



# Studying the military in a qualitative and comparative perspective

Delphine Deschaux-Beaume

## ► To cite this version:

Delphine Deschaux-Beaume. Studying the military in a qualitative and comparative perspective: methodological challenges and issues. The example of French and German officers in European Defence and Security Policy. Helena Carreiras; Celso Castro. Qualitative methods in military studies : research experiences and challenges, Routledge, pp.20, 2013, Cass military studies, 978-0-415-69811-5. hal-01795110

**HAL Id: hal-01795110**

**<https://hal.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/hal-01795110>**

Submitted on 18 May 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **Studying the military in a qualitative and comparative perspective : methodological challenges and issues**

## **The example of French and German officers in European Defence and Security Policy**

Delphine Deschaux-Beaume<sup>i</sup>

Social science, especially in France, has long ignored the analysis of the army from a sociological or political sociology perspective. There is even less methodological literature on this point, except for the significant book by Samy Cohen (Cohen 1999). This lack on the subject is significant to the extent that the military institution raises specific methodological challenges for a social researcher and requires reflexivity. The analyst actually needs to be conscious of some supposed common knowledge on the military field that must be put aside. Enquiring directly on the military ground actually shows the social scientist that the culture of secrecy in the army still exists and makes the enquiry difficult for the civilian social researcher. However the interviewed officers and diplomats actually show a true will to communicate on their profession with the social science researchers. Consequently the social outlines of the military field oblige us to reflect on the praxis of qualitative enquiry and more precisely on the praxis of qualitative research interview insofar as “the paradox of research interview is to have the interviewee say and show what he had until then held hidden, voluntarily or not” (Marmoz 2001 : 7) by using a specific instrumentation (e.g. questionnaires, concepts) even if secrecy appears as a constitutive characteristic of the military profession and the politico-military decision-making process in France as well as abroad.

This chapter is based on our dissertation dealing with the genesis, practices and uses of the European Security and Defence Policy with a focus on the comparison between France and Germany both in the genesis and daily practices and representations of ESDP actors (military and diplomats). More precisely, we lead over 130 qualitative interviews with high military officials, diplomats and political leaders in Paris, Berlin, Bonn and Brussels. Here we focus on what it means to study the military with a qualitative and comparative methodology. We will therefore raise three main issues, which are intertwined in our research. The first issue will be the qualitative perspective and the questions it raises regarding the specificity of the

military mission, which is often confidential. The second issue is to raise concretely the question of the implementation of the qualitative method in the military field in a comparative perspective : how to ask questions, so as these questions make sense to the interviewees ? The last issue will address the question of reflexivity, and more precisely of the position of the enquirer before the military officers. What does it mean, and how does it impact the research ? We will of course rely on our case study (French and German officers in CSDP) to draw empirical examples, so as to illustrate the three issues raised in this chapter.

### **Qualitative interviewing: a methodology for a « difficult field »<sup>ii</sup>**

As for any social science method, qualitative research interviewing leads the scientist to wonder about on the reasons for his methodological choices and the way the analyst constructs and collects his data. More precisely in the case of a political sociological enquiry on the army and the politico-military milieu, qualitative interviews correspond to two main uses: getting first-hand information to the extent that most of the time the researcher does not have an extensive access to the grey literature or internal documents he would need, and having an interesting access to the military actors in a research context where secret and the very specific military language constitute an issue for the analyst.

#### **The interview: a socially grounded information source**

In any research project on defence matters an essential methodological problem quickly emerges: the problem of the access to internal documents, grey literature. In the case of European defence policy, if official European declarations are public and often available on the Internet –such as for instance the declarations or joint actions of the Council of the European union, the conclusions of the EU summits, the ministerial bills of the high representatives political discourses-, the documents leading to these official papers for their part and used to prepare the official positions are actually not accessible and are protected by a strong classification system set up by the necessities of military and diplomatic

confidentiality. Regarding the archives of the French Presidency of the Republic, the ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the Quay d'Orsay), these documents remained beyond our reach because they did not meet the thirty-year notice for consultation<sup>iii</sup>. There still exists a specific procedure to access some medium-range classified documents<sup>iv</sup> : we therefore tried and completed this procedure at the Ministry of Defence in 2006. This authorization procedure can nonetheless turn out to be double-edged for the researcher. The higher the level of information the researcher can access, the higher the risk the research is classified as well, which would not enable them to publish their research results in any way. And yet is it not the vocation of research in social sciences to put into light and make understandable the research results so as to debate on them and help build a better knowledge of our contemporary societies ?

We therefore opted for a simplified authorization procedure to access confidential documents. But once the authorization has been obtained it is only the beginning of a long-drawn process. The researcher then has to send mail to the dedicated services of the ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs and to the Elysee Palace and the Chancellery in Paris and Berlin as well as to the archive service of the Council of the European Union where it is unfortunately given negative responses, the topic being too contemporary. This problem of accessing the documents turned out to be similar for our German field.

