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# Participatory Research Practices in the Context of Youth Political Engagement: A Reflexive Account of a Fieldwork experience

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## Abstract

*This article reflects on participatory research on youth civic and political participation in Oran, Algeria. It uses a generational approach that integrates ethnography and interviews to examine the activist practices in a low trust and political uncertainty setting. The study necessitated continuous bargaining of the researcher's position. As a result of this, the methodology became a dynamic, constructive process. Two important tools were co-created with the participants: generational timelines to trace their understanding of the shared collective political experience, and personal logbooks to understand hybridized repertoires of action and transferable skills from one activism arena to another, demonstrating a permeability between civic and political spaces. The research article concludes by confirming the need to be flexible in the methodology, ethics on the ground, and reciprocal relationships to generate valid data in a complex, distrustful field site.*

**Keywords:** Co-production of knowledge - Youth engagement - Hybrid activism, Social navigation - Algeria - Participatory methods.

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## ملخص

يعرض هذه المقال تأملاً منهجياً حول دراسة ميدانية تشاركية لمشاركة الشباب المدنية والسياسية في وهران ( الجزائر). وباعتمادها منهجاً جيلياً، جمعت الدراسة بين الإثنوغرافيا والمقابلات الكيفية لتحليل ممارسات النشاط الشباب في سياق اتسم بعدم اليقين السياسي وغياب الثقة. تطلب البحث تفاوضاً مستمراً لموقع الباحث في ميدان البحث، مما أدى إلى تطور المنهجية لتصبح عملية بناء تكيفية وتشاركية مع المشاركين. تم اعداد أداتين اساسيتين بالتعاون مع المشاركين: جداول زمنية للأجيال لفهم تمثلاتهم للتجربة السياسية الجماعية المشتركة، ودفاتر يومية شخصية لفهم ذوائر العمل الهجينة والمهارات القابلة للنقل من ساحة نشاط إلى أخرى نظرا لمرونة الحدود بين المساحات المدنية والسياسية. وتختتم الدراسة بالتأكيد على ضرورة المرونة المنهجية، والأخلاقيات السياقية، والعلاقات التبادلية لإنتاج معطيات حقيقية بشكل مشترك في مواقع ميدانية معقدة وتتسم بالشك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإنتاج المشترك للمعرفة - المشاركة السياسية للشباب - النشاط الهجين - الملاحظة الاجتماعية - المنهج التشاركي - الجزائر.

## Résumé

*Cet article présente une réflexion sur une recherche participative menée sur l'engagement civique et politique des jeunes à Oran, en Algérie. Adoptant une approche générationnelle, notre étude intègre ethnographie et entretiens pour examiner les pratiques militantes dans un contexte de faible confiance et d'incertitude politique.*

*L'étude a nécessité une négociation constante de la position de chercheur, ce qui a permis de développer une méthode dynamique et constructive. Deux outils importants ont été créés avec les participants : des chronologies générationnelles pour retracer l'appréhension de l'expérience politique collective partagée par les participants et des journaux de bord personnels pour comprendre les répertoires d'actions hybride et des compétences transférables d'une arène d'activisme à l'autre, témoignant d'une perméabilité entre les espaces civique et politique.*

*L'article conclut en confirmant la nécessité d'une méthodologie flexible, d'une éthique rigoureuse sur le terrain et de relations réciproques pour produire des données valides dans un contexte complexe et marqué par la méfiance.*

**Mots-clés :** Coproduction de connaissances - Engagement des jeunes - Activisme hybride - Navigation sociale - Méthodes participatives - Algérie.

