

**SITUATIONS ET CHAMPS DES POSSIBLES
DES JEUNES ET MINEURS NON ACCOMPAGNÉS**

Un éclairage franco-allemand

Coordonné par Catherine DELCROIX et Gwendolyn GILLIERON



**Jeunes et Mineurs en Mobilité
Young people and Children on the Move**

N ° 9

B²⁰₂₄



Croquis : Eddy Vaccaro

{Dossier}

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Learning from Student Perspectives on the MIGREVAL Project: Comparative Action Research on Unaccompanied Minor Refugees in French and German Contexts

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The action research project MIGREVAL actively involves not just researchers but also students of various levels (undergraduate and postgraduate). So in this article, I thought it would be interesting to consider their perspectives on our joint work in the project¹.

MIGREVAL is a collaborative French–German project that began in 2009, initially with the University of Frankfurt, Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences (Frankfurt UAS) and the University of Strasbourg. The University of Poitiers recently also came on board. I have been involved in the project since 2016. In the winter of 2023, we started working with students from Martin Luther University (MLU) Halle-Wittenberg, my current institution, for the first time, and in November of that year I travelled to Strasbourg with a small group of students. It was an inspiring trip for both me and the students. We² spent two days working with students from Frankfurt UAS, who had come with Youssef Abid, and the University of Strasbourg, who were members of a seminar group supervised by Gwendolyn Gilliéron and Liyun Wan. My discussion here will focus on the experiences of the students while at the same time considering my own experiences within this exchange format. I will reflect on both sets of experiences in terms of their impacts on professionalisation, since my students are not training to be sociologists or researchers but rather teachers at various types of schools.

I begin by discussing the collaborative work we did with our students during the seminars and the workshop in Strasbourg in November 2023 (1). I then present the students' perspectives on the work in Strasbourg (2) and outline one case that the students worked on in Halle (3). Finally, I offer a brief conclusion (4).

¹ This text was conceived as a presentation at the international congress of the MIGREVAL network 'Gendered Intergenerational Experiences of Social Mobility in Migration' from 9 to 10 October 2024 at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. I would like to thank Lena Inowlocki for the consultations we held together to refine the subject, and Catherine Delcroix and Gwendolyn Gilliéron for the opportunity to include this contribution in this issue. I would also like to thank Youssef Abid, Gwendolyn Gilliéron, Liyun Wan and all our students for this very rewarding work together! And a special thank you to Gustav Henno Stolze for his critical reading of this text.

² When I say 'we' in this article, I shall sometimes mean 'the senior researchers who organised the exchange' – me, Youssef Abid, Gwendolyn Gilliéron and Liyun Wan – and sometimes I will mean the group from Halle.

Collaborative work in the seminars

The seminars that I shall focus on in this section started in September/October 2023. At the University of Strasbourg, students on the master's programme in Social Interventions, European Comparisons and Migration worked under the direction of Gwendolyn Gilliéron, Liyun Wan and Catherine Delcroix. A second group, at Frankfurt UAS, was made up of students on the BA Social Work course working under the direction of Youssef Abid. At MLU Halle-Wittenberg, the seminar participants were students training to be teachers at a variety of school types (primary and secondary schools, special needs schools, colleges). I led this third seminar group, which forms part of the students' educational science studies.

In my seminar, I always begin by presenting the MIGREVAL project. The aim is to compare dynamics of belonging and exclusion in migration contexts in France and Germany using the method of biographical policy evaluation, which allows a comparative analysis based on the life stories shared by migrants themselves (Apitzsch et al. 2019; Apitzsch, Inowlocki and Kontos 2008). The main question it seeks to address is 'how political decisions and measures at local, national and transnational level have affected the biographies of migrants over several generations' (Apitzsch et al. 2019, 1). Each project phase focuses on different topics. Previously, for example, the MIGREVAL project has compared language acquisition, professional success and early childhood education in the French and German contexts. The current focus is on young migrants who have come to Germany or France as unaccompanied minors (UAMs), their educational opportunities and their transition to adulthood³, and this focus was reflected in the topics we addressed in our seminars.