In addition to the contemporary characteristics of our research which tend to bar us the access to most of the politico-military and diplomatic archives, the office "Studies and documentation" of the ministerial and inter-ministerial departments of the Ministry of Defence in Paris provides a great support to understand why our request for the access to internal documents could not be met positively most of the time. The major problem concerning contemporary politico-military archives –in this case 1991 to 2007- stems from the fact that the inventories of these documents have not been published and added to the archives yet : these internal contemporary documents are consequently dispersed among several services and departments of the institutions of defence and diplomacy, which can each refuse to communicate them<sup>v</sup>. The researcher found reluctance from these services' staff . To put it differently, consulting internal documents (e.g. service notices, meeting proceedings, and language elements used to elaborate national positions to be brought up on the European meeting table) depends on the good will of each interlocutor, who in most of the time finds a justification to refuse to let the social scientist consult the documents at his disposal<sup>vi</sup>.

Concerning the documents made accessible to a civilian researcher by the authorization procedure, they often turned out to be of little interest or unreadable owing to the use of a very opaque technical jargon<sup>vii</sup>. Therefore, qualitative interview is the only recourse for the researcher to have access to and to understand information on how the different actors implied in the European Defence Policy decision-making process in Paris, Berlin and Brussels have come to such or such result or compromise remains qualitative interview. This characteristic appears to be specific to research on inaccessible social fields (Bogner, Menz 2005 : 7). We consequently chose to base our research strategy and our data collection on qualitative interviews, following Howard Becker's comment that "if one wants to know society, one first has to know it first hand" (Becker 2002 : 44). Samy Cohen incidentally underlines how much more fruitful than archives those interviews turn out to be in the military institution (Cohen 1999 : 19) : this method helps us understanding and explain how the actors hold their social roles and positions and give their role its meaning (Lagroye 1997).

### **Direct connection with the defence field : an asset for the "profane" civilian researcher**

Another, more epistemological, reason confirmed us in our research strategy: qualitative enquiry in social sciences enables the researcher to have a direct connection to the social reality he aims at analyzing (Marmoz 2001 :19). Indeed, for the civilian researcher the defence field raises the question of the social distance with its interviewees. This social asymmetry is actually conveyed by a specific language of their own: "The special languages produced and reproduced by the specialist professions [...] are, as every discourse, the product of a compromise between an expressive interest and a censorship constituted by the structure of the very social field within which the discourse is produced and operated" (Bourdieu 1982 : 167-168)<sup>viii</sup>. Therefore immersing oneself in the specific language and the social codes of one's interviewees turns out to be very fruitful and can only happen by repeated contact with the research field, theses contacts enabling the weaving of mutual trust between the researcher and the person interviewed. Qualitative interviews constitute not only a tool for the analysis of representations (in the present case the influence of a European or pro-NATO strategy on the social representations of the French and German politico-military actors daily dealing with the construction and implementation of the Common Security and

Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union) but this method reveals nevertheless the social practices of the interviewees through their discourse on their practices. The use of qualitative interviews leaves some room for the context of the discourse in the analysis. If “individuals instantly adapt their behaviour to the social scenes within which they participate in” (Beaud, Weber 2003 : 334), the fact that they speak about their representations, their professional training and career and their daily practices conveys a real added-value for the researcher who is looking for the analysis of the relationship between the actor and the institution he belongs to. Jacques Lagroye for instance relies on the theory of social roles and underlines the fact that “the relationship towards the institution is first of all the relationship between the one who holds a role in this institution. [...] It is first the apprehension of individuals living in the institution who, because they hold roles, enable us to have an idea of the institution.” (Lagroye 1997 : 8)

To go further on this idea, reflexivity necessitates to “set the collected discourse in the institutional context where it has been enunciated to the extent that speech can not sociologically exist independently from the institution giving it its social justification” (Bourdieu 1982 :71). This located discourse informs the researcher on the institution, its internal functioning and its lively dimension but also outlines a bias of the methodology based on qualitative interviews : the researcher has to be careful and keep this collected discourse at a distance. The interviewees cannot be assumed to be objective as they are personally involved in the process the analyst is investigating : “often the memory of the actors is failing, they mix up dates and tend to reconstruct their role a posteriori” (Muller 2003 : 94). On the side of the enquirer the solution is to shrug off the myth of “objective truth” to replace it by “subjective and partial truths” that the researcher has to restore and confront so as to be able to make up his own supposedly disinterested point of view (Beaud, Weber 2003 : 303). For us the stake was to adopt a comprehensive approach in the Weberian sense, which is inclined towards the comprehension of the internal logic of the action of our interviewees (Weber 2003). On a methodological level this scientific posture means the interviewer pushes forward the interviewee by adopting himself an “inferior” position and bearing in mind the specificity of the army based on a strong hierarchical principle (Kaufmann 2004). The researcher tries to enter the actors’ world by listening to them and learning from them or even participating in their professional duty when it is materially possible, and then “getting out of the field again” when it comes to the interpretation of the collected data (Paillé, Mucchielli 2003 : 229). This

“going native” approach is interested in the actors’ discourse and enables the analyst to access internal information if we base our research strategy on the comprehensive Weberian approach built on the following presupposition : the meaning the actor gives to his social action largely contributes to determine the formal aspects of this action. This leads us as researchers to pay a careful attention to the meaning the military interviewees give to their action. To put it another way and freely relying on Foucault (Foucault 1969), the interview provides an access to the actors’ discourse, which has to be considered as a social practice or a social event : Foucault considers discourses as a set of regulated and specific social practices among other practices.