This article offers a reflexive analysis of an ethnographic study conducted in Oran -Algeria- focusing on forms of political and civic engagement among young people. Its primary aim is not to provide a substantive explanation of Algerian youth mobilizations, but to reflect on how constraints of the fieldwork -issues of access, building trust, and navigating the evolving boundaries of the political- actively shaped and contributed to the production of knowledge. Ethnography is not framed as the concrete implementation of a set methodological procedure, but as an emergent and improvisational research procedure where the modification of methods forms an analytical resource and not a breakage of rigor (Broqua, 2009; Jouan, 2016). This view aligns with the increasing literature on the negotiated, context-specific, and non-linear character of qualitative research in politically and socially difficult environment (Bacqué and Demoulin, 2022, Ait-Aoudia *et al.*, 2010a ; Bué, 2010; Mischi, 2012; Vannetzel, 2010; Boumaza and Campana, 2007).

The researcher's position was not merely an ethical consideration but a constitutive dimension of the research process, shaped by a politically sensitive context and the relational configuration of the field itself. The study was conducted within a regulated public sphere where collective action is discursively framed through narratives of stability and risk avoidance (Dris, 2022), during a period marked by political uncertainty due to president absence from the public sphere, the legacy of the 1990s civil conflict, regional instability, and ongoing economic adjustments due to collapse in public resources. In this environment, research on political participation is often perceived as ambiguous not due to physical risk, but because of dense social ties, competing normative expectations, and uncertain boundaries of acceptable engagement (Massicard, 2002).

This "difficulty" was further intensified by the field's internal fragmentation, requiring navigation across multiple activist spheres characterized by shifting relations of collaboration, competition, and avoidance. Access was uneven and relational, dependent on how my affiliations and intentions were interpreted. Moreover, the effort to observe informal, episodic, and partially invisible practices -selectively disclosed, negotiated, or silenced- centered my positionality at the heart of what could be observed, articulated, or omitted.

Thus, the field's challenges did not precede the inquiry but emerged progressively through its relational dynamics. In response, a participatory methodological orientation became a practical necessity rather than a normative choice. The need to adapt tools, redefine expectations, and co-develop instruments with participants over time reflected the fluid and heterogeneous nature of engagement itself. This approach aligns with the literature on situated and processual ethics, which emphasizes ongoing moral and methodological adjustment in politically sensitive fieldworks (Moussaoui, 2001). Although my fieldwork did not involve the same high-risk conditions Moussaoui addresses, his reflections remain relevant in underscoring the need for continuous adaptation to local power relations, risk perceptions, and the researcher's evolving positionality.

The article outlines its analysis in three pillars of this methodological navigation. To begin with, it is necessary to build credibility in an environment that is characterized by low levels of trust, outlining the strategies used to create a viable research relationship, which is essential in “managing research relations in overlapping fields” (Bué, 2010). Second, the situation of the researcher which was split up between actor demands and deontological demands, demonstrating how this tension was fruitful in knowledge generation- a standard paradox of militant fieldworks (Fillieule, 2001). Finally, the development of transferability tools (hybridity grids, skills matrices) projected as the outcome of a collaborative work of formalization with participants. This was a method of constant restitution and the participation validation of analyses with respondents to enhance internal validity of the interpretations and to follow a rigorous ethics of field research (Bourrier, 2013).

### **Political Context and the Configuration of a “Difficult Field”**

My research was situated in Oran, Algeria's second-largest city and an important economic and cultural urban space, during a period (2017-2019) that immediately preceded the eruption of a mass popular movement (the *Hirak* on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019). In order to understand the forms of engagement observed among the young people, I organized the generational approach of Karl Mannheim as a way of relations and not as a strict classificatory

instrument to address this youth. Mannheim conceptualizes generations as social locations that have developed out of shared collective historical experiences in formative stages of life, which may give a rise to shared orientations and interpretive frameworks of the social life. The view was handy in placing individual paths in the context of a larger setup of collective socio-economic and political constraints and opportunities (Mauger, 2015, Mannheim, 2011, Attias-Donfut, 1988).

The investigated group of people was the sample of individuals born between 1985 and 1999. They became of age during the post-conflict era, known formally as the era of national reconciliation, following the civil violence that was noted during the 1990s (Hadj-Moussa, 2019). This generation has experienced different conditions as compared to that of its parents who had their socialization on the one-party political system (1962-1989) and state-managed economy with more significant proportion of employment in the public sector and social protection (Derras, 2011). The early adulthood of this generation unfolded within a formally plural political system and an economy that progressively incorporated market-oriented reforms.

