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Pragmatic Research, Critical Knowledge and Political Relevance

A Self-Reflexive Perspective

This article is a self-reflexive exercise that seeks to turn lived research experience into an object of exploration and critical self-evaluation. Here, the researcher moves from the position of observer to the object of observation. The mere thought of reflexivity might cause feelings of aversion and reluctance among many social science researchers. It demands the readiness and boldness to expose the messy practices that underlie, yet are intentionally hidden in, the research and writing process. Reflexivity, in this sense, serves as a mirror game in which the researcher goes behind closed doors to expose all moments of confusion, uncertainty, and fragility marking the confrontation with the intractable facts of field research. It deconstructs aspects of the knowledge production process by revealing the institutional conditions, ideological mechanisms, and dominant discourses shaping the academic enterprise.

This deliberate self-disclosure can generate feelings of anxiety and discomfort in the researcher. It remains, however, of crucial significance. Whilst the positivist approach often overemphasises objectivity over subjectivity, reflexivity – if undertaken thoughtfully and methodically – can only enhance qualitative research's rigour, reliability, and credibility.

In practical terms, self-reflexivity draws on the idea that the researchers should tell their 'research stories' transparently, averting the 'hypocritical' feature¹ attributed to formal discourse and normative academic writing styles. Telling the research story entails exposing the different phases of the research undertaking, from its birth as an initial inquiry, passing through data collection, the negotiation of access to the field and positionalities, through to reporting research findings. This introspective investigation of the research process, although not devoid of what Bourdieu called "narcissistic indulgence" and "scholastic illusion,"² can yield an invaluable moment of productive reflection, especially if the researcher is self-aware and bold enough to uncover the

1 Bourdieu 2004, 25.

2 Ibid., 37, 89.

backstage and ‘messiness’ and ‘muddy swamp’ of research practice³ that often remains out of the reader’s view. Reflexive thinking, in this sense, imposes itself as a “hygienic exercise”⁴ that uncovers unconscious flaws, contradictions, and implicit biases between the researcher and the research object.⁵

This article adds to a growing literature that uses reflexivity as a crucial methodological means to evaluate qualitative research knowledge-production in the Moroccan context.⁶ Drawing on personal field research on Morocco’s transnational religious policy, the article argues that, in a Global South context such as Morocco, where social science research is still underdeveloped and fairly marginalised, the researcher needs to map out a context-sensitive research agenda suitably articulated with critical and cameral⁷ perspectives to generate usable knowledge for decision-makers and benefit the community. Regardless of its potential pitfalls, a rigorous calibration of critical depth with socio-political relevancy seems essential to endow the social sciences with the ‘performance legitimacy’ to root the research strongly in deliberative public space. Importantly, this calibration ensures the social sciences’ sustainable growth in the ongoing neoliberal transformation of academia in the Arab world today.⁸

To unfold this argument, the article first presents elements of Bourdieu’s reflexive approach that inform the study’s analytical framework. Second, it explores some key issues marking Morocco’s emerging political science research arena, namely the practice of field research, the power-knowledge nexus, and reflexivity. Thirdly, it tells the story of an individual case of policy research, demonstrating how the academic researcher, under the constraints of academic reality and the pressing quest for survival and professional development, is pushed to tread a fine pragmatic line between the critical and cameral perspective of social sciences.

³ Finlay 2002a.

⁴ Pascon 1986, 107.

⁵ See our co²libri project as example: <https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/region/suedostasien/forschung/netzwerke/co2libri>.

⁶ Zaki 2006; Ward 2015; Mouna et al. 2017.

⁷ Cameralism, drawn from the German tradition of ‘Kameralstudien’ since the XVII century, marked the beginning of the academic development of the sciences of administration and government. By providing technical knowledge and practical expertise, it primarily aims at training an elite of public officers and state servants to counsel and help the king/prince to rule state affairs. For further insights into a “cameral” political science, see Association Française de Science Politique 2009.

⁸ See Hanafi and Arvanitis 2015; Waterbury 2020.

Reflexivity as a Critical Means of Knowledge Production: Elements of Bourdieu's In-Depth Reflexivity

In recent decades, reflexivity has attracted considerable interest as an “academic virtue”⁹ and essential ingredient of rigorous qualitative research production.¹⁰ Reflexivity turns the research experience into a fertile subject for critical investigation by casting an “ironic gaze [that] unveils, unmask[s], [and] brings to light what is hidden”¹¹ in our research experience. In contrast to the common view condemning all intrusions of self and subjectivity into the research process, including those hidden behind ‘critical distance’ or the Weberian principle of ‘axiological neutrality,’ reflexive thinking transforms subjectivity from a problem to an opportunity.¹² By shedding light on the methodological and experimental choices that characterise the lived research experience, reflexivity illuminates how the researcher’s social background, presuppositions, and behaviours influence the research process and shape its findings.¹³ This undertaking is not intended to diminish the credibility of social science research but rather to enhance its trustworthiness and even validate its outcomes.

Since the focus is on the researcher’s self and complex positionalities in the broad social field, reflexive practice is not without difficulties. It requires of the researcher a laborious “doubling of consciousness”¹⁴ to reveal the ambiguous, tense relationships between the research-explorer and the subject explored, and recursively go back and forth between the two. This complex introspection cannot be accomplished overnight. As Bourdieu maintains, it ought to be a slow, arduous process that can be mastered only by long apprenticeship and practice.¹⁵

Reflexive practice might be seen as a sort of ‘treason’ and disclosure of ‘professional secrets’ that risk calling into question the attractive representation that cultural producers often have of themselves as free from all kinds of social determinism.¹⁶ It thus requires critical commitment, self-awareness, and cons-

⁹ Lynch 2000.

¹⁰ Etherington 2004, 34; Berger 2015, 1.