After having clarified our research strategy which relied on qualitative interviews owing to the specificity of our research object and of the military field of enquiry, it appears important to analyze the implementation of research interviews (here semi-directed) in the defence social field. This implementation raises indeed peculiar methodological challenges particularly due to the status of military speech.

### **Interviewing officers in a comparative perspective: implementation and challenges**

How can one carry on a qualitative research in the military social field? What are the specificities regarding the implementation of research interviews ? A research approach such as ours, based on the actors, complicates the enquiry phase. In order to analyze the construction and implementation of the European defence policy as well as the representations and practices related to this policy among the French and German actors operating it daily, the choice of the interviewees has relied on their specific social experience in this new policy. We had to reach the officers and diplomats who were working at putting on track the European defence project that is the “historical actors”, whose professional rotation frequency makes them quite difficult to reach. A second type of interviewees were the officers (and also the civilians and diplomats) operating daily the CSDP once it was launched in 1999. It then appeared essential to draw a mapping of this network of actors both

in France and in Germany so as to identify the relationships of interdependence and the interactions within among their institutional positions : we had to zig zag our way up this network so as to be positioned to understand the similarities and divergences in the practices and representations within CSDP. One of the most important stakes of this method is to put into light the interactions between military actors located both at the national and European levels in the production of the European defence policy by relying on an in-depth study of the actors of the French-German military cooperation involved in the European defence social field. We also had to cope with distinctive military discourse collected during the interviews and limited by legal restrictions<sup>ix</sup>.

### **Mapping out a social network: an insertion strategy to get round military hierarchy on the ground**

The method implemented leans more generally on a threefold approach : first of all the researcher spots the actors and their logic of action in order to discover the actors involved in the public policy sector under study (here defence). Then comes the identification of the interdependence and power flows : who is a member of the network ? Who is an outsider or remains outside the network ? How do the members of the network cooperate ? Last but not least the analyst examines the evolution of the institutional functioning and the impact of European integration on this process. In this matter Andy Smith proposes to call up a range of four enquiry techniques validating this threefold approach: information collection and literature review, semi-directed interviews, participant observation (whenever possible) and budget analysis (when it is relevant) (Smith 2000: 229-252). We combined all four techniques, with a very limited use of participant observation due to the deeply rooted persistence of a culture of secrecy in the defence field. Even if the military actors often spoke more than expected a priori, participant observation is far from being welcome and facilitated<sup>x</sup>.

More precisely, our field enquiry relies on 135 semi-directed interviews (based on an interview grid mixing open and closed, thematic and analytical questions) led in Paris, Berlin and Brussels between 2005 and 2008 and relying on a “snowballing” technique aiming at



cross-ruling the actors' networks and completing this technique by content analysis. The comparative perspective is a challenge to take into account. Thus we had to identify the institutions daily dealing with CSDP in Paris and Berlin: the difficulty was that these institutions are not completely symmetric in both states. For instance the Elysee Palace plays a very significant role on these matters whereas the German Chancellery intervenes more selectively. Indeed in Germany the head of armed forces is not the Chancellor but the Federal Minister of Defence, whereas in France this role is the President of the Republic's. Consequently the question for the researcher is to discover how the French and German politico-military systems work. The best way to do so appeared to be an immersion first in the Parisian defence social field, and then of the German defence social field. After an in-depth reading and content analysis of specialized literature, press and institutional websites on the subject, we therefore opted for a research stay in Berlin at the *Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr* (SOWI, or Institute of the German Army for Social Science Research). We stayed there seven months in 2006 and five months in 2007<sup>xi</sup>.

The interviews were lead in the following services with officers, non-commissioned officers and diplomats :