As the new millennium started, a phase that was arguably more stable political environment, the growth of the public expenditure and government programs aimed at youth inclusion expanded. Such programs coincided with the shifts in the youth unemployment rates and the establishment of new mechanisms which should assist youth to be integrated in the social and economic life. Simultaneously, there were debates on the sustainability of this set of policies and its ability to respond to the changes of the economy, especially after the fall of oil prices in 2014. In this respect, a number of studies have indicated that these structural states have influenced the way most young adults perceive their future opportunities. Also, they observe that different strategies are present in youth stories, such as the utilization of personal networks during search of a job, some kind of informal or personal economic activities, and migration (Musette, 2022, Hammouda *et al.*, 2018, Ahouari, 2019; Lakjaa, 2014).

The political life of the discussed generation in Oran was developed in the context of institutional hegemony of the established political parties, among whom were the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Democratic Rally (RND). This was shown in the legislative and local elections of 2017 which

occurred during the research period. The FLN secured 15 out of the 18 parliamentary seats and the RND got the remaining 3 seats. The same trend was also provided at the provincial levels where FLN was having 46 out of 55 seats in the Provincial People Assembly (APW) unlike 9 by the RND. This tendency was also proved in the largest municipal people assembly (APC) in Algeria, where 36 seats were occupied by the FLN, and 7 by the RND (Barti, 2017).

The 2017 legislative and municipal elections provided an episode to view how the youth viewed and bargained their role to institutional party politics. These political arenas were frequently perceived as having limited relevance to everyday concerns, and participation in elections or partisan organizations was often approached in pragmatic ways (Omrane, 2018, Remoan et al., 2012). However, such disbelief did not lead to an overall rejection of collective life or civic activities. Rather, it helped in re-shifting political and civic participation to other arenas that were seen to be more available and able to bring tangible results from the perspective of many young people. The engagement forms that were brought out by this reorientation were not necessarily more visible in the public and were mainly embedded in the daily practices and were described by use of indirect strategies and tactical negotiations which necessitated long term and situated field work in order to capture them.

This reorientation of engagement has led to a diversification of the arenas in which young people invest their time, skills, and resources, particularly within volunteer initiatives and the non-profit sector, which occupy a significant position in Oran's civic landscape. The city hosts a dense network of registered associations alongside a wide range of informal volunteer collectives active in domains such as environmental protection, cultural heritage, neighborhood initiatives, charitable action, youth empowerment, and human rights advocacy. As previously noted, these organizational settings operate as hybrid spaces in which citizen initiatives and social service provision intersect with ongoing processes of political negotiation and accommodation, thereby blurring conventional boundaries between civic action and political participation (Cavatorta & Elananza, 2008, Liverani, 2007). Within this configuration, different youth profiles required differentiated analytical approaches. Pro-government youth were examined through targeted observation of their modes of institutional integration and participation rituals. Hybrid

oppositional youth, engaged simultaneously in associative and protest arenas, called for a fine-grained analysis of their discursive repertoires and adaptive strategies. Finally, the study of actors characterized as “politically disavowed” necessitated attention to informal practices embedded in social networks and cultural spaces, revealing latent yet significant forms of politicization (Baamara, 2022).

Fieldwork further revealed a process of hybridization of action repertoires that complicates attempts to categorize young actors’ trajectories within a single sphere of engagement. According to biographical interviews, young people have regularly shuttled between associative, trade union, and partisan domains throughout the years, moving abilities, resources, and relations gained in one area into another, which would be familiar to multimovement settings how hybrid activism is conceptualized (Heaney and Rojas, 2014). This compounded and interrelated trend of involvement was an empirical discovery and a methodological problem that needed to be negotiated in terms of access and trust.