¹¹ Bourdieu 2004, 4.

¹² Finlay 2012b.

¹³ Finlay and Gough 2008, IX.

¹⁴ Bourdieu 2003, 281.

¹⁵ Bourdieu 2004, 5.

¹⁶ Bourdieu 2003, 283.

tant epistemological vigilance.¹⁷ Importantly, ‘disclosing oneself’ and exposing all kinds of ideological biases and ethical dilemmas derived from the researcher’s position in the scientific field requires a great deal of audacity. Such subjective factors, which actually constitute the researcher’s microcosm, itself shaped by the overall social structure, inevitably influence the research experience and affect its outputs.

Reflexive analysis involves a twofold risk: slipping into narcissistic temptation¹⁸ or falling into the trap of “excessive self-analysis.”¹⁹ The latter may lead to endless deconstructive thinking, distracting the researcher and weakening their focus on the research itself. Thus, the reflexive exercise should be initially deferred while the researcher carefully documents all the elements needed to engage in it subsequently.

Bourdieu points to the significance of the substantial shift from a primitive conception of reflexivity, or what he called “narcissistic reflexivity” to an in-depth, “reformist” one.²⁰ Primitive reflexivity can be identified as a mere justificatory discourse to prove the scientific credentials of anthropological research. The early ‘reflexive moment’ in social sciences occurred in the 1970s and 1980s with a generation of anthropologists and ethnographers whose confessional accounts of their lived field experience²¹ emphasised particularly the subjective relationships between researchers and informants and other research participants.²² In-depth reflexivity, in contrast, refers to a more comprehensive and critical introspection that questions the researcher’s positionalities, biases, and the general structural conditions shaping the researcher’s microcosm.

Overall, the significance of Bourdieu’s reflexive approach lies in providing a comprehensive, radical program as a collective enterprise incumbent on all the agents in the field.²³ Bourdieu’s reflexive project is credited with being vigilant of the constitutive elements of knowledge production, including the unconscious subjective motives and cognitive biases involved in research practice. Bourdieu’s reflexive project goes so far as to investigate the researcher’s position and personal interests in the academic space, as well as the various historical and intellectual conditions, academic traditions, and the axiomatic problems of the national scientific field that altogether impact social knowledge-production.

¹⁷ Bourdieu 2004, 89.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Finlay 2002a, 212.

²⁰ Bourdieu 2004, 90–91.

²¹ Finlay 2002a.

²² See for instance, Rabinow 1977.

²³ Bourdieu 2004, 91.

Political Science, Reflexivity and Field Practice: Insights from Morocco

Political science knowledge production in Morocco has recorded a remarkable growth during the last three decades. The discipline has relentlessly pursued an understanding of the complex and deep transformations of the political regime since 1990s. The number of teaching units and students enrolled in the discipline has significantly increased.²⁴ An equivalent increase has been recorded in the number of university research structures, think tanks, and publications,²⁵ as well as the proliferation of sub-fields and specific research themes that captivate the attention of a growing number of specialised political scientists. Despite this relative growth, knowledge production in political science has barely been assessed. Apart from a few individual attempts,²⁶ there is hardly any fundamental review or comprehensive evaluation of the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological aspects of knowledge production or of future research directions in this emerging discipline.

Political science in Morocco does not seem to be involved in any 'critical moment' or state-of-the-art assessment of the discipline. Instead, this discipline is seemingly still going through accumulation and experimentation.²⁷ Such a situation is explained by the dispersion of knowledge production sites in the social sciences, as a whole, the prevalence of individual research,²⁸ and the inconsistent multilingual publication. Another significant explanation is that political science, like many other social sciences, suffers from the absence or weakness of a 'scientific community' that would institutionalise knowledge production in this disciplinary field and promote public debate about its major orientations and developments. As comparative experience teach us, scientific communities often emerge hand in hand with active professional associations.²⁹ An evaluative report issued by the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education maintains that scientific

²⁴ It is noteworthy that, in Moroccan public universities, political science is not taught as a separate discipline but rather as a mere sub-field within the department of Public Law, in 'open access' mode. Since the early 2000s, several private higher education establishments have begun to offer specialised BA and MA programs in Political Science. In 2018, Mohammed V University inaugurated a selection-based '*licence d'excellence en sciences politiques*,' the first of its kind in the Moroccan public university system

²⁵ Moudden 2013.

²⁶ See Saaf 1991; Rachik 2007; Saaf 2011; Moudden 2013.

²⁷ Saaf 1992, 137–36.

²⁸ Rachik 2007.

²⁹ Cherkaoui 2009, 54.

communities, in Moroccan context, are still in their “embryonic stage.”³⁰ Nearly 60% of university professors deny their existence.³¹ The Moroccan Political Science Association, deemed to represent the discipline in question, suffers from multiple dysfunctions and constraints. Despite the fact that general assemblies are regularly held, the association’s scientific activities remain seasonal, it lacks specialised journals, and significantly has not yet managed to attract a critical mass of scholars and practitioners. There is still a long way to go before the representative authority of political science can be established and fully recognised.

Such structural issues do not concern only Morocco. They are similarly raised in other regional contexts, showcasing the fragility of the national political economies of social science knowledge production in the Arab world compared to their counterparts in the Global North.³²

Concerning the discipline’s orientations and prospects, three central issues have captured the attention of Moroccan political scholars.