<b>Paris</b>	<b>Ministry of Foreign Affairs</b>	<b>Ministry of Defence :</b>	<b>Elysée Palace (Presidence of the French Republic):</b>	<b>Matignon and services of the Prime Minister :</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minister's personal staff</li> <li>• Direction for Strategic Affairs, Security and Disarmament and notably the Under-Direction for strategic Affairs</li> <li>• CSFP Service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minister's personal civilian and military staff</li> <li>• Delegation for Strategic Affairs, CSDP and NATO services</li> <li>• Delegation for Defence Information and Communication (DICOD)</li> <li>• General Military Staff : Euratlantic Division</li> <li>• Army Military Staff : International Relations service and Chief of Staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal Military Staff of the President</li> <li>• Diplomatic Cell (Sherpa)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Secretariat for National Defence (SGDN)</li> <li>• Prime Minister's military personal staff</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Airforce Military Staff : International Relations service and Chief of Staff</li> <li>• Navy Military Staff : International Relations service</li> <li>• Interarmed Military Staff (Creil)</li> </ul>		
<b>Berlin</b>	<b>Federal ministry of Foreign Affairs:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planungstab (Minister's personal staff)</li> <li>• Politische Abteilung, Referat 202 (Direction for Political and Strategic Affairs, CSDP and CFSP Service)</li> <li>• Politische Abteilung, EU-KOR (Direction for Political and Strategic Affairs, EU Correspondent)</li> </ul>	<b>Federal ministry of Defence :</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generalinspekteur (Chief of the General military Staff)</li> <li>• Presse und Informationsstab (Information Service)</li> <li>• FüS III-1 : Bilateral Cooperation Service</li> <li>• FüS III-2 : CSDP service</li> <li>• FüS III-4 : International relations Service</li> <li>• FüS III-5 : NATO service</li> <li>• Planungstab (Minister's personal staff)</li> </ul>	<b>Chancellorship:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abteilung 2.2.2., Gruppe 23 (Political Division)</li> <li>• Referat 213 (European Division)</li> </ul>	

<b>Brussels</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permanent Representation of Germany to the Political and Security Comity (PSC)</li> <li>• French Permanent Representation to the Political and Security Committee (PSC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permanent Representation of Germany to the EU Military Committee</li> <li>• French Permanent Representation to the EU Military Committee</li> </ul>	<b>General Secretariat of the EU Council :</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Direction E VIII (CSDP)</li> <li>• General Direction XIX (Civilian Crisis Management)</li> <li>• EU Military Staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permanent Representation of Germany to NATO</li> <li>• French Permanent Representation to NATO</li> <li>• Supreme Headquarter Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE in Mons)</li> </ul>
-----------------	---	--	---	--

Working by interviews actually implies that if he wants to collect valid data, the researcher should not be perceived as an “intruder” in the social configuration within which they enquire. This characteristic is particularly true in the military field. We secondly noticed that some contacts offer “open sesame” : the practice of name-dropping was fruitful among superior officers and also at the intermediary levels<sup>xii</sup>. For example having met with Admiral Lanxade (a former French General chief of staff) in 2004 for a former research enabled us to meet his friend and colleague General Naumann : both held key strategic roles in building up European defence in the 1990’s. The progressive integration and even the curiosity shown by some interviewees have largely been favoured by word of mouth: the politico-military system both in France and Germany as well as in Brussels tend to function as a big family<sup>xiii</sup>. Thus one can reach the different actors, by “snowballing” from one to another. These officers dealing daily with European defence policy know one another well, they sometimes have been friends for years as some of them confessed, and have often followed the same professional training in the superior politico-military schools (Joint Forces Defence college and Institute for High National defence Studies in France, Federal Academy for Commandment and Federal Academy for Security Policy in Germany). Though the turnover is quite frequent<sup>xiv</sup>, a detailed

study of this configuration shows that in fact the researcher often comes across the same contacts, which have evolved from one position to another in this social space.

Nonetheless qualitative interviews command that the researcher avoids the appeal of the “scoop” by relying on the technique of cross checking which means that “a piece of information only exists if it has been given by at least two independent sources, possibly first hand” (Thoenig 1985 : 40-41). As a result we opted for a multiplication of interviews at different levels of the decision-making process (from the high-ranking officers and diplomats actors down to the executing actors) so as to avoid a unilateral and official discourse and to cross the collected data and sources. This cross-checking also raises the question of the place of the speech producer in the field of this speech production (Bourdieu 1982 : 170 and fol.). This place takes a particular meaning bearing in mind the hierarchy principle in defence. Often the “second knives ”(Cohen 1999 : 28), that is intermediary actors, turn out to be very precious interviewees : they hold a less media-related position and have few contacts with public opinion and journalists. As a matter of fact they do not internalize censorship as much as the superior officers : censorship [does not] impose its form onto [their] words” (Bourdieu 1982 : 169) to the extent that they show less concern about their social image than officers of the high hierarchy who hold political positions and are most exposed to the media. Howard Becker even tends to generalize this by-passing of the hierarchy in order to study social organizations : “ If we rely on the high representatives of an organization or a community to understand in detail what is going on, we systematically fail to take into account a whole range of things that this person does not hold for important.” (Becker 2002 : 154)

Supplementing the words of the politico-military high representatives both in Paris and Berlin as well as in Brussels by interviews with actors on the ground provides access to the actual practices and the social interactions that are developing between the lines of the European Defence policy’s orthodoxy. Moreover leading interviews with several members of the same service constitutes a way to guarantee a relatively better objectivity to the practices compared to a permanent immersion. This method implies pedagogy from the researcher, mostly towards the German interviewees : the co-signature principle (*Mitzeichnung*) in German administrative organizations supposes that every agent of a same service or division has the same information at their disposal to the extent that all the information is transmitted to everyone in the service. Therefore multiplying the contacts with different agents in the same service necessitated to justify our request. Pedagogy also provides an efficient communication

tool between the researcher and the interviewee and helps build mutual trust in the social interaction that a qualitative interview actually constitutes.