Ultimately, the political and social context did not merely serve as a backdrop to the research but actively shaped the conditions of fieldwork. Issues of access, trust, ethical positioning, and the delimitation of what constituted relevant “political” practices were directly influenced by the configuration of the field. Addressing these challenges required ongoing reflexive attention to my positionality, which forms the focus of the following section.

### **Negotiating One’s Place: Trust, Ethics, and Adaptations**

The challenges related to positionality during fieldwork were centered on certain socio-demographic characteristics of the researcher, his institutional and geographical affiliation, as well as on the fragmented nature of the field. My local anchorage in Oran as a resident was a significant point of entry. I was not an outsider researcher who was stationed outside the country or even attached to the institutions that are solely located in other region of the country. This closeness to the research environment led to non-research interactions, and minimizing some types of social distance. Language proficiency in Algerian Arabic and French as well as knowledge of local cultural allusions, social rules and patterns of interaction facilitated a certain degree of

communicative comfort favoring informal communication and cultural awareness.

The structuring influence was also made by institutional affiliation. I was a doctoral researcher at the University of Oran and a researcher at the Centre of Research in Social and Cultural Anthropology (CRASC) whose location is situated in Oran, which gave me a familiar academic identity. This affiliation provided an excellent and relatively consistent answer to queries about my existence in the field and helped to locate my position in a non-partisan, research-based model. Although this position did not remove warning signals among interlocutors, it assisted in creating a certain level of legitimacy and intelligibility. Interaction was further promoted by age proximity to most of the participants. Being at a similar generational place made it possible to make references to shared social experiences, educational paths, and uncertainties about their life paths. The closeness of the generations helped in carrying the conversation and facilitating the shift between normal talks and more analytical conversations. Practically speaking, my personal context, specifically the lack of immediate family responsibility also enabled some flexibility in terms of time so that I could attend activities with a scheduled time outside of standard working hours, such as evenings and weekends.

Simultaneously, the mentioned characteristics created constraints. The fact that the research was multi-sited because I needed to observe and interact with as many organizations and groups as possible, made my movements more visible in various settings. This mobility at times cast doubt on my role and intentions in a world where networks cross and information flows fast. This visibility was further added by digital traces of participation especially through publicly shared content which necessitated constant clarification of my research goals and proper maintenance of inter site relations. My academic position also actually served as a symbolic resource at one point or another that other people tried to draw upon. Invitations to attend workshops, open forums, or events could be packaged as a chance to exchange expertise, and might also overlap with internal organizational processes. These cases needed sensitive boundary-setting so as not to become part of organizational or inter-personal conflict. This is comparable to the cases of dilemmas that have been recorded in the research studies about the highly engaged or mobilized settings (Fillieule, 2001).

To overcome these difficulties, I used a progressive and interpersonal style of entry and gaining trust. The preliminary stage of non-intrusive presence was followed before formal data collection. At this stage, I subjected myself to open events and actions without interviewing or taking notes in a systematic manner and only referred myself as a researcher when being questioned directly. The stage enabled me to be a familiar face and to develop familiarity with interactional norms without foisting a research agenda. It was also achieved with the help of the mediation of people that possessed long-term credibility within various social groups. Such intermediaries have made introductions that have been useful in placing me inside existing networks of trust. Embedded mediator as a technique of penetrating sensitive or apprehensive setting is an old tactic in qualitative studies (Bué, 2010; Aït-Aoudia et al., 2010b). Since the very beginning of the formal interaction, I have been using the explicit transparency strategy. I gave the potential study population a brief written report with information about my research aims, institutional affiliations, anticipated deliverables, and ethical obligations.

I also explained the scope of my area of work, such as what kind of help or participation I was un/able to render. Setting these boundaries in the beginning of the research contributed towards expectation alignment and minimized uncertainty about the nature of the research relationship. The establishment of trust was not only through explanation, but also through the constant involvement in the mutual activities. The constant engagement in group activities without instant requesting interviews or data produced the chances of observation based on co-presence. This type of engagement led with time to the impression that the research was sensitive to practice and not purely concerned with discourse.