The first issue concerns the correlation between political knowledge and power and its theoretical and praxeological dimensions. The theoretical dimension questions the correlation between political knowledge and domination.³³ Morocco-related colonial (political) sociology, through its prominent representatives (Michaux Bellaire, Charles Le Coeur, Robert Montagne, and Jacques Berque), has frequently been presented as a pertinent example of such correlation.³⁴ Regardless of the circumstances and ideological tendencies surrounding the evolution of colonial knowledge, scholars have debated how this knowledge can promote emerging political sociology in the context of modern nation-state building in post-independent Morocco.³⁵ As for the praxeological and cameral dimensions, it questions in particular the inextricable relationship between political science and political action, namely how politology can prove its legitimacy as an applied-knowledge field concerned not only with deciphering contemporary socio-political reality, but also with the rationalisation of decision-making processes and political problem-solving.³⁶ Jean Leca pointed out that “there is always a part of the heritage of cameralism in the evolution of modern political science on a universal scale: its role is to help the prince to govern.”³⁷

³⁰ Cherkaoui 2009, 53.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³² See Hanafi and Arvanitis 2015; Waterbury 2020.

³³ Saaf 1992, 79.

³⁴ For a detailed elaboration of this argument, See Khatibi 1967, 10–28; Saaf 1992, 83–115.

³⁵ See for instance, Saaf 1992, 120–1.

³⁶ Moudden 2013.

³⁷ Cited in Association Française de Science Politique (AFSP) 2009, 97.

The second issue draws attention to the weak investment of field research practice in political science research in contrast to the excess of institutional-legal formalism that has long dominated Morocco's law faculties, where political science is predominantly taught. As Rachik put it, "We speak more easily of sociography and ethnography than of politography."³⁸ Several scholars demonstrate an increasing awareness and appreciation of the fieldwork as a 'training laboratory' that embodies the idea of 'learning by doing.' Yet, except for a few areas of research in which field practice flourishes greatly, such as public policy, electoral behaviour, and social protest movements, 'desktop research' continues to dominate political science research at the expense of field research. To intelligibly comprehend the socio-political and institutional reality, desktop research is preoccupied with descriptive and historical analysis or, at best, resorts to document-based analysis, especially in research areas pertaining to political history, political thought, and political Islam.³⁹ Field research, in contrast, privileges empirical tools and grounded theories. An emerging anchoring of field practice in Moroccan political science research has primarily been noticed in the Casablanca law faculty since the early 1980s. Thanks to Paul Pascon (a Moroccan sociologist) and Bruno Etienne (a French political scientist), social science seminars and research groups have sprung up since then, encouraging young political science scholars to engage more actively in field-based research.⁴⁰ This is a breakaway from the normative, institutional-legal perspective that has greatly marked Moroccan law faculties under the influence of the French university education model. A member of this core group, subsequently accredited with consolidating fieldwork approaches within Casablanca law faculty, contends that "in social sciences, learning the profession of researcher is not achieved through handbooks, but rather through field practice."⁴¹ This new dynamic has resulted in a growing young generation of political science scholars, more open to field research and social science techniques, in the attempt to shift away from the excessive focus on legalistic-institutional and state-centred approaches, deemed incapable of empirically apprehending socio-political reality.

The third issue points to the increasing interest in reflexive thinking as an introspective tool to gain insights into political science knowledge production. The vital need for reflexivity concerns academic research as well as expert consultation commanded by private or public agents. While the expertise and knowledge

³⁸ Rachik 2007, 57.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰ Tozy 2014.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

of political scientists have been intensively required and invested in the political or ideological projects of state and civil actors, reflexivity should be carefully preserved and valued. Regardless of the private and public utility of research sponsored by the state or by other donors, Tozy recommends maintaining reflexive practice to enhance the ‘traceability’ and ‘transparency’ of research, detect conflicts of interests and ideological tendencies involved, and ensure that the research product can be subjected to accountability and critique.⁴²

Related to the three elements raised above, the following section proposes a self-reflection exercise on an individual case of field research. Despite its limited scope, this case study is being problematised to mirror the overall institutional conditions and theoretical issues that impact Morocco’s political science knowledge production. This tentative problematisation will also highlight some pragmatic strategies that help the researcher overcome field research’s constraints and successfully publish and disseminate research findings.

The Story of a Field Research

My field research was carried out intermittently between 2016 and 2020. It examined the intensive use of religion as a fundamental component of Moroccan-African policy during the last two decades at three levels: (1) the formation process of this transnational religious policy, the actors and stakeholders involved, and the mechanisms of its implementation; (2) the major geostrategic aims intended; and, (3) the reception and implications of this policy in the countries involved. Since the research touched on a complex matrix of ideological discourses and overlapping geopolitical interests, it was meant to be both exploratory and critical.

I started working on this topic immediately after joining the Institute of African Studies (IEA) in late 2011, yet my concerns with it predate this institutional affiliation. ‘Spiritual diplomacy’ was a partial theme of my doctoral project, defended in 2009, which focused on King Hassan II’s Moroccan religious policy from 1984 to 2002. I have subsequently sought to update the topic in light of the new contexts and stakes of King Mohammed VI’s Moroccan African policy. The idea of bringing up to date the topic was the keystone of my application for a research position at Mohammed V University in Rabat. Among the questions posed by the selecting committee members, one remains vivid in my mind: “What

⁴² Tozy 2014, 239.

would you suggest as a value-added contribution or a research project that makes you qualified for this position?" I proposed the African dimension of Moroccan religious policy as a relevant field of scholarly investigation. I also highlighted the dire need for field-based research in gaining a more multi-perspective and in-depth understanding of the topic. My successful application seemed to mean that a Moroccan university institute, specialised in promoting humanities and social science research on Africa, was interested in the proposed research. This interest is quite understandable, given that this research institution strives to engage in policy-oriented reflection and keep abreast of issues of concern to the official Moroccan vision in Africa. The IEA's early scientific initiatives and activities were dominated by a historical orientation, yet the IEA subsequently increased its engagement in policy research on cutting-edge issues concerning Moroccan-African relations in all fields. Indeed, rapid developments in the Sahel region and West Africa following the dramatic collapse of Libyan and Malian regimes in 2011 and 2012, and the politico-religious initiatives and diplomatic moves Morocco took to handle these events,⁴³ seemingly provided an impetus to inscribe 'Moroccan religious policy towards Africa' into the IEA's research agenda.