The content of the seminars is planned collaboratively by the senior researchers. We jointly select English-language texts on the topic and introduce the methods of narrative interviews and biographical policy evaluation. Due to differences in how the academic year is structured at the three universities – the semester in Strasbourg starts in September, whereas in Halle and Frankfurt we only start in mid or late October – the students in Germany had only had a few sessions before our two-day workshop at the end of November, while in Strasbourg the semester was already coming to an end. That meant the French students had already conducted interviews and transcribed them by the time we met in Strasbourg. For the workshop, they wrote 'analytical summaries' in English – short summaries of each interview that provide an overview of biographical events and significant topics. My students in Halle did the same after our time in Strasbourg, since our semester runs until the beginning of February.

During the two-day workshop in Strasbourg, Youssef's and Gwendolyn's groups gave short presentations in small groups on the different contexts in Germany and France, which formed part of their course requirements. My students, meanwhile, discussed some of the topics we have been working on in our seminar in Halle. For the Strasbourg workshop, we put together a programme consisting of the presentations on the French and German contexts, joint analytical work on the interviews and

³ See the introduction to this special issue.

presentations of analytical summaries of seven interviews from the French context and an interview with Ali, a young Syrian who arrived in Germany as a UAM. That interview was conducted by a group of Youssef's former students in Frankfurt⁴. The interviews were presented and jointly analysed in small groups made up of a mix of students from the three universities. We also visited the Council of Europe headquarters, where Gwendolyn had arranged a meeting with the official responsible for the council's work with UAMs. She also invited two speakers who work in the field: firstly, a priest from the Centre Bernanos, a very impressive individual who founded a professional support network that provides shelter, food and assistance for young refugees who are not officially recognised as minors and end up living on the streets in France⁵; secondly, a social worker employed by an institution that provides care for recognised minors.

The students' perspectives on the Strasbourg workshop

It was not just us lecturers who found the collaborative research, integration into a larger project and exchange between the three different groups and two national contexts to be an enriching experience, but also the students. For the students from Halle, for example, the joint work as part of a bigger, 'real-world' research project made them feel they were being taken seriously as researchers and could make a small contribution to a larger project. For all of my students – as well as most students from the Frankfurt group and many from the Strasbourg group, too – it was the first time they had taken the role of researchers themselves and conducted interviews. I thought it would be interesting to share some of their reflections on the experience.

After two full days of working together in Strasbourg, we did a 'flashlight round' (*Blitzlichtrunde*): we went round the room and each person in turn could briefly share their thoughts about the workshop and their collaborative work.

I was very impressed to hear how much the students – most of whom are future social workers and teachers – had learned and absorbed. Over the two days of the workshop, I sometimes had my doubts about how much they would take home with them afterwards, because even when we were presented with crucial insights into the issues affecting young migrants' lives, the students sometimes looked distracted rather than fascinated. They are, after all, young people with many things going on in their lives other than the work of the seminar, and for some of them it was their first time abroad.

In the reflection round, all the students (not just those from the Halle group) seemed to have been inspired by the shared experience of the last two days and were very grateful for the detailed insights into work in the field shared by the invited speakers. They were also deeply moved by the various situations and life stories they learned about in the speakers' presentations, as well as in the interviews conducted by the French group and in the interview with the Syrian refugee Ali conducted by a group of former Frankfurt students.

⁴ See also Abid and Delcroix's article in this issue.

⁵ See also Gilliéron, Käckmeister and Poizat's article in this issue.

The students talked about:

- The many different approaches currently taken in work with UAMs;
- The sadness of the topic, given the difficult life paths of the young people that they learned about from the speakers and the interviews;
- But also the impressive positivity and passion conveyed by the speakers.

The students found the intense two-day workshop inspiring. At the same time, they were aware of the complexity of the topics we discussed. They greatly valued the exchange with other students: they gained insights into differences between the countries and learned new things about the two contexts. They also asked critical questions about human dignity and how it gets lost in the reception procedures.

