



Abstract This personal narrative describes a case of realities in intercultural contact in the context of research. Different cultural patterns of gaining access to research participants—foreigners in the context of the US society at the time of the study—are described. The wider issue of researcher as a migrant between the worlds of research participants and research institutions is discussed.

Key Words cultural roles, field research, research participation

Isolda de Araujo Günther
University of Brasilia, Brazil

Contacting Subjects: The Untold Story

In the fall quarter of 1983 I finished my PhD dissertation at Michigan State University. For the last time I would see the Great Lakes' winter arriving once more, showing that it had come to stay for a while. Before going to Michigan I had only lived in the tropics, thus it was quite a novelty to live with seasons, where Mother Nature shows her changes, urging us to rush. And rush I did: finished my work and raced home to Brazil—to 'down-there', as one of my professors used to call it—to reassume my duties.

In retrospect, it was as if the change from -20°F to $+30^{\circ}\text{C}$ had melted away the whole experience. Maybe I understood only too well that my peers at home did not tolerate foreign ideas that much, although Freud was treated as a native. Politically the country was being revitalized, after almost 20 years of a dictatorship. Since my return in 1983 I have moved to another university that is more open to foreign ideas, but even so, I never turned my attention back on my dissertation.

During a recent round-table discussion about 'Subjectivity in Psychology', one of the speakers commented that researchers usually do not write about the personal experience they have with the participants in their research. On the way back to my office, flashes of my dissertation research solidified, re-emerging from the depth of memory in a very pleasant way. I thought, 'I could write about my Michigan experience.' Back at the office, I took my notes (which I had almost thrown out the week before) and began this paper. What follows is a report of how

I obtained access to and interacted with 47 children and their families, while collecting data for my PhD dissertation.

How It All Began

In the dissertation I completed at Michigan State University (MSU), I intended to investigate how young persons between the age of 6 and 12 who have moved across cultural boundaries view their new environment. The competence in dealing with the situation, as perceived by children and their parents, was also investigated (Günther, 1983). The reason why this topic was chosen was linked to some observations in daily life. At first, what caught my attention was the behavior of foreign families at supermarkets. While there, I observed mother and daughter or mother and son dyads. The mother, dressed in traditional clothes, was having difficulties in understanding how much to pay for the purchase. She was speaking to the child in their native language, and then the child spoke English to the salesperson. Next, the mother decided to give the money to the child, who turned it over to the clerk. When this interaction with the salesperson had ended, the mother returned to her traditional role of an apparently dominant parent, and the child into an apparently obedient offspring. I observed also, looking at the playground from the window of our study, that during a particular summer the playground was international: kids from all ethnicities were interacting in the same area. By the following summer, things had changed drastically and one could hear loud voices pointing to the swings: 'This is only for the Japanese,' or referring to the sandbox, 'Get out! This is for Americans.' As a psychologist, I was approached by parents from my country, asking for advice concerning their kids' adaptation. At home I also had 'cross-cultural experience'. There I was a *nordestina* (from the northeastern part of Brazil), married to a German, with a 3-year-old daughter who introduced me to the American children's culture and who used to say, 'I am half-Brazilian, half-German and half-American.'

Because I was living on such a culturally enriched campus, I did not want to run an experiment. With this consideration in mind, I decided to study how 6- to 12-year-olds perceived their cognitive, physical and social competence vis-à-vis the new environment. The first step was to conduct a pilot study with a group to which access was not a problem. An interview schedule was developed and tested with 11 Brazilian children and their mothers. To obtain the reliability of the instrument the same group was interviewed 15 days later by a US psychology student.

Defining Participants

Information provided by the Office of International Students and Scholars indicated that at the time of the fall registration (1982), there were approximately 1640 foreign students from 70 different countries among the 40,000 students enrolled at Michigan State University. Most foreign students who were accompanied by their families, as well as many US students and foreign faculty, lived in university housing in three distinct neighborhoods. Two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school served these university housing areas. The proportion of foreign children at Spartan Village and Red Cedar elementary schools was 50 percent and 40 percent respectively. Hannah Middle School reported 15 percent and East Lansing High School 2 percent of foreign students.

The next step was to obtain information about children of foreign students at MSU by country of origin and age. Given the interest of studying 6- to 12-year-olds, information was obtained about the number of children born in 1969 and before, in each year for 1970 through 1976, and from 1977 through to the present. To corroborate the information obtained from the Office of International Students and Scholars, an attempt was made to obtain the number of children of foreign students enrolled in the East Lansing School District.