From a practical standpoint, developing this research project under the IEA's umbrella was expected to fulfil, in principle, two main purposes. First, receiving institutional support to facilitate my field research, especially building a network of research participants within relevant government departments and official bodies. Second, obtaining funds for field research project to be carried out outside of Morocco.

Since the research touches on issues that intersect with discourses of hegemony, influence, and regional competition in mobilising religion to serve states' national interests ('*la raison d'état*,' the 'war on terror,' etc.), the questions that primarily impose themselves here are: What sort of academic research knowledge is the researcher expected to produce? Is the academic knowledge produced to be of critical substance? Is it action research aimed at addressing specific applied (empirical) questions? Or is it meant to serve as apologetical knowledge, corroborating other mainstream discourses on state public policies?

In the same vein, to what extent can the researcher maintain intellectual autonomy as a producer of critical academic discourse about the state's discourses of hegemony and its geopolitical aims? To more deeply explore this chain of critical inquiries, one can wonder whether the researcher runs the risk of being stigmatised as 'politically incorrect,' which can ultimately complicate the researcher's

⁴³ Including the establishment of a training program for African imams and the creation of the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulema. See Hmimnat 2020.

positionality in the academic field, delay his professional promotion, and even impede the building of sustainable collaborative relations with research participants, many of whom are state elites and officials.

Such tricky questions about positionality and the academic researcher's presumed autonomy can be viewed from two opposite standpoints: on the one hand, there is the view favouring the researcher's full autonomy and a plea for a critical attitude in university-based academic knowledge. Intellectual autonomy is commonly seen a founding principle of academic practice, and it is within the university space that intellectual freedom and academic autonomy are preserved and enhanced.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the opposite view is that academic knowledge can be harnessed in service of political decision-makers. This cameralist view builds on the assumption that only the politician is able to grasp the complexities of the field reality and its constraints,⁴⁵ whereas the academician's knowledge is deemed abstract and 'too theoretical' to efficiently handle practical issues on the ground. "*On allait plus vite sans eux!*"⁴⁶ – this is how many state officials commonly assess the usefulness and relevance of university researchers' work. Regardless of whether this perception reflects a widespread opinion among state officials and decision-makers, the above-cited quote echoes to some extent the kind of unfavourable representation decision-makers have of university researchers in Moroccan context; that is, an image of a bunch of ineffectual academics sitting in their ivory towers, disconnected from what is happening on the ground. Indeed, the perception that members of contemporary society hold of academia and academicians greatly helps define the status, function, and development of scientific research within a country.⁴⁷

Research funding is an additional indicator that reveals cultural representations of social science research's worth in a given context. In Morocco, the budget allocated to the scientific research sector does not exceed 0.8% of the gross domestic product (GDP). It is obviously weak compared to international standards, which, for countries like the U.S. and some in Europe, amounts to 3% of GDP.⁴⁸ Moreover, in Morocco, the share dedicated to the humanities and social sciences (HSS), law and political sciences included, from the whole budget for

⁴⁴ Khatibi 1997, 171; Aït Mous and Ksikes 2014, 25.

⁴⁵ Saaf underlines in this respect that "the prince, in authoritarian contexts, does not need the insights of others. He knows he is the only one who knows. When an exchange is concluded between the two authorities – that of power and that of knowledge – it is less to enlighten the prince than to justify and legitimize his choices." See AFSP 2009.

⁴⁶ Author's field notes, May 2015.

⁴⁷ Cherkaoui 2009, 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 49.

scientific research (0.8%), does not exceed 7%.⁴⁹ In contrast, the remaining considerable share (93%) is dedicated to the techno-sciences, although the number of HSS students represents more than 75% of the Moroccan student population.⁵⁰

The minor budget allocation devoted to HSS partly explains the miserable conditions impeding social science knowledge production in Morocco, including a lack of funding, insufficient human resources, inadequate training, poor infrastructure and the research system's modest openness to the private sector and socio-economic environment.⁵¹ A widespread view among HSS scholars contends that the state still considers social science research an 'unproductive sector' that drains the state budget.⁵² This explains its marginality compared to the techno-sciences.

In contrast, from the perspective of the governmental actor, the state is truly accountable for lacking a sound, integral public research policy that can promote social-science research within the whole scientific research system. But the current precarious situation of HSS is rather the shared responsibility of multiple agencies. Put differently, the marginal presence of HSS within the national system of research and innovation is presented as a constant fact.⁵³ Yet there is no agreement on the common prejudices spread by university elites and research professors themselves, attributing all blame to the state.⁵⁴ The official view maintains that the state is significantly aware of the vital need for HSS to support socio-economic development priorities and keep pace with the country's societal transformations.⁵⁵ The many surveys and diagnostic reports carried out by the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education since 2005 on the situation and prospects of the HSS production system indicate the existence of the political will to integrate social sciences into the state's societal project.⁵⁶

Regardless of the indicators related to budgeting, funding, and other structural conditions affecting social science knowledge production, there are two opposite views about the status of political science particularly, and its vital worth to political power. Some scholars believe that the state has developed a suspicious wariness toward any critical knowledge escaping from surveillance and censorship, fearing it may become, over time, sites of oppositional discourse. Socio-

⁴⁹ Cherkaoui 2009, 49.

⁵⁰ DESFCRS Report 2011, 25.

⁵¹ Cherkaoui 2009.

⁵² Aouchar 2011; Ezzine 2011.