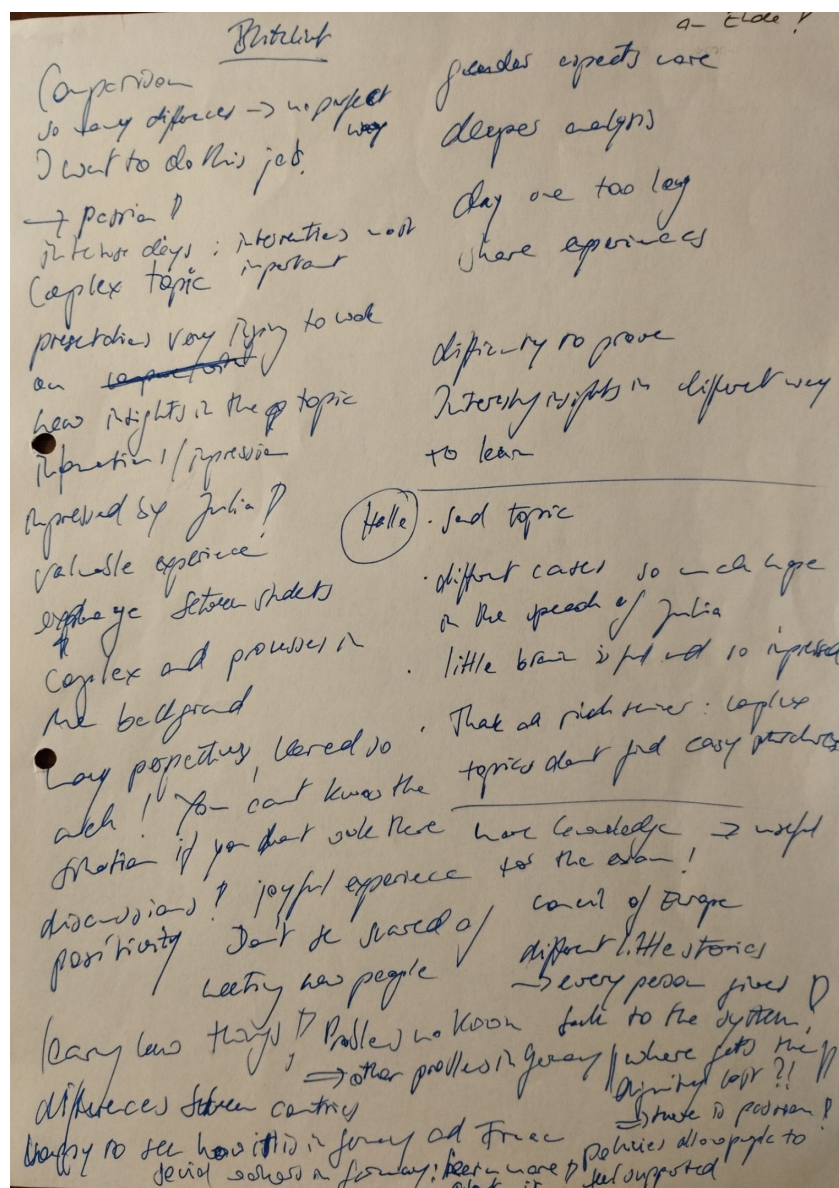


Figure 1: My notes from the 'flashlight' round

The case of Susan

For the students in Halle (and I believe also those at the other institutions), the task of finding an interview partner and conducting an interview themselves was daunting. They worked in small groups throughout the semester and many of them had difficulties finding an interviewee. Although in some cases that was perhaps due to a lack of effort, some groups really got creative and tried many different ways of contacting people. Quite a few were still struggling to find an interviewee by the end of the semester and asked if they could analyse an interview conducted by a previous seminar group. However, two groups did manage to find an interviewee right before the end of the semester, and some members of one of these two groups came to Strasbourg with me.

Excerpt of Susan's case presentation

The interview was conducted with an Afghan woman named Susan (pseudonymized name). At the time of the interview, Susan was 21 years old. She previously lived in Afghanistan with two brothers, two sisters and her parents. Her father, a teacher and the town mayor, was killed by political enemies. After his death, Susan and her family decided to leave Afghanistan for their safety in 2012/2013, which would correspond to Etienne's category of 'exile'⁶.