### **Investigating the « great mute » in comparison : a methodological challenge**

Interviewing Defence personnel in France and Germany consists in carrying out an « investigation amongst a “difficult environment”,[...] a suspicious environment and yet not hermetic to research” (Cohen 1999 : 17). Once the contacts have been taken with our interviewees a question still remains : will the chosen interlocutors accept to talk and not just deliver a politically appropriate speech of lesser value for the researcher ? Social science research in the defence social field raises an inherent dilemma for the researcher in the profound aim of his research : accessing military discourse, which is traditionally supposed to remain confidential and surrounded by secret, comes up against the purpose of research: disclosure and publishing of the collected data. Nonetheless as the interviews went on, our enquiry pushed us to question a well established prejudice: the prejudice of the army as a mute institution. In their wide majority our interviewees gave us interesting and sometimes unreleased information. Indeed as Samy Cohen observes it is of great interest for Defence personnel, officers as well as diplomats, “not to show themselves cut from the research circles” (Cohen 1999 : 17).

More fundamentally, one of the most acute problems encountered in a social science investigation on the defence environment is the status of the collected speech and its quotation. Most of the times the sources want to remain unofficial. This wish for anonymity goes hand in hand with the will to express themselves as freely as possible in front of the analyst as well as to prevent themselves from potential negative consequences of ‘free’ expression within their office or department. Thus the officers and non-commissioned officers would welcome our questions with enthusiasm as long as we guaranteed their words would remain confidential. This actually raises the question of the “off” speech and of self-censorship : to what extent can the researcher be explicit about his sources when he investigates the military field ? How can one combine research deontology and methodological rigour ? This dilemma is most frequently resolved by the researchers studying

the military by using the same rule as the journalists<sup>xv</sup> : one can quote the institution and service where the interviewee works but not his name and neither his function.

Moreover in the case of a multi-country comparison as in our case (France and Germany) it is of high importance to take into account the different rules surrounding the status of military speech in each country (De Beer, Blanc, Jacob 2005). The expression rules for the military agents diverge in France and Germany and strongly codify the frame of (the) authorized speech, this speech expressing a delegation of power to the member of the military institution (Bourdieu 1982 : 103-119). Thus the researcher comes up against the duty of confidentiality in France. This duty has been defined by the general military status (revised in 2005) as follows: the opinion can “be expressed only outside duty and with the reserve required by the military status” (Bacchetta 2004: 76). The officers therefore have to use moderate language as long as their speech is expressed during duty : confidentiality duty does not constrain individual opinion so much as the way of expressing it. Caution is indeed much needed when the expressed opinion or the given information is to be published. In Germany however the servicemen are considered as “citizens in uniform”: “officers under control and citizen[s] like the other[s] (Pajon 2001 : 245) they benefit from a rather large freedom of speech guaranteed by the article 5 of the Basic Law<sup>xvi</sup> so as to protect the social connection between the army and German society. Therefore German officers sometimes publicly express their opinions against a government decision<sup>xvii</sup>. This specificity of an investigation in the defence social field also motivated the use of handheld recorder tolerated in most cases but banned on occasions.

Another challenge of comparison is to master several languages and intercultural competences. Establishing mutual trust with the interviewees is particularly important when interviewing officers and it necessitates time and a good knowledge of their mother language. As Michel Lallement and Jan Spurk observes, comparison is the “preserve of the multilingual carrier-pigeons of the [sociological] discipline” (Lallement, Spurk 2003 : 71). It is also important to master the cultural codes of the countries, so as to make the interview as unremarkable as possible, even if the interview remains a specific social interaction as we analyze it below. We thus chose to lead the interviews with German officers in German rather than in English. Our research experience showed that the information given in their mother language revealed much more on their social representations and daily practices. English is actually their daily working language and leads them to use a standardized

discourse. For instance, we started an interview in English with a German officer appointed in the EU Military Staff in Brussels and got no interesting information on its representations and practices. As we switched to German, the interview became much more fruitful for us and the language switch helped this officer develop more trust towards us. This example is just one out of many similar ones. Thus, without falling into a culturalist approach, we were struck by the fact that social facts –as social practices and representations of military officers are- have to be analyzed by taking into account the national and organizational origins of the interviewee. Such a “sociological journey” (Gephart 2005) is a good way to develop a better comprehensive understanding of the interviewees in Paris, Berlin and Brussels.

Last but not least as in any political science, research interviews also constitute a full social interaction between the researcher and its interviewees inasmuch as the interviewee is led to “answer for his speech” (Blanchet 1985 : 113) by the way the analyst questions him. This social interaction is to be considered and analyzed not only under its social dimension but also with regard to the gender of the researcher in the present case.