⁵³ DESFCRS Report 2011, 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁶ Cherkaoui 2009, 44; MERSFC Report.

logy in the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, was often depicted as a ‘despised discipline’⁵⁷ for being ideologically oriented and politically engaged. “For the first generation of Moroccan sociologists, research and political engagement had to go hand in hand.”⁵⁸

Other scholars, in contrast, claim that this discipline better serves the prevailing political powers. Political science, being much concerned with comprehending reality and laying bare its complexities, provides political power with the means for fostering resilience and taking control of society. This idea has been raised both in the case of sociological knowledge produced by French colonial powers⁵⁹ and in post-independent Morocco. According to Pascon, sociological knowledge, like any scientific undertaking, hardly escapes being manipulated by political authorities.⁶⁰ The many evaluation survey reports, funding programs, and national strategies on social sciences, some cited above, demonstrate the official concern and demand for the social sciences. Still, the state’s vital demand for political social science makes sense in the framework of a realistic-utilitarian outlook that prioritises socio-economic development and political problem-solving, which enables the decision-maker to preserve political power’s stability and resilience.

Against the backdrop of the representations and institutional conditions shaping Morocco’s social-sciences production today, I initiated research focusing primarily on a Rabat-based African imams’ training program. Given the lack of funding and bureaucratic complications of conducting field research, securing a research grant from the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 2014 was extremely motivating and of practical use. This individual research grant allowed me the relative autonomy to conduct impartial research. It also opened the door to additional research development opportunities and networks at regional and international levels.

Another international funding opportunity happened to be available for the second part of my field research project. I managed to secure an individual research grant from the African Peace Network (APN) of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). This grant program was part of a comprehensive SSRC program to support young African scholars, enhance their capacity and increase the regional and international visibility of their work. This generous grant enabled me to undertake field research in Morocco and two sub-Saharan African

⁵⁷ Guessous 2003, 215; Ezzine 2011.

⁵⁸ Rachik 2007, 10–11.

⁵⁹ Guessous 2003, 219–20.

⁶⁰ Pascon 1986, 59.

countries: Senegal and Mali. It also provided me with two training and methodological workshop opportunities abroad.

In operational terms, however, many difficulties emerged in the course of this research project, such as negotiating access to the research field, positionality, and managing ambiguous relationships with research participants.

Challenges of Accessing the Field and Positionality

Accessing official documents and data related to Morocco's transnational religious policy proved extremely problematic. The same goes for persuading some officials to engage as research participants and interviewees. Early attempts to access official data and conduct interviews with officials were disappointing. The official procedure requires the researcher to acquire formal permission. A government administrator cannot hand out official data and documents without sanctioned approval from their superiors; otherwise, the official would be held accountable and could even risk his or her professional career.

This bureaucratic culture is not limited to employees and officials but is successfully implanted even among local and foreign student imams involved in the training program supervised by the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs. An anecdote is worth reporting here. I first visited the Malian imams' training school in Rabat in 2014.⁶¹ I planned to arrange interviews with the director and some Malian imam trainees. The director was not there that day. As I was about to leave, I came across several trainees in the school yard on their way to Friday prayer. After I explained the nature of my research, I handed some of them my contact cards and suggested that interviews might be arranged later. Three days later, I received a phone call from the director to inform me that some of the students had reported our interaction. After he gently reproached me, saying I should have knocked on his door first, he explained why the administration recommends that imam trainees not talk to any foreigner unless allowed. In fact, the Moroccan training program of African Imams gained (and still gains) far-reaching momentum at the regional and international levels. Concerns about a potential manipulation or penetration of this emerging experience thus made sense. Either way,

⁶¹ This state-sponsored training program, initiated in late 2013, was later merged into the Mohammed VI Institute for Training Imams Murshidin and Murshidat launched in 2015. For further details about this training program: Hmimnat 2019; Hmimnat 2022.

the director agreed in principle to facilitate my field research within the training school. However, he requested an official permission from the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs. “I can’t act on my own,”⁶² he replied. Actually, the story was repeated with many other officials who initially accepted to be interviewed, then changed their minds at the last moment. Some confided that they retracted their approval because they are subject to tight internal surveillance by the Ministry. An official was once scolded because he happened to talk to a media outlet on his own, without the ministry’s green light.

Actually, I was not very optimistic about the feasibility of securing official research permission. I had already tried desperately during my doctoral research, when I experienced many bureaucratic delays and formalities. I thought, however, that I could try again. As the Ministry of Islamic Affairs was then headed by a former director of IEA,⁶³ I had assumed that a request from a fellow researcher at the IEA would facilitate my scientific mission. While logical at first sight, this prediction proved naive and even deceptive. Many written requests for field research permission and two gentle reminder letters to the ministry remained unanswered. Instead, in 2015, the IEA’s administration informed me that an official from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (who shall remain nameless) had called to inquire about my request for field research. The IEA administration suggested that I submit a statement of personal ‘commitment’ indicating that my research falls under the academic activities of the IEA and would be published as such. I had no clue who might be behind this suggestion but, to make things work, I submitted the so-called ‘commitment.’ Still, I received no follow-up.

It is worth noting that I submitted a similar request to the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, hoping to access the religious cooperation agreements between Morocco and several other African countries. After months of waiting, I realised that attempts to request field research clearance and access to official data from governmental agencies, in my case at least, lead nowhere. Some administrative staff themselves confessed, off the record, that such official requests are hopeless. In the end, they said, “things should be settled on personal grounds.”⁶⁴ Despite a rhetoric of openness and stated commitment to communicate clearly with citizens, bureaucratic complications and secrecy continue to prevail in the Moroccan administration.

⁶² Author’s field notes, June 2014.

⁶³ Ahmed Taoufik, current minister of Islamic affairs (2002–), served as the first director of the IEA between 1990 and 1994.

⁶⁴ Author’s field notes, June 2014.