Since representativeness could not be established, I decided to study families from Saudi Arabia, Japan and Korea who represented homogeneous groups with a large number of children, families who were the sole representatives of their respective countries or cultures, and a group of US families. The rationale for the selection of the groups was linked to the source of support available to the children: (a) strong group support in the case of the Saudi group, who even had their own mosque and school, which they attended after the American school day; (b) presence of group support due to sufficient numbers of children among the Japanese and Koreans; (c) lack of group support in the case of children who were solitary representatives of their respective countries or cultures; and (d) families who had moved, but within their own culture, as was the case for the US children. The selection criteria were as follows: (a) both parents from the same country; (b) at least one child between the age of 6 and 12 born in the same country as the parents; (c) in the case of more than one child meeting these criteria, the eldest was interviewed; (d) in the case of the foreign families, the intention to return; and (e) in the case of US families, having moved to Michigan in the last five months, since the spring term.

Preparing To Contact Families

In the proposal for this study, I had written the following regarding the procedure:

Once families are identified, they will receive a letter, inviting them to participate. The letter will be followed by a telephone call. In the case of families agreeing to participate, a time will be set, and the researcher will visit the family at the agreed upon time.

There was no problem in following this procedure to obtain the collaboration of the 10 US families. The University Apartment Office provided 79 names and addresses but only 12 families were found to meet the criteria listed above. In this group a phone call was sufficient to guarantee participation. As university students living on campus, it appeared that they were well socialized in understanding what research is all about. In this group two families declined to participate. As a citizen of a country other than the US, I conducted the interviews with foreign children and their parents. A North American senior student in Psychology at MSU conducted the interviews with US children and parents. However, there were notable variations in gaining access to the other groups, that is, to those from Japan, Saudi Arabia, Korea and to the sole representative from 10 countries or cultures: Chile, Egypt, Hungary, India (Muslim), Nepal, Poland, South Africa (black), South Africa (Afrikaner), Sudan and Uruguay. Although I was quite aware of the challenge of interacting with unfamiliar persons from different countries, each one with his or her own singularity, I tried not to emphasize the inevitable differences. Instead, I tried to transmit that, like them, I was a foreign student and a parent, besides being a researcher who wanted to study them and their children. I will present the interactions with the different cultures in the order that I conducted the study.

The Japanese Group

Next to the US group, the Japanese group was the easiest to work with. Access to the Japanese student population was gained through the Japanese Club. An explanation of the study, similar to the one provided in the letter to US parents, was translated and published in the quarterly newsletter of the Club. Furthermore a list of the Club members as of the winter quarter was obtained. I was not aware, however, that the Japanese school year begins during the spring, and that families with school-age children usually return to Japan during the winter quarter. Thus, only three eligible families were located from

the Club list, all of whom agreed to participate. These three families, in turn, provided names and introductions to other families. All but one eligible Japanese family agreed to participate in the study.

At the Japanese houses I felt welcome. I understood immediately that I had to take off my shoes. All of the houses appeared as if transplanted from Japan. All families had prepared a well-decorated table with snacks and green tea. However, some unexpected interactions took place. Considering the variations of accents, I decided to tape the interviews. When I asked permission to tape-record the interview on entering the first Japanese home, the mother answered: 'Oh, no problem. I am tape-recording since you entered, that's why I delayed in opening the door.'

Another interaction was more difficult to handle. When the data collection phase of the Japanese group was concluded, I received a phone call from one of the mothers with the following request: 'I know that you talked with all the Japanese children already, so I want the results, because I want to teach my boy how to compete.' This mother could not or did not want to understand the confidentiality of the data, and did not accept my promise to return the results when the dissertation was done. Her argument was, 'But you, who are not a Japanese, entered our home, talked to our children and got the information. I am the mother.' I was relieved that the data had already been collected. I could only reinforce my position by pointing out that I was following orders from my adviser.

Another interesting aspect in dealing with this group was that all the mothers stayed in the room during the interview. Throughout, they maintained eye contact with the child. This interaction reminded me that my mother used a very similar form of control. In public, she only needed to give us *that* look. We all understood her words in *that* look. So while I perceived the interactions, it was very frustrating, because I was unable to grasp the potent non-verbal communication. One of the Japanese children, however, surprised me. In response to the question, 'Please tell me three things you don't like about living here,' the boy answered, 'To study English spelling.' After that he looked firmly at his mother and shouted: 'See, now I am going to say!' and continued, 'To be scolded by my mother,' and, 'To be bullied by other friends.'

