views which are seldom found in our everyday lives, and which for that reason doubtlessly require an in-depth study focusing on the understanding and knowledge a lifestyle which cannot leave anyone indifferent.

Apart from this I should not forget that my informants, the shepherds, were not unaffected by the experience of being interviewed. They were constantly surprised by my presence, my questions, the recorder and the photos. "Are you really telling me that this (their shepherd's life) is important for someone?", they would ask me. Shepherds are that type of "popular" people who feel that their stories are of no interest to anyone and thus, "when they are heard in an interview their past is given value, thus helping to bolster a dignity which is essential for any personal and collective identity" (Archila, 1998: 287). As he gradually forms his own account, the shepherd is also necessarily discovering his own identity, and becoming the individual voice of a social group with whom he shares his lifestyle, his experiences, places, myths, traditions, definitively his past, present and future.

But where does all this new information come from? What is it that favours knowledge that is more comprehensive than it is explanatory? We already talked earlier about the importance of the language used by shepherds, but we should not forget that one of the key factors in this type of research is everything that the shepherd communicates without words, that is, the nonverbal language expressed through his smile, his look, his intonation, gestures, and so on. According to Fraser (1996: 149), it is precisely all this which researchers need to be able to interpret properly:

"Read any transcription and you will see how lifeless it is in comparison with the interview as you remember it. A good deal of the witness has disappeared. You cannot, unless you hear the voice in your head, intuitively feel the meaning that the witness wanted to give to this account or that explanation. The tone, nuances, pauses, gestures (everything which gives the written words their living context) has vanished. And it is this context, as much as the words themselves, which you need in your head to be able to interpret the interview properly later on. This specifically applies to that interview which seemed fairly unimportant at the time, and which later on ends up providing the key to focus on a specific incident, as has happened to me so often".

This capacity to gasp facets beyond verbal language is assisted by the relationship which is inevitably established between the interviewer and the interviewee. Hence, through the conversation, the shepherd furnished me with a type of knowledge which is difficult to materialise through words in the final report, but which doubtlessly enables one to come closer to human reality with greater accuracy. This is what Molano (1998: 103) calls "emotive or subjective knowledge".

How is this relationship established? It takes time, of course. It also requires displaying a deep and true interest for the person standing in front of you, not only in the information that this person can give you, but also in them as a person. Fraser (1996: 140) explains that he tackles dialogue as he would with a person whose whole lifetime's work proved fascinating for him.

But can a study be based on the subjective knowledge provided by the oral account? Vansina (2007: 162) says that oral data is "the key for a perception of cultures and societies from the inside outwards; these are the internal voice of culture". To quote Szczepanski (1979: 245):

"The objects of the cultural world are like the persons who experience these, so that, since they only exist in human beings' experience and lose any meaning outside this experience (...) any social reality (that is, social groups, their structure, etc.) constitutes at its heart a complex of factors, attitudes, requisites, experiences and valuations of people who participate in these. This basic thesis forms the ultimate reason for the use of autobiographical materials as a unique and sufficient source of knowledge for social research".

I therefore decided that the most appropriate approach in the final report of my research was to let my interviewees speak for themselves, and so I grouped the fragments of the interviews transcribed together by subjects. Beyond the work that they did, what mattered to me was how they feel when they do it, how they experience this. Because oral sources enable the researcher to gain access "both (to) the practices and the representations and meaning that the actors give to their actions and the interpretations of the circumstances undergone" (Borderías, 1995: 118). Apart from learning all about the routes that they take down the mountains, what really matters to me (as an anthropologist) are the motives leading them to do this work year after year, finding out how they face up to cold, loneliness, life far from their homes and family. In other words, I am not interested by the theory but by the human experience provided by subjective knowledge. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1987: 114), "The authenticating seal of in-depth qualitative interviews is learning about what is important in the informants' minds; the meanings, perspectives and definitions; the way they see, classify and experience the world".