Susan and her family members experienced many troubles during their migration. Most of the time they were able to stay together, but later Susan had to go to Germany on her own. She arrived in Halle (Saale), Germany, in 2019 when she was 17 years old. There, she was reunited with one of her sisters and one brother. Later, their mother and the other siblings also arrived. In Halle, Susan went to school for some months and started vocational training afterwards. Her residence permit lasts until 2026 and she wants to stay in Halle.

Our research group made contact through a social organization that connected us with her. We wanted to create a comfortable environment for her without excessive pressure from the interviewer's side, so we decided that only one person should conduct the interview with Susan. Initial contact was made by WhatsApp, then one group member met Susan for the interview.

On January 19, 2024, the interview was conducted at our university's pedagogy department in our lecturer's office, which was prepared with snacks and drinks for the interview to create comfort. On their way to the office, Susan told our group member that she was a bit worried about her language skills and that she might not want to tell him too much.

In general, the interview did not strictly follow our guiding questions which we came up with in preparation for the interview, but were used during the open interview to ensure that we still gathered information regarding our general research question, i.e., her integration into the German education system. The interview was recorded and later transcribed. An automatic voice recognition program named 'f4x' was used as support.

Before the time of the interview, Susan had to discuss her life story in various contexts, and during the interview, she seemed tense, which our group member noticed and tried to improve through approving behaviour. At some points, Susan was close to tears. She also seemed slightly reluctant to talk about her experiences, but she was still willing to respond to everything and explained things at length of her own accord.

⁶ See Etienne (2002) as quoted by Frechon & Marquet (2007).

Coming to Strasbourg and conducting an interview themselves went far beyond the course requirements, given the number of credit points awarded for the seminar. But this one group insisted on doing so even though the semester was already drawing to a close⁷. Through an NGO that organised a regular welcome meeting (Welcome Treff) for refugees and local volunteers, they had made contact with a young woman who had come to Halle as a UAM. In the text box above, I quote an excerpt from their short presentation of the case (the first part of the analytical summary, which they wrote in English).

The excerpt shows how the students applied concepts they had read about in the literature to their interview, and how much care they took over the interview situation and Susan's well-being. After the interview, we reflected together on the role of the researcher and the role of emotions in the interview: both those of the research partner and those of the researchers themselves.

During the interview, the student who conducted it, Gustav Henno Stolze, actively negotiated his role as interviewer while taking responsibility for the situation and making sure Susan was comfortable. This is most apparent at the start and end of the interview transcript⁸:

G: And exactly. Yes, exactly. We can also have some tea, and you can choose one if you want.

S: That's all.

G: Because I always need that. I always need something to eat and drink so that I can...

S: Yes, go ahead and have some. If I want to, I'll have some too.

G: Okay. Fine. Yes, but having a little snack is important to me.

S: I don't know. Where's the right place to start? I should tell you something about where I'm from. And then we'll come to Germany, because I've been to different countries, so it's all in my head. So, I've been in Germany for three years, I don't know. How can I express myself properly in Germany now? Well, I should first say something about where I'm from.

G: So, you said to me earlier that maybe you don't want to tell me about everything.

S: Of course. Well, I can't. Well, actually, I'm not the kind of person who [talks about] things like that, when I go so deeply into my past. So my feelings just annoy me too. Go somewhere else.

G: Yes, then, take care of that- take good care of yourself. I don't want to- yes, I want to- well, I'm happy with anything you want to tell me. And I can assure you that if you tell me something, I'll be careful with what you've told me and not not share it. So I want you to know that this is me trying to create a safe space for your story. And whatever you tell me will not be judged. So I won't say this is good or this is bad. In that respect- exactly, there are- there are many points that interest me. If you like, I can just ask you a few questions.

⁷ The group's members were Lina Dannies, Shaydon Ramey, Gustav Henno Stolze and Katharina Zeidler. Gustav and Lina were part of the Strasbourg group and Gustav conducted the interview.