### **The researcher-agent relationship on the defence field : a gendered interaction**

Qualitative interview is not only a way of getting data but also a full social interaction between the researcher and the interviewee. Analyzing this social relationship actually consists in questioning the conditions of production of the “truth” expressed by the interviewed agents, military and civilian. Moreover this interaction becomes more specific when one is a young woman investigating a mostly masculine environment (Arendell 1997). Without reverting to the common cliché of traditionalism and development of stereotyped behaviours towards women, the specificity of defence social field has an impact on the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. Concerning our research and with regard to discussions with male colleagues also investigating this field, the gender of the analyst seems to weigh on the research interaction and indeed positively in our case<sup>xviii</sup>. Being a woman can actually be of help : it makes it possible for the researcher to ask “naïve” questions enabling to obtain lots of information on the social practices and representations of the military and diplomatic actors. For instance the very technical aspects wrapped up in an

opaque jargon were graciously explained to us unlike what happened to a male colleague asking the same kind of questions. The politico-military environment in France as well as in Germany is an exclusively masculine environment: amongst our interviewees fewer than 10% –both officers and diplomats- were women characterised by their youth and high education level. Therefore the female researcher can sometimes feel like a curiosity and an indulgent ear for the interviewed agents of this social field. The attitude adopted towards a young woman comes close to a semi-fatherly, sometimes even a seductive range but also highlights a great concern for the image of the army within society.

Besides any research based on qualitative interviews among the defence personnel, and more particularly amongst officers, has to be analyzed in the light of the army-society connection both in France and Germany. The suspension of military conscription is also to be considered in that matter: if this makes the French army more reactive and able to fulfil its missions abroad in accordance with its commitments within international organizations (UE, ONU, OTAN...), this suspension also brings the military to fear the loss of the army-society connection. This connection is in France sporadically expressed by the Days of Defence Preparation and by the military parade on the French national day on July 14<sup>th</sup>. Under these conditions the researcher becomes a go-between with civil society and more precisely with the academic and scientific circles. Jean-Dominique Merchet, a French defence journalist, even evokes the need for the military to feel loved<sup>xix</sup>. This concern for a good army-society connection also strongly exists in Germany since pacifist trends in German public opinion are still vivid as fallout of the Nazi trauma. This will to communicate has to be perceived by the analyst as an incentive to cross the collected data with other sources either scientific or derived from internal documentation.

In the end investigating defence environment and particularly interviewing military agents provides a stimulating methodological challenge which encourages the researcher to seek for inventiveness. Faced with the difficulty, and most of the time impossibility, of procuring any internal document from the military and diplomatic services, the social science researcher can only rely on the option of a quasi-immersion in the military social field. This qualitative strategy of getting the needed data, actually puts him into an investigative position endowed with some advantages : “The “traveller” benefits from his social situation. This



methodological “outsider” is not excluded from the group but on the contrary is actually part of it.” (Gephart 2005 : 13) The researcher therefore has to make use of reflexivity when using the data collected in this way and to bear in mind the inherent limits to any social science research based on recurrent qualitative interviews. Conducting an interview can seem easy at first sight but still comprises limits, one of which is the possible gap between the saying and the doing of the social actors (Sala Pala, Pinson 2007). The task is to manage the risk of disconnection between these two dimensions either by direct observation when it is possible, or by multiplying interviews amongst the same kind of agents so as to uncover the potential discordances. Additionally, one should create a relation of mutual trust so as to reach at least partially the social practices of these actors. Indeed the researcher frequently plays the role of the scientist as outlined by Max Weber, which “obliges the individual to take into account the ultimate meaning of its own actions or at least to help him into it” (Weber 1963 : 113).

In this case, if -as we have just analyzed it- such a research strategy necessitates some precautions specific to the military field regarding the status of military speech and has to be based on a rigorous implementation of the research interviews, this method finds yet a good justification nevertheless through the results it enables to obtain (Lequesne, 1999 : 65). Keeping in mind “the island of our knowledge in the ocean of our ignorance” (Elias 1993 : 124), this methodological qualitative strategy has proved fruitful to the extent that this method has enabled us to reach unreleased data on an emerging socio-political phenomenon -the Europeanization of the defence sector. That strategy has also enabled us to shed new light on the resistance of nation-states in this matter through the analysis of the practices, social representations and national policy-making processes ruling CSDP. The military institution, far from being mute, actually provides the sociologists and political scientists with a rich investigation field.

---

<sup>i</sup> PhD in political science, research fellow at Grenoble School of Peace and associate research fellow at PACTE-Sciences Po Grenoble. I would like to thank Jacques Lockwood and Scott Greer for their correcting of my chapter.

<sup>ii</sup> See Boumaza, Campana 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> In France, the bill passed on July 17th 1978 enables the access to administrative documents. Nevertheless the access to the Ministry of Defence archives is restricted to people holding a security authorization procedure. The waiting time to access public archives is thirty years and even seventy-five years in some cases outlines by this bill of law.