This is a way for ordinary people, those who have never been allowed to speak, to be given a chance to make themselves heard and indeed, to become models, mirrors in which others can see and discover ourselves. To take Voldman's (1982: 83) idea, those who until now were "object-witnesses" now become "subject-witnesses".



A female shepherd talking to the researcher

But can any generalisation be made from these sources? Or should anthropologists be content with particular knowledge? If we opt for restricting ourselves to the particular field, could we not be betraying our profound desire to understand ourselves as human beings?

As far as these questions are concerned, I think that the anthropologist has no reason to relinquish raising the specific knowledge provided by oral accounts to a more general and global scale, using categories proper to the social and cultural spheres. Kofes (1998: 84) points out that "life accounts synthesise the singularity of the subject, his or her interpretations and interests, the interaction between researcher and researchee and an emotional objective reference transcending the subject and conveying information about the social field". Because everything that the shepherd perceives, everything that forms his world-view and his memory, is ultimately social and, though coated with subjectivism, does not cease to be built on a cultural imaginary. Can man indeed ever cease to be a cultural being?

Conclusions

For this reason, after using the interview as a research technique which has provided me with a number of oral accounts, most transhumant Teruel shepherds moving around the Sierra de Espadán could be said to have a certain sensation of

being something dying out, coming to an end as they have known this. They are men who do their work with a great sense of duty, but aware that everything they have known has been transformed. To some extent this could well be something that encourages them to justify what they are, and thus *who* they are.

What is quite certain is that they love their work, and starting from their testimonies, I would even venture to say that this fact supports the idea that shepherding is not an occupation but a way of life, a form of being a person. This explains the (sometimes extreme) difficulty of shepherds to adapt to their new lives when they retire, as well as the efforts made by those still working in transhumance to extend their working lives as long as possible, putting off the time of retirement.

The transhumant shepherds whom I interviewed are simple people who are humble and feel humble. They are good friends of their friends, reliable and very loyal. Their capacity for sacrifice and resignation is constantly put to the test, since apart from the disadvantages that have always existed (the cold, the rootlessness, the lack of means and comforts) we should not forget that they are the protagonists of a lifestyle going through a major process of change, which makes their work even more difficult and hard, if possible. Today's transhumant shepherd has to come to terms with the absolute devaluation of his sheeps' wool, but he nevertheless has to go on shearing them. Farmers no longer require the manure from his flocks, so it is the shepherd who has to clean the folds. The profits from the sale of lambs go down all the time. The paths which they travel along are semi-abandoned, with no farmsteads where they can enjoy a rest or meet people to say hello to on their way. And so on.



A shepherd with his dogs

When we look over the accounts of the shepherds, the feeling that we get is that they are men of few words, accustomed to spending long periods alone, and who like silence and peaceful places. In this respect they are aware that above all in the villages of the winter pastures, they are seen as rather "strange" and marginal people. But the actual fact is that although they go through many periods of peaceful isolation, there are also times when they enjoy an interesting social life reflected in the many sayings, rhymes, riddles, jokes and songs (the popular shepherds' songs so typical in the Javalambre range) which make the anthropologist's work such a gratifying matter. One can delve deeply into these aspects of the social and cultural life of transhumant shepherds and doubtlessly the best way to do this is through oral accounts, whose allure, as we see it, lies in this technique's capacity to disappear in the anthropological text without leaving any trace, thus enabling one to discover the human being who produced this.

Acknowledgements

I would like to say that the shepherds and their families have willingly given me all the time I have needed and very generously have shared with me much more than just their memories. The way I was taken into their homes, their honesty when showing me their daily routine in all its moments, their hospitality, respect and understanding have all aroused a deep admiration and warmth towards them within me. I am particularly grateful to Joaquín, Domingo, Consuelo, Pedro, Santiago and their families for their cooperation. I would never have been able to carry out my research without their help. Photos 1, 2, 5 and 6 have been given up as a courtesy by J. Daniel López. I gratefully acknowledge the generous grant given by the Fundación Bancaja Segorbe, as well as the comments and criticism raised by three anonymous referees.

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