

Migrants' access to rights and statuses: the legal-administrative intermediation field

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Abstract

Studies stemming from different academic traditions have variously shown how migrants' access to social and residence rights occurs through repeated and often exhausting encounters with several control agencies in an increasingly regulated and bureaucratised field. The complexity and ambiguity of legal rules and administrative requirements, coupled with the shift from government to governance, increases the relevance of a diversified range of actors, e.g. lawyers, trade unionists, social workers, associational volunteers, private agencies and consultants as well as (online and offline) 'profane' social networks, in intermediating migrants' rights at an individual and collective level (i.e.:, Alpes, 2017; D'Aoust, 2022; Lindquist, 2015; Molland, 2012). On the one hand, vehiculating information on who has the right to what, intermediaries enhance migrants' legal and rights consciousness, translating into an understandable language public administrations' requests, local and so-called '*infra-droit*' practices (Miaz *et al.*, 2021; Tuckett, 2015). On the other hand, intermediaries can foster social change, actively redefining categories of entitlement through a diversified range of practices that include, among others, exercising discretion as street-level bureaucrats, filing lawsuits and undergoing strategic litigation, engaging in lobbying or other forms of institutional advocacy, disseminating coping strategies and tactics that produce change at the aggregate level (Pette, 2014; Odasso & Salcedo, 2022). These actors, manoeuvring in and with the structural ambiguities of different (immigration, welfare...) policy fields, occupy a delicate position vis-à-vis both the state and the migrants. On the one hand, studies have shown that intermediaries can operate in a continuum with governmental actors and logics (Kalir & Wissink, 2016). On the other hand, these partisan actors can also challenge (gender, class, educational, ethno-racial...) inequalities according to the fields in which they operate and the repertoire of actions chosen (Faist, 2014; Bonizzoni & Hajer, 2022).

These studies are characterised by the extensive use of qualitative research methods, allowing for the construction of a promising interdisciplinary research agenda based on ethnographic observations (i.e. of bureaucracies, courtrooms, legal services, online support groups); shadowing (i.e. observing how paperwork is produced and evaluated); qualitative interviews (i.e. interrogating social actors about the meaning they give to intermediation practices and migrants about their experiences); and (mental) maps to give visibility to administrative paths and how vulnerable subjects experience inclusion or exclusion.

The panel aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue through the collection of contributions that, adopting different qualitative research methods and analytical approaches, address one or more of the following questions.

Research questions

How do qualitative methods permit the identification of the main actors (e.g. professional and non-professional, public and private, for-profit and non-profit, formal organisations and informal groups or networks) in the migrants' legal-administrative intermediation field?

What kind of relations (e.g. cooperation, conflict, competition, avoidance...) can be observed among these actors and the migrants, and the state at large?

What emic meaning do these social actors give to intermediation practices? How do these relate to and reveal, for instance, specific professional ethos, political activism, inter and intra-ethnic forms of solidarity or (local/national/transnational) interpersonal relationships?

How biographical analysis of professional and militant trajectories can enhance data collected through ethnography? How can a temporal perspective help us understand how and why intermediation practices change (e.g. due to crises and/or following processes of civil society de-mobilisation and institutionalisation)?

To what extent can intermediation practices sustain, reveal or challenge exploitative and unbalanced power relationships along lines of race/ethnicity, class/cultural capital, age and gender?

How do such power relationships also partake in the collection of empirical data and shape the establishment of a trusting relationship between the researcher and their interlocutors?

What are the methodological challenges inherent in exploring the legal-administrative intermediation field (both online and offline), notably in terms of research positioning and ethics (e.g. when it comes to sensitive data, unreliable or illegal practices)? How to conduct

fieldwork with social actors whose way of operating we do not share or, on the contrary, with whom we have an ideological affinity?

Keywords

- Migration studies (i.e. studies on internal de/re-bordering and civic stratification; immigration bureaucracies; immigration industries)
- Social work and public policy implementation (i.e. studies on street-level bureaucracy, third sector actors)
- Political sociology (i.e. studies on social movements and civil society, judicialisation; citizenship studies)
- Sociology of law (i.e. legal consciousness, cause lawyering, legal socialisation; contentious actions)
- General socio-anthropology (i.e. agency, autonomy of migration; critical ethnography, intimacy in the research process; researcher's participation; action research; sensitive outcomes' restitutions)

Subdisciplines

- immigration (online–offline) intermediaries, industries and brokers
- immigration bureaucracies
- immigration, civil society and social movements
- migrant agency/autonomy and (collective) participation
- (n)ethnography and its controversies
- researcher positioning and research ethical challenges

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Convenors

Paola Bonizzoni is an Associate Professor at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milan, where she teaches ‘Globalisation, diversity and inequality’ and ‘Society and social change’. She has carried out research in several subfields of the sociology of migration, including (il)legalisation and family reunification policies (and migrants’ counter-strategies); the role of migrant, minority-ethnic churches in fostering integration at the local level; forms of immigration governance in small, peripheral, non-urban contexts; intra-EU Italian youth mobility in a time of economic crisis; and gendered and familial experiences of migration. She is currently exploring the role of volunteering activities in the refugee field.

Laura Odasso is researcher at the *Collège de France, Chaire Migrations et Sociétés*, and at the French Collaborative Institute on Migrations. She is also a research associate at the *Centre Méditerranéen de Sociologie, de Sciences Politiques et d’Histoire*, Aix-Marseille University and at the Group for Research on Ethnic Relations, Migrations and Equality, *Université Libre de Bruxelles*. Characterised by a comparative and qualitative intersectional approach, her research interests are situated at the crossroads of sociology of migration, sociology of law and contentious policies. Her current research explores intimacy as a skill for accessing rights in the frame of on/offline socio-legal brokerage.