The Korean Group

Initially, contact with the Korean families appeared straightforward. A list was obtained from the MSU foreign student office and from the Korean Club. Letters were sent to those 21 families who, on the basis of

living in a two-bedroom apartment, could be presumed to have children, though not necessarily of the appropriate age, place of birth or with the intention to return home. Yet it was surprising that during the telephone follow-up only one family admitted to having children. This family also agreed to participate in the study, and helped to open the door to two other families. All the other families affirmed on the phone: 'No, we have no children.' What struck me was the tone of voice: it was not clear, with rapid breathing, as if the heartbeat interfered in the pronunciation. Surely it contained anxiety. I do not know why, but the reaction reminded me the period in Brazil from 1964 to 1970, the grimmest time of the Brazilian military dictatorship. I kept thinking to myself 'just like '64.' I commented about it to my husband, but he did not react. After all he did not live in Brazil at that time. I decided to discuss it with my adviser, who suggested that I could contact a former US priest turned sociology professor, married to a Korean ex-nun. I phoned and made an appointment. When I came into the professor's office, he was sitting at his table, looking towards the open door, talking to someone. He asked me what I wanted in front of the student, and as I explained the situation, the student, a Korean, turned, stood up, pointed to my nose and said, 'Ah, so you are the one who wants our children!' This is how I discovered that prior to my arrival in Michigan there had been political problems between the Korean Student Association in Michigan and the Korean government. A student had been abducted and assassinated, and there had been threats to kidnap the Korean students' children. I was able to explain myself, but the problem remained. How to be legitimized as a researcher to these families?

The professor suggested that I go to a Korean community market where the families met every week. I went there, explained to the owner that I was sent by the professor, and asked for permission to contact the families. She did not appear too cooperative, but she also did not say no. I approached the families; they listened but showed no interest. By chance, a Brazilian student of Korean descent whom I had met at a friend's house entered the market. We chatted, and I talked about the problem I was confronting. Suddenly the owner asked, 'Wait a moment! You are not speaking English or Korean. What language is that?' My acquaintance explained that we were speaking Portuguese and that I was a Brazilian student. With this explanation, I was able to contact and interview all Korean families who met the criteria established for the study. My post-interview annotations show that six Korean families served ginseng tea, and one family excused itself for not serving me in Korean porcelain. All the apartments were very neat and clean and, in contrast to the Japanese ones, all in occidental style.

One of the families asked to be interviewed at my house. I agreed and served apple juice and ice cream on that hot summer afternoon. Another family, with two daughters, 6 and 8 years old, and one boy aged 2, created a different situation. Arriving at their home, I met the mother, father and the three children. The mother was eating when I came, then went to wash the dishes and came back with what appeared to be a kilo of garlic to peel. The father stayed during the first 20 minutes of the interview, then left for class. The 6-year-old girl, who tried hard to be the one to be interviewed, said to me, 'You cannot talk with her [mother]. She does not know English.' The mother continued peeling the garlic during the interview and seemed very embarrassed when asking for her daughters' help.

The Saudi Group

During a statistics course I talked to a colleague from Saudi Arabia about my dissertation project. He gave me the name of a member of the board of Al-Farook Elementary School, maintained by the Saudi Arabian Education Mission. He advised me that I, as a woman, could not speak to the man, but my husband could phone him. Little did I know that it would take from October to mid-May to cultivate contacts and provide clarifications about the purpose and procedure of the study. During this time I visited the board member's house three times. For the first visit, he instructed my husband to escort me to his apartment door, since a woman could not walk alone. At the same time, he explained that my husband could not enter the house because his wife would be there. During this first visit, in November, I was received by his wife, who scrutinized me for two hours. It felt like taking another comprehensive examination. She began by asking about my religion. Without reflecting, or even perceiving this pivotal question, I answered that I was raised a Catholic. She seemed satisfied and explained that this is the only religion close to Islam. Next question: 'Do you eat pork?' I said 'No' and kept reminding myself that, if I were to be accepted as a researcher by the Saudi group, I would need to be careful not to buy pork, at least until the data collection was over. Imagine if I were to be caught with a tray of pork at the supermarket! Then she asked me about the features of our bathroom in Brazil, about family relations, discipline for children, the number of children I had. She served tea with Arabic delicacies in a very elaborate Arabic tea-set and finally began to inquire about the study: reason, objective, population. Every detail was investigated. When I phoned my husband to pick me up, she said that her husband

would contact mine. The second meeting, three weeks later, was arranged with my husband's presence, so that her husband could participate also. This time the inquiries were directed at the research and source of support for my studies. Tea and cookies were served. At the end of the meeting, the spouse asked me to bring my daughter for a third meeting, so her children could be present in the living room. Two weeks later my daughter came and played with her girl.