---

<sup>iv</sup> Mostly the “restricted access” level and sometimes the “confidential” level, which are the two first scales of classification.

<sup>v</sup> It is what happened in our case : a globally negative answer after over five months waiting. The few reachable documents belonged to an archive set taken by the high civil servant in charge after his changing of professional position.

<sup>vi</sup> This legitimate fear of the incurred risk pushed some of our interviewees to read to us some paragraphs of the documents so that we could make notes but would not show them to us.

<sup>vii</sup> Samy Cohen also states a similar assessment regarding his investigation on the Analysis and Prevision Centre of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Cohen 1999 : 19).

<sup>viii</sup> On this point, see also Laborier, Bongrand 2005 : 95 ; Chamboredon, Surdez et al. 1994 ; Cohen 1999.

<sup>ix</sup> Here the example of the reprimand earned by the French General Vincent Desportes in July 2010 illustrates the weight of these legal restrictions on military speech. For the record General Vincent Desportes had given his personal advice on the French intervention in Afghanistan to a public media, calling this intervention an American war and criticizing the coalition strategy on the ground.

<sup>x</sup> We have been able to carry out two direct observations: one in a parliamentary meeting at the German Bundestag on April 6th 2006 ; another one in a workshop organized by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 18th 2006 and bringing together German diplomats and officers around the director of the General Direction E IX of the EU Council, Claude-France Arnoult.

<sup>xi</sup> For the record, we actually really « immersed » ourselves by living two months in a garrison house of the German Army, as the SOWI is located within the former Soviet General Headquarter in Germany in Strausberg.

<sup>xii</sup> Samy Cohen states a similar assessment regarding his interviews with former French President Mitterrand. Cohen 1999 : 24.

<sup>xiii</sup> This affiliation feeling is increased by the professional turnover leading the individuals to maintain their institution as a professional reference point.

<sup>xiv</sup> A politico-military position is actually held for 2 to 3 years.

<sup>xv</sup> It is what the defence journalists usually do. We actually asked some of them about it in January 2006 : Laurent Zecchini from *Le Monde*, Arnaud De La Grange from *Le Figaro*, Jean-Dominique Merchet from *Libération* and Christian Wernicke from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

<sup>xvi</sup> This article states that any citizen has a right to freely express his opinion by words, writings or pictures, and the state has to watch over this freedom (Kannicht, 1982)

<sup>xvii</sup> It was the case for instance concerning the Bundeswehr reform by former Defence minister Rudolf Scharping in 2000-2001, which retained conscription. See the article from Captain Jürgen Rose « Schafft endlich die Wehrpflicht ab ! » (litterally : “Abolish conscription !”) published in *Die Welt* on September 12th 2001 : military conscription does not enable Germany to fully meet its NATO and CSDP commitments regarding rapid reaction.

<sup>xviii</sup> On the general question of social interaction and of the impact of gender in research interviews see Beate Littig, 2005.

<sup>xix</sup> Speech of Jean-Dominique Merchet, Monthly seminar “Young researcher” of the former Centre for Social Science Studies on Defence now known as IRSEM, Paris, January 24<sup>th</sup> 2006.

---

## Bibliography

- Arendell, T. (1997) « Reflections on the Reasearcher-Reasearched Relationship: a Woman interviewing Men », *Qualitative Sociology*, 2 (3): 341-368.
- Arveiller, J. (2001) *Secret de l'entretien et secret de la cure*. 169-188, in Marmoz, Louis (ed). 2001. *L'entretien de recherche dans les sciences sociales et humaines. La place du secret*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Bacchetta, C. (2004) *Quelle liberté d'expression professionnelle pour les militaires ? Enjeux et perspectives*, Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale, Paris, Economica.
- Beaud, S., Weber, F. (2003) *Le guide de l'enquête de terrain. Produire et analyser des données ethnographiques*, Paris, La Découverte, Coll. « Repères Guides ».
- Becker, H. (2002) *Les ficelles du métier. Comment conduire sa recherche en sciences sociales*, Paris, La Découverte, Coll. « Repères Guides ».
- Beuth, H. (2005) *Regiert wird schriftlich*, in Enrico Brand, Christan Buck (Hrsg.). 2005. *Auswärtiges Amt, Diplomatie als Beruf*, Wiesbaden, VS-Verlag, 119-128.
- Blanchet, A. (1985) *L'entretien dans les sciences sociales*, Paris, Dunod.
- Bogner, A., Menz, W. (2005) *Expertenwissen und Forschungspraxis : die modernisierungstheoretische und die methodische Debatte um die Experten. Zur Einführung in ein unübersichtliches Problemfeld*, 7- 30, in Bogner, A., Littig, B., Menz, W. (eds) (2005) *Das Experteninterview, Theorie, Methode, Anwendung*, 2nd edn, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag.
- Bourdieu, P. (1982) *Ce que parler veut dire. L'économie des échanges linguistiques*, Paris, Fayard.
- Boumaza M., Campana A. (2007) « Enquêter en milieu difficile », *Revue Française de Sciences Politique*, vol. 57, n° 1 : 5-25.
- Chamboredon, H., Surdez, M., Pavis, F., Willemez, L. (1994) « S'imposer aux imposants. A propos de quelques obstacles rencontrés par les sociologues débutants dans la pratique et l'usage de l'entretien », *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire*, n°16 : 114-132.
- Cohen, S. (1999) *Enquêtes au sein d'un « milieu difficile » : les responsables de la politique étrangère et de défense*, 17-50, in Cohen, S. (ed.) (1999) *L'art d'interviewer les dirigeants*, Paris, PUF, Coll. « Politique d'aujourd'hui ».
- De Beer, A., Blanc, G., Jacob, M. (2005) *L'expression professionnelle des militaires : comparaison européenne*, Paris, Centre d'Etudes en Sciences Sociales de la Défense, Coll. « Les documents du C2SD », n° 73.
- Deschaux-Beaume, D. (2008) *De l'Eurocorps à une armée européenne ? Pour une sociologie historique de la Politique Européenne de Sécurité et de Défense (1991-2007)*. Unpublished thesis, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Grenoble.