Gender was another aspect of positionality which needed particular attention on methodology. Some of these spaces and activities, especially those which were organized on the basis of women participation were not openly available to me unless there was a change in dynamics. Instead of trying to negotiate access to such settings, I chose the approach based on the principles of feminist (methodological) approaches prioritizing respecting the boundaries and reflexivity in terms of power relations (Djelloul, 2020). The limitation was considered by focusing the observation on the surrounding processes and materials. I was present during

open preparation meetings, interviewed both prior to and post closed events, and read publicly available materials including statements, visual materials, and online discussions. Through this method, the boundaries that were being actively created and sustained, as well as the functioning of non-mixed spaces as organizational and relational resources were studied.

Ethical negotiation was a process and not mechanical words of applying formal guidelines. There were situations when participants would make a request in which my role would need clarification. These were demands on strategic advice, popular support or material help. In both instances, answers were informed by a steady focus on analytical participation as opposed to direct participation, public impartiality as opposed to representativeness, and openness on institutional constraints. I insisted on comparative discussion and shared consideration instead of advice when questioned to do so. Invitations to take part publicly in acts or statements were declined so as to preserve observational autonomy. Any request of material help was responded by a clear explanation of the restrictions, which was accompanied by the dissemination of publicly available information regarding training opportunities, or institutional resources, where possible. These reactions helped in keeping the research relationship clear about the scope and limits of the research relationship.

The continuous negotiation of positionality-balancing proximity and distance, visibility and discretion, engagement and restraint-constituted a central methodological condition of the research. In a context characterized by cautious interaction, the quality and consistency of the research relationship itself became a primary methodological instrument. Its careful construction was a prerequisite for the participatory and reflexive design developed in the subsequent stages of the study.

### **From Temporal Belonging to Social Navigation: Two Participatory Tools for Studying Youth Engagement**

The methodological design of this research could not be based on a predetermined or standardized protocol, given the field's complexity and the negotiated nature of my positionality. Instead, it gradually coalesced around two core participatory tools that were analytically productive and adaptable to field constraints: the co-construction of generational timelines and the use of logbooks to

record social navigation across arenas of participation. Rather than multiplying methodological devices, the research focused on deepening the use of these two instruments, allowing for organized data collection, interpretation, and reflexive analysis throughout the fieldwork. The central methodological aim was to reach political practices that are often implicit, intermittently visible, and reframed in discourse (Foster, 2013). These tools were designed to render such practices observable without direct confrontation and to integrate participants' own interpretive capacities into the analysis.

The framework of generational analysis was operationalized through the joint development of generational timelines. At the start of fieldwork, I convened small, informal meetings with participants from diverse organizational and social backgrounds. Using basic visual aids -such as pictures and post-it notes- they identified national and local events that had shaped their political perceptions and engagement styles. Crucially, this was not an exercise in reconstructing an objective chronology, but a dialogical process. Participants debated which events were significant and why, often disagreeing productively: some emphasized political openings or violence, others economic shifts, local disruptions, or personal turning points. Discussions moved beyond recounting events to exploring how they eroded trust in institutions, reshaped expectations of the state, and informed engagement choices.

The resulting timelines -for example, engagement that followed political reforms related to the Arab Uprisings and the spread of official discourse calling for strengthening the political presence of youth- situated participants' biographies within a collectively defined set of temporal reference points, making the interplay between personal trajectories and broader structural change empirically tangible and thus rendering the concept of generation itself more concrete (Edmunds & Turner, 2002). These tangible objects facilitated critical distance, as with a 31-year-old who exclaimed before a co-constructed timeline: "I finally understand why my way of militating bewilders my father, a former FLN member during the 70s!" The timelines also served as a valuable mediator in the research relationship, as evidenced by the comment from Leïla, 29: "Your work helps me understand why my father, a militant from the 1970s, doesn't grasp my engagement in the citizen collective."