While my requests to government bodies were to no avail, I paradoxically witnessed prompt, responsive care to foreign researchers' requests to undertake scientific missions on similar topics (the training of African imams). European and American colleagues, many of whom I happened to meet, rapidly obtained permissions from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, accessed the imams training school, and even interviewed officials and students with ease. I have also documented the case of a Moroccan MA student from the International University of Rabat (UIR)⁶⁵ who enjoyed the same privilege. When investigating the matter, I found out that foreign researchers' requests are often subject to different protocols. Their requests are sent on behalf of international cultural organisations, or through diplomatic channels by foreign embassies, which explains the exclusive care and quick favourable treatment they receive. Other requests, made through the ordinary administrative procedure, may receive favourable treatment because they concern international students or scholars from prestigious British or US-American universities. 'Local' researchers have become bitterly accustomed to this ironic treatment, and, as my case suggests, many consider alternative tactics.

Another explication must be added in this regard. The favourable treatment granted foreign academic researchers probably matches Morocco's institutional communication and marketing strategy to increase the international visibility of the brand-new imams' training school, the Mohammed VI Institute for Training Imams Murshidin and Murshidat. Since its inauguration in 2015, foreign political figures, diplomatic delegations, cultural elites, and international media have been constantly solicited to visit it. Morocco has reaped the fruits of this well-elaborated marketing strategy, as evidenced by numerous television programs and news reports praising the experience and underlining its authenticity and world leadership.

From this marketing perspective, field research carried out by *an insider* seems not really momentous, or the research questions and their critical sensitivity did not perfectly match the official narratives. Also, perhaps, Mohammed V University in Rabat, to which the researcher belongs, does not have an aura of 'prestige' like its reputable counterparts Harvard or Oxford. The institutional affiliation and the researcher's identity here do make difference.

After months of unsuccessful attempts to *officially* access the research field, I came up with an alternative strategy to help break through into it: invest intensively in building a network of personal relationships. The expression "break through" is purposely used here to illustrate that the research topic, given its sensitive geopolitical nature related to Morocco's quest for continental leadership

65 UIR is a semi-public university founded in 2010.

and influence,⁶⁶ seemed surrounded by an intractable fence preventing unauthorised persons from access. Building such a relational network certainly requires a significant investment of time and patience. For some officials, the idea of being engaged with a local researcher on questions that concern the *domaine réservé* of the Moroccan monarchy might seem risky. The researcher, therefore, must make a strenuous effort to build trust and reassure research participants, many of whom are high-ranking state elites.

This alludes to another type of positionality in qualitative research: the one between the researcher and research participants. In identifying potential interviewees for this research project, I was always curious about the motives behind their engagement in the ‘game of research.’ Comprehending such motives is essential to appropriately integrating the interview findings into the research axes. The research participants’ motives obviously differ according to their professional rank and their rational-pragmatic calculations about the policy under investigation. The motives also differ according to the interviewees’ nationalities, the setting of the interview, and their relationship with and position towards the researcher. Such elements altogether shape and significantly alter the researcher’s positionality.

In the context of a research question that touches diverse transnational contexts and geopolitical interests, the insider/outsider status becomes blurry. It does not always unfold in simple terms, depending on whether the field research is conducted in one’s home country or outside. The insider/outsider binary here becomes intricate, depending on whether the interviewees are of the same nationality as the researcher and whether the interviews and participant observation occur on Moroccan soil or elsewhere. Both the interviewer and interviewees’ perspectives, motivations, ideological backgrounds, and calculations vary more or less depending on the research context and setting.

In the Moroccan setting, the interviews involved several participants with varied backgrounds and motivations. Some interviewees cooperated with the researcher only to please a shared friend or acquaintance. For another type of interviewee, the motivations seem much clearer. This is the case for several African imam trainees in Rabat whose collaboration with the researcher reflects intensive advocacy efforts to draw attention to some technical issues plagued the training program and, most importantly, secure careers at home countries after the two-year training. Others, Moroccan officials in particular, cooperated based on the conviction that scientific research is valuable, and the expectation that it should contribute to rationalising policy-making and its implementation. The

66 Hmimnat 2020a.

involvement in research, for this type of interviewee, also reflects a personal commitment to better serve the nation that we Moroccans belong to. The *we* used here by some officials interviewed is an explicit evocation of the common sense of citizenship that binds the interviewee and interviewer together. Indeed, I took this as an opening toward a promising collaboration that could provide room for each to serve the country in his own way. Put concretely, it happened that the interviews covered issues too sensitive for an official to raise in internal official settings. In this case, the researcher is implicitly asked to mobilise his ‘academic authority’ to shed light on technical and procedural problems in the religious policy in question. Some officials would also suggest practical insights and recommendations of interest that can serve better or improve the policy under investigation.

Aware that the researcher might sometimes be used as a vehicle for conveying or amplifying certain discourses and narratives, this pragmatic form of collaboration between researcher and politician can be harnessed to elevate both academic research and policy-making. I happened to put myself in this game by authoring policy papers that seek an assessment of the ways Morocco’s religious policy toward Africa functions and the challenges facing its implementation on the ground by centring on two case studies: the Mohammed VI Institute for Training Imams Murshidin and Murshidat and the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulema.⁶⁷

My positionality became more complex and problematic when field research took place outside my home country. The research inquiry I investigated, in the sub-Saharan African countries involved, sought to understand how Morocco’s transnational religious policy operates, the patterns of its reception, effectiveness, and concrete influence. In Senegal and Mali, my positionality shifted to that of an outsider investigating the views of sub-Saharan African elites on Moroccan-African religious cooperation. The interviews involved sub-Saharan Africans associated with religious bodies (*zawiyas*), diplomats, intellectuals, and others attached to Moroccan transnational bodies such as the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulema. To stress the academic character of my research, I often showed my interviewees an official university certificate, confirming my professional identity and the academic framework of the project. Nevertheless, most interviews seemed not to budge about the pre-conceived view: This is a Moroccan academic researcher, who represents in one way or another the Moroccan state’s point of view, or at least cannot deviate much from it. These interviewees hardly deviated from the following official positions: Praising solid Morocco-African spiritual relationships as well as their historical and popular depth; welcoming

67 See Hmimnat 2019; Hmimnat 2020b.

the positive political impetus that these relations have received in recent years; touting Morocco's devotion and its efforts to preserve and sustain such spiritual relationships.