- 
- Elias, N. (1991 ; 1st German edn: 1987) *La société des individus*, Paris, Fayard.
- Elias, N. (1993 ; 1st German edn : 1970) *Qu'est-ce que la sociologie ?*, Paris, Pocket Agora.
- Elias, N. (1996 ; 1st German edn : 1983) *Engagement et distanciation*, Paris, Presses Pocket.
- Foucault, M. (1969) *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines ».
- Gephart, W. (2005) *Voyages sociologiques. France-Allemagne*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Kannnicht, J. (1982) *Die Bundeswehr und die Medien., Material für Presse und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit in Verteidigungsfragen*, Regensburg: Walhalla U. Praetoria Verlag.
- Kaufmann, J.-C. ( 2004) *L'entretien compréhensif*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Paris, Hachette, coll. « 128 ».
- Laborier, P., Bongrand, Ph. (2005) «L'entretien dans l'analyse des politiques publiques : un impensé méthodologique ? » *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 55, n°1 : 73-111.
- Lallement, M., Spurk J. (eds) (2003) *Stratégies de la comparaison internationale*, Paris, CNRS Editions.
- Lagroye, J. (1997) « On ne subit pas son rôle », *Politix*, 38, 7-17.
- Lequesne, C. (1993) *Paris-Bruxelles- Comment se fait la politique européenne de la France*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.
- Lequesne, C. (1999) *Interviewer des acteurs politico-administratifs de la construction européenne*, 51-66, in Cohen, S. (ed.) (1999) *L'art d'interviewer les dirigeants*, Paris, PUF, Coll. « Politique d'aujourd'hui ».
- Littig, B. (2005) *Interviews mit Experten und Expertinnen. Überlegung aus geschlechtertheoretischer Sicht*, 191-206, in Bogner, A., Littig, B., Menz, W.(eds) (2005) *Das Experteninterview, Theorie, Methode, Anwendung*, 2nd edn, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag.
- Marmoz, L. (2001) *L'outil, l'objet et le sujet : les entretiens de recherche, entre le secret et la connaissance*, 11-68, in Marmoz, L. (ed.) (2001) *L'entretien de recherche dans les sciences sociales et humaines. La place du secret*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Muller, P. (2003) *Les politiques publiques*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Paris, PUF, Coll. « Que sais-je ? ».
- Paillé, P., Mucchielli, A. (2003) *L'analyse qualitative en sciences humaines et sociales*, Paris, Armand Colin, Coll. « U ».
- Pajon, C. (2001) *Forces armées et société dans l'Allemagne contemporaine*, Paris : L'Harmattan.
- Passeron, J.-C. (1993) *Le raisonnement sociologique : l'espace non-poppérien du raisonnement naturel*. Paris, Nathan.
- Pollet, G., Payre, R. (2005) « Analyse des politiques publiques et sciences historiques : quel(s) tournant(s) socio-historique(s) ? ». *Revue française de science politique*, viol. 55 (1) : 133-154.

---

Sala Pala, V., Pinson, G. (2007) « Peut-on vraiment se passer de l'entretien en sociologie de l'action publique ? ». *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 57(5) : 555-598.

Smith, A. (2000) *Institutions et intégration européenne. Une méthode de recherche pour un objet problématisé*, 229-252, in Bachir, M., Duchesne, S. et al. (2000) *Les méthodes au concret., Démarches, formes de l'expérience et terrains d'investigation en science politique*, Centre Universitaire de Recherches Administratives et Politiques de Picardie, Paris, PUF.

Weber, M. (2003 ; 1st German edn : 1922) *Economie et société*, T 1: *Les catégories de la sociologie*, Paris, Pocket.

Weber, M. (1963 ; 1st French edn : 1959) *Le savant et le politique*. Paris, Editions 10/18.