This approach proved particularly effective in eliciting nuanced accounts that direct questioning could not access. For instance, in an interview with a 27 year-old unemployed participant, direct questions about his economic situation yielded limited replies. However, when presented with a narrative scenario of a graduate working in a job mismatched to his training, he engaged in a rich, reflective discourse on his own career path, aspirations, and perceptions regarding the broader situation faced by his generation. Methodologically, the timelines made it easier to discuss sensitive topics by externalizing discourse onto a shared visual object, allowed participants to express political experiences indirectly, and established a common analytical language for future interactions grounded in co-produced material rather than researcher-imposed categories.

While generational timelines provided a temporal mapping of political experience, the second tool -logbooks- captured the practical dimension of participation: how actors navigated across various arenas over time. As a multi-sited study, I collaborated with a sample of participants in maintaining individual logbooks structured around three components: a descriptive record of activities and meetings; a reflective section on impressions, dilemmas, and strategic decisions; and a relational mapping of interactions across settings. I maintained parallel field notes aligned with this structure. Regular cross-analysis between participants' log entries and my own observations allowed me to juxtapose their perspectives with mine, revealing what is termed social navigation: the strategic management of visibility, the portability of skills across arenas, and the modulation of engagement in response to situational constraints (Vigh, 2010). Logbooks illustrated that participation was rarely confined to a single organization, instead circulating among associations, informal networks, political arrangements, and digital spaces. They also captured moments of hesitation, withdrawal, and recalibration often absent from retrospective interviews.

The tool further highlighted discrepancies between discourse and practice. For example, participants who identified as non-partisan recorded instances of indirect political engagement in their logbooks such as providing logistical support during elections or facilitating informal local mediation. These were not contradictions but evidence of strategic repositioning, shedding light on how actors managed reputational risk and legitimacy in an environment

where overt partisan affiliation could be costly. The necessity of long-term engagement to trace such individual trajectories was clear: understanding the logics of circulation between participation spaces required, on average, a minimum of three meetings per respondent over eighteen months. The experience of a 24 year-old environmentalist illustrated this process: after hesitating over two interview requests, she finally agreed following my sustained participation in forest clean-ups, noting that “the notebooks stayed in the bag during concrete actions.” This long-term engagement also revealed hybrid figures like the “militant-entrepreneur,” embodied by Salima, who was transforming her associative engagement into a moral economy project.

Together, the co-created timelines and logbooks structured the entire research process. They guided interviews, informed observations, and provided a platform for iterative interpretation. Although participants actively contributed to creating and discussing these materials, the research did not operate under conditions of full symmetry; theoretical framing, comparative analysis, and final synthesis remained my responsibility as the researcher. The tools functioned as spaces for dialogue and corrective feedback rather than as instruments of shared epistemic authority. The value of this methodological approach lies not in the originality of the tools themselves, but in how they were assembled and cyclically deployed to capture both the temporal organization of political experience and the practical logics of engagement.

## **Conclusion**

This reflexive account of participatory research in Oran underscores that methodology must be conceived as a dynamic process, continually negotiated with the field. In a context of political sensitivity and low institutional trust, the adoption of a situated ethics -characterized by transparency, reciprocity, and adaptive protocols- proved essential not only for access but for the scientific robustness of the findings. At the heart of this approach was a collaborative transformation of the research relationship. Through the co-construction of analytical tools -generational timelines and navigation logbooks- and the participation in of restitution workshops, participants became co-analysts. This shared interpretative work corrected biases and revealed the underlying

rationality of seemingly opaque practices, such as strategic disengagement or hybrid activism.

The study's limits, particularly the advent of the *Hirak* movement at the end the research period, highlight the constitutive unpredictability of such fields and the need for flexible research designs capable of integrating historical ruptures. Likewise, the inaccessibility of certain activist fringes points to the importance of developing mediated and trust-based approaches to entry. Ultimately, this experience confirms that engaged research can create a virtuous circle between knowledge production and actors' own capacities for action. The transferable tools developed through this collaboration -such as hybridity grids and skills matrices- serve not only as analytical resources but as practical instruments for the actors themselves.

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