In inquiring about deficiencies in the policy in question, interviewees identified some challenges and shortcomings, whether on the Moroccan side or those of other African countries. They also proposed ways to improve religious cooperation and push it forward. Some criticisms and recommendations seem to reflect positional conflicts between local competitors. This is, for instance, the case of the sharp rivalry between the Tijanis and Muridian partisans in Senegal, or the well-known conflictual relationship between Sufis and Salafis. In other cases, interviewees even formulated recommendations that Morocco should consider to enhance Moroccan-African religious cooperation. Like their Moroccan counterparts, sub-Saharan African interviewees sometimes tended to turn the researcher-interviewer into a channel to communicate their visions to the Moroccan policy-makers. When reflecting on this manipulative tendency, I realised that the communication strategy I opted for in those countries might have caused the muddle. Although I hired local informants to facilitate fieldwork in Senegal and Mali, I was keen to contact in advance the Moroccan embassy in Senegal and Mali to inform them of my scientific mission there. This is a familiar step that researchers often take to secure their research journey in foreign countries they visit for the first time. In my case, I also expressed my interest in interviewing diplomatic officials. Once, given time pressure and the difficulty experienced in accessing the field, I resorted to the Moroccan embassy to facilitate contact with some key personalities in Senegal. Indeed, embassy officials managed to facilitate contact with many of them belonging to Sufi orders and other religious institutions. This is a stark contrast to the difficulties I had encountered when in Morocco. I have no clear explanation for why my treatment differed so much when outside of my home country. But I recognise that such a pragmatic tactic (i.e., seeking help from the embassy), regardless of its benefits, would affect the researcher's position and have certain side effects that should be outlined here.

This tactic indeed helped me to obtain significant data that was inaccessible in my home country. The Moroccan-African cooperation agreements concerning imam trainings are a perfect case in point. Regardless of the effectiveness and practical need for seeking help from the embassy, one should be aware that doing so may put the researcher in confusing and even sensitive situations. Two examples can be cited here. First, a research participant assumed that my professional connection with the embassy might enable me to secure a scholarship for one of their relatives. Another one thought I can help secure funding for his Quranic school. The second example, concerning the case of someone previously expelled from the Rabat-based training program due to aggressive behaviour towards

training-school colleagues and staff, is more sensitive. While I was considering getting in contact with this person for an interview, he was reportedly involved in a violent incident in his home country. My informant briefed me about the incident and urged me to report it to the Moroccan embassy. Although there was some initial hesitancy and anxiety, I explained to the informant that my job, as an academic researcher, is observing and seeking to understand, and as such, I should not, under any circumstances, get involved with the subjects under study. Reflecting later on this ethical dilemma and my earlier hesitant reaction to the issue, I have realised that as a researcher from the Global South, I have been short of any ethical rules or Dos and Don'ts in such critical situations. Field research ethics are barely taught to political science students in Moroccan law faculties. The researcher may find him-/herself acting on intuition or, at best, inspired by codes of conduct applying to scientific communities in other geographic areas, such as the American Political Science Association.

Publishing

Academic research acquires its concrete meaning through reporting and publishing research findings. The act of publishing gives the researcher a sense of accomplishment and ensures the communication of research findings to the public.

The catchphrase 'publish or perish' perfectly summarises the problematic challenge that faces most researchers in their struggle for academic survival. This idiomatic saying, initially highlighting the vital significance of publishing to academic researchers' visibility and the advance of scientific knowledge about their specialisation, has over time come to hide the dark side of the higher education system. Under the neoliberal management model, the system of higher education has become obsessed with "key performance indicators" and metrics, such as h-index scores, journal rankings, impact factors, and other standards of economic business logic, to boost the university's *cult of excellence*. In his controversial book *Dark Academia*, Fleming (2021) explains how the much-quoted phrase 'publish or perish' has become a weapon, turned against academics who will be discarded if they do not embrace the logic of high competition.

In the Moroccan academic context, the 'publish or perish' pressure is posed differently, but is not without paradoxes and complexities. In a constrained institutional environment where the conditions of knowledge production and publication are miserable and the traditions of peer-evaluation still weak, academic publishing in high-ranking international journals turns into an adventure that

requires plenty of professional dedication and constant perseverance. Successful experiences in this regard are often the result of individual efforts of the “solitary researcher”⁶⁸ rather than collective initiatives resulting from well-designed research structures framed by a sound research development policy. Under the current research regulations, those labelled ‘productive researchers’ for their rich record of publication in indexed peer-reviewed journals barely benefit from incentives and promotion in return for their regular scientific production. Their work is rarely acknowledged or discussed by local peers.⁶⁹ In a context where opportunities for visibility and incentives are limited, what motivates productive researchers to publish is their professional awareness and a belief in academic work as a vocation rather than a profit-making enterprise.