Following that meeting in December, there was a long silence. After waiting five months, hoping for permission to interview the families, I was contacted in May. I had been cleared and received the names and addresses of Saudi families. From now on, everything went smoothly. Only tape-recording was not permitted. It was explained that the voice contains the soul, therefore I could not register it. Entering their houses was like arriving in an Arabic country. Opening the door I would see the whole family dressed in their native clothes and lined up, by age. After the introductions, the other children quietly disappeared, while the mother, father and the target child stayed. All the families had at least two children. Two families, with five children each, lived off campus. The Saudis constituted an exception, in that half of the adults' interviews were conducted with both parents. During the interview, the mother always appeared to be in charge. When the husband wanted to add something, or, considering their expression, disagreed, he would turn to his wife, speaking in Arabic. A discussion would take place, even heated arguments from both sides. Unlike the Japanese, the communication was verbal. Yet, once again, I could not follow it. I felt, to use a Brazilian expression, like a blind person in a shooting, hearing but not understanding. In all instances the mother had the last word.

After seeing this so many times, I could not restrain myself and said that this behavior was not congruent with what I had expected, that is, a very dominant position on the part of the father. The answer I received was that Saudi couples always discuss their children's education and schooling, and that in this area the mother is dominant. What impressed me most in this group was the self-assurance of the children. They appeared very well adapted: 'We have our school, our Mosque, and speak two languages' (boy aged 9), 'They [Americans] are not mean' (boy aged 10), or 'I thought they were really mean, like in the movies' (boy aged 11). One of the questions in the parent interview schedule asked, 'What advice would you give to a mother coming to the US?' One mother answered, 'Not to expect that somebody will bother her because of her tradition. Not to feel they will be insecure.' A father proudly conceded, 'My 5-year-old told me: How come you are my father and I speak English better than you?'

Single Cases from Different Countries

Not constituting a community, finding families from a specific country was like searching for a needle in a haystack. Contrary to the Koreans or Saudis that I had to legitimize myself, in these cases their doors were shut. It appeared as if they were alone, but also did not bother or care to have friends or visitors. I felt this especially with respect to the mothers. I was able to identify 13 families in this condition with the help of the foreign student office, the English Language program of the United Ministries in Higher Education, neighbors, friends and colleagues. Three families refused to participate.

The children appeared well adapted to the environment, enjoying their social life, very competent in the language spoken outside their homes. Usually the mother demonstrated a poor knowledge of English, and the child acted as translator. Only two children continued speaking their native language, the one from Hungary and the one from Chile. In the other families, the child understood the native language, but answered in English.

In this group each home presented a different way of interaction and different home environment. I will never forget my contact with the black South African family, consisting of a single mother, a 15-year-old girl and an 8-year-old boy. When I arrived, the mother said, 'He wants to speak alone with you,' directing me to the bedroom. When asked 'Who are your friends here?' the boy broke down: 'You don't know what it means to be a black, in a white neighborhood,' and he explained, 'The whites don't play with me, and the others [meaning other foreign children] begin playing, but when they discover I am not an American black, they don't like me anymore.'

The Tactics of Survival

Although the experience reinforced the necessity of knowing the social rules when contacting unfamiliar persons or working in unfamiliar contexts, the story does not end here. A few years ago I went with three students to interview adolescents at a familiar shopping mall in the middle of my home town. The students were well trained: we all knew the people and the place—this was our place. I decided to go in one direction, while they all went off in another. Seconds later, I heard voices calling me. When I turned around, I saw my students surrounded by three security guards. In no uncertain terms they wanted to know: Why we were approaching the shoppers? Who had given us permission? What was going on? In short, they made it clear that *they*

were the guardians of the place and the people ... and I had thought it was a *public* space! The following week, after we had obtained permission, we were welcome.

Reference

Günther, I.A. (1983). *Competence and acceptance: Perceptions by foreign children and parents*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

Biography

ISOLDA DE ARAUJO GÜNTHER teaches psychology of adolescence and does research on that subject at the University of Brasilia. Her research covers issues of adolescents' conduct in different environmental contexts. ADDRESS: Prof. Isolda A. Günther, Caixa Postal 4480 Brasilia, DF, CEP: 70919-970, Brazil. [email: hartmut@guarany.cpd.unb.br]