⁸ The interview was conducted in German. The following excerpts have been translated into English.

S: Yes. If you have any questions, you can [ask] me.

G: Mm-hmm. And you just say whether you- whether you want to talk about it. For example, I'm interested in how it started. What, for example, is your country of origin? Where are you from and what made you decide to change countries?

S: Yes. Shall we start now?

G: Yes, gladly.

S: Well, yes. So, I come from Afghanistan. I lived there for, I don't know, ten years, eleven years. And after a bad situation there, after the death of my father, we actually had to leave. So my mum and my brothers decided to leave. Back then, my father was mayor there and had enemies. So one day after the train home, the enemies killed him with a pistol. And then after a month- so my mum decided we had to leave. And then we went to Iran and lived there for a few years. We were small children, five siblings. I'm the last one and I have two sisters and two brothers. And actually, in Iran, it's not so easy to go to school. So, I don't know if you've also read this news from Iran or not. I don't know. So do you actually know something about Iran here? How they treat the refugees from Afghanistan?

After Gustav invited her to help herself to food and drinks, Susan explained that she could not tell him everything in an interview situation. She asked him where she should start, and a question asked by Gustav helped her to begin the story of how she left Afghanistan and arrived in Germany. At the end of the interview, Gustav made clear how listening to Susan's story had changed how he thought about the stories of his friends who were living in Germany after having fled from other countries.

G: Okay. Very good. Nice. Yes. Um. I think. Yes. We talked for a long time.

S: Yes, almost an hour.

G: Yes, a little longer than an hour. Yes. Yes. Um. Thank you very much for talking to me.

S: All good, [no problem]. My pleasure.

G: I also have friends who have fled. Who fled to Germany. And every time I- when we met, we always felt like doing something else, so we never talked about where they come from, what they've experienced and, in part because of this seminar, I'm now of course also interested in where my friends come from. I'm interested in why they came to Germany, and so on. And now I'm planning to ask them too, to have a chat with them too. But until now, it was never important to me. As a friend, it wasn't important, but somehow simply at a human level I just find it very interesting. Great. Yes, thank you. I'll end this here then.

I was very impressed to see how within the time constraints of this one semester the students came to understand the perspective of a researcher: they read and gained insights into different perspectives on UAMs in the literature, took home a lot from the trip to Strasbourg and then on top of all that conducted their own interview and composed a short analytical summary.

During the reflection round in our last meeting of the semester, the students spoke about:

- Their gratitude for their experience in the seminar (this was expressed by the students who conducted their own interview and came on the trip to Strasbourg);
- The high intensity and workload of the course, but also how much they had gained from the theoretical insights and their first experience of being researchers;
- The importance of conducting their own interview to their understanding of the topic how they approach the subject;
- The discussions in the seminar about the importance of the emotional aspects of the research and the subject matter;
- The difficulty of gaining access to the field and finding interview partners.

In the anonymous evaluation at the end of the seminar, most of those points came up again. The students also mentioned that they particularly appreciated the opportunities to explore and gain deeper understanding of their own areas of interest; to learn about research during their studies; to gain research experience in a pleasant and appreciative atmosphere with a good mix of freedom and support; and to learn about working practices in an important social field. They would have liked more time for the analysis and found the high workload and their sometimes limited ability to plan the research process difficult. One last point that I see as very important – especially given the rise of far-right parties in Germany and elsewhere – was that the students mentioned the seminar's political relevance.

Conclusion: MIGREVAL's work with students

I will end on that point, because it leads on perfectly to my conclusion and the question: why does linking the MIGREVAL project to a teacher training course work so well for the students? It is a highly intense seminar for both the students and for us lecturers: securing funding for the travel, supporting the students and introducing them to theory, research and methodology within such a small window of time is highly demanding.

But when they talk of 'research partners', just like we read in the participatory action research literature – which indicates that they are seeing the interviewees as active subjects and partners, not as passive research objects – and of being moved by the stories of young people living in conditions so different from those they grew up in themselves, I cannot help but feel that we are doing a very important job by introducing future teachers and social workers to different living conditions and different perspectives on the world.

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