This brief reminder of the degraded reality of academic publishing in Morocco, which might easily be extended to other Global South contexts, helps to apprehend another manifestation of pragmatic research that informs the paper’s central hypothesis. In the challenging academic context described above, one should carefully consider certain forms of publication over others, narrowly reaching the target constituency, and maximising the impact of published research. Overall, academic researchers, in the Moroccan context, as in other Global South countries, often find themselves facing three distinct options:

- *Publish locally and perish globally.*⁷⁰ This is the case of local or ‘provincial researchers’ who publish mainly in Arabic, mostly in non-indexed local journals, many of which lack scientific committees for reading and peer evaluation. Those opting for this choice run the risk of becoming invisible or being marginalised⁷¹ at international level. This category of researchers shows a good contextual understanding of the socio-political reality they study, yet their inquiries and perspectives mostly remain provincial in scope and circulation. Moreover, their research’s outcomes and findings are often communicated in a jargon language and concepts that are intelligible only by local researchers.⁷²
- *Publish globally and perish locally.*⁷³ This is the case of “cosmopolitan researchers”⁷⁴ with extensive publications in international journals in multiple foreign languages. These have greater chances of integrating into inter-

⁶⁸ Rachik 2007, 61–62; Cherkaoui 2009, 53.

⁶⁹ Hanafi and Arvanitis 2015, 168.

⁷⁰ Hanafi 2011; Cherkaoui 2009.

⁷¹ Ward 2015.

⁷² Rachik 2007, 61.

⁷³ Hanafi 2011.

⁷⁴ Cherkaoui 2009, 20.

national networks and research groups. Yet, their presence in national discussions remains minimal and thin due to the lack of an interactive dynamic between members of the same discipline, and, as previously mentioned, the absence of a scientific community.

- Finally, there are those who are entirely out of the publishing business and thus, *perish both locally and globally*.⁷⁵ This is the case for a large number of professors in Moroccan universities who are turned into instructors with no research or publication records. The famous evaluation report estimates that 55 percent of faculty have not published a single line in their lives.⁷⁶ “Intellectual sterility” does not only affect universities and young researchers but is endemic in old, large faculties and among the elderly.⁷⁷

The motives and reasons for choosing one option over another depend on the set of opportunities and constraints each researcher encounters. They can also be defined to a great extent by the poor working conditions and underprivileged environment shaping social science knowledge-production in Morocco, as previously mentioned. The researcher in a Global South context such as Morocco has little margin of manoeuvre in this regard. To find one’s way in a challenging research environment, one should typically rely on personal effort, training capacity, and the international collaborative research opportunities that have remarkably flourished since 2011. In the end, the pragmatic endeavour and struggle for academic survival matter more in navigating the labyrinth and oftentimes frustrating experience of academic research career.

In this specific context, I have taken advantage of several methodological and training workshops on engaged research, and my pragmatic publishing approach consists of combining substantial academic articles and brief policy papers in two languages, Arabic and English. This publishing plan requires careful ‘tuning of the research text’⁷⁸ in terms of method, writing style, and the language of publication. This tuning helps formulate research questions, ideas, and conclusions more accurately and professionally to match the target audience’s concerns, be they the scientific community, political circles and decision-makers, or the general public. Whether the research work is theoretical, heuristic, or concerned with action and practice, “the text attuning,” as Pascon reminds us, “responds

⁷⁵ Hanafi and Arvanitis 2015, 173.

⁷⁶ Cherkaoui 2009, 23.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Pascon 1986.

little to a scientific protocol, so much as it engages in a battle for the ideological representation of Morocco.”⁷⁹

Such a pragmatic choice seems an appropriate way to ensure fair visibility, maximise influence and extend networking in the scholarly community. It also helps the researcher gain credibility and maintain relationships of trust and commitment with funders who often stress publishing research-based papers with impact and relevancy for public policy decision-making and its evaluation.

Quantitatively speaking, the outcome of this personal experiential process of pragmatic research proved very promising: three policy papers and three scientific articles.⁸⁰ However, the practical impact of such research papers remains unclear. We still lack viable indicators to help measure how those scholarly policy papers have been received and considered for decision making. All we have are some anecdotes, impressions, and reactions that circulate informally among researchers, which reflect the state elite’s views of the worth of academic scientific research and uncovers overlapping interests and stakes surrounding the power-knowledge nexus that fall into the cameral reasoning indicated above.

In any case, the main stakes for academic research today, in light of the current reality of the social sciences in Morocco, is the ability to tread a fine pragmatic line between ensuring intellectual autonomy and contributing to an open and productive dynamic of scientific research that is integrated into national and international environments. The pragmatic formula proposed in this paper, which stems from an individual field experience, is a tentative attempt to provoke further discussion of research practices and strategies to strengthen the social sciences in socio-political development and decision-making processes.

Conclusion

In the Moroccan context, where knowledge production in the social sciences faces numerous challenges and difficulties, reflexive thinking and field investigation should be crucially promoted to improve the critical and empirical depth of research knowledge. Doing so would encourage alternative institutional and personal practices that could help researchers to cope effectively with deadlocks and obstacles encountered in field research.

⁷⁹ Pascon 1986, 144.

⁸⁰ See Hmimnat 2019; Hmimnat 2020a; Hmimnat 2020b; Hmimnat 2022; Hmimnat forthcoming.

Social and political research needs to broaden its circle of interests and recipients, by shifting away from the dry academic vision that tends to imprison academic knowledge within pure theoretical concerns disconnected from complex and pressing issues posed by the socio-political environment. It is more urgent than ever to think of reflexive and thinking modes that combine the critical depth crucial for academic knowledge and the political relevance associated with the decision-maker's vital interests.

Under weak structural condition, with poor incentives for research production in social sciences, researchers from the South and their European and American counterparts should consider developing innovative collaborative practices and networking mechanisms to exchange experiences and promote knowledge-sharing on pressing issues of mutual interest. Flexible institutional and individual partnerships can help foster training opportunities, grant and mobility programmes, and capacity-building for engaged research with impact. This promising pathway would bridge the substantial gap in social sciences knowledge production between the two sides.

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