

Migration between Switzerland and Germany:

A comparative study of migration between two culturally and geographically close countries

Introduction

In May 2019, I started my research project, comparing migration experiences of German and Swiss migrants to the neighboring country, respectively. The focus of the project was on three aspects: initial migration decisions, current living conditions, and prospects. Both groups mostly consist of well-educated individuals who should have few difficulties integrating into the host society, since both countries seem to be very similar. However, due to various factors, e.g. negative/positive stereotyping or media coverage, both groups face different problems integrating into their host country. One aspect that needs to be mentioned here is a prevalent Germanophobia in Switzerland.

Originally, I was planning to use the same approach for both groups; six months of fieldwork accompanying several German and Swiss culture clubs (“Kulturverein”), their events and regulars’ tables, mainly recruiting people from those clubs for my interviews and participating in the Swiss/German community. I finished my interviews with Swiss immigrants to Germany in late October 2019 and continued to participate in the community until April 2020 by continuously attending the regulars’ table of the Swiss culture club in Hamburg and various of their events, from the formal celebration of the national holiday, a hike in Hamburg’s nature reserve to a casual Fondue evening at a Swiss restaurant. When time came to start my fieldwork in Switzerland, SARS-CoV-2 had just reached Europe with its full force. I still travelled to Switzerland and spent six months in the country, however, I needed to fundamentally change my research design.

German culture clubs were practically closed down, there were no events or regulars' tables, even contacting the clubs through email to reach their members proved more difficult than anticipated. I managed to organize a few interviews through acquaintances, however, it was not enough to reach my target number of 35 to 40 interviews. In the end, I found the solution to my problems in a Facebook group called "Deutsche Auswanderer in der Schweiz" (German emigrants in Switzerland). The group provided me with sufficient interviewees, and doubled as an open forum, not unlike a regulars' table. At the same time, using different approaches for my two samples, and especially doing research online through a Facebook group, provides a whole different set of challenges. Thus, in my contribution, I will explore my own experiences doing research through Facebook, firstly introducing this particular group, addressing a specific ethical issue – dealing with the possible reinforcement of negative stereotypes of an already plagued minority – that is central for my use of the data I acquired, and then analyzing the broader problems and consequences that come with a lack of personal contact in online research.

Facebook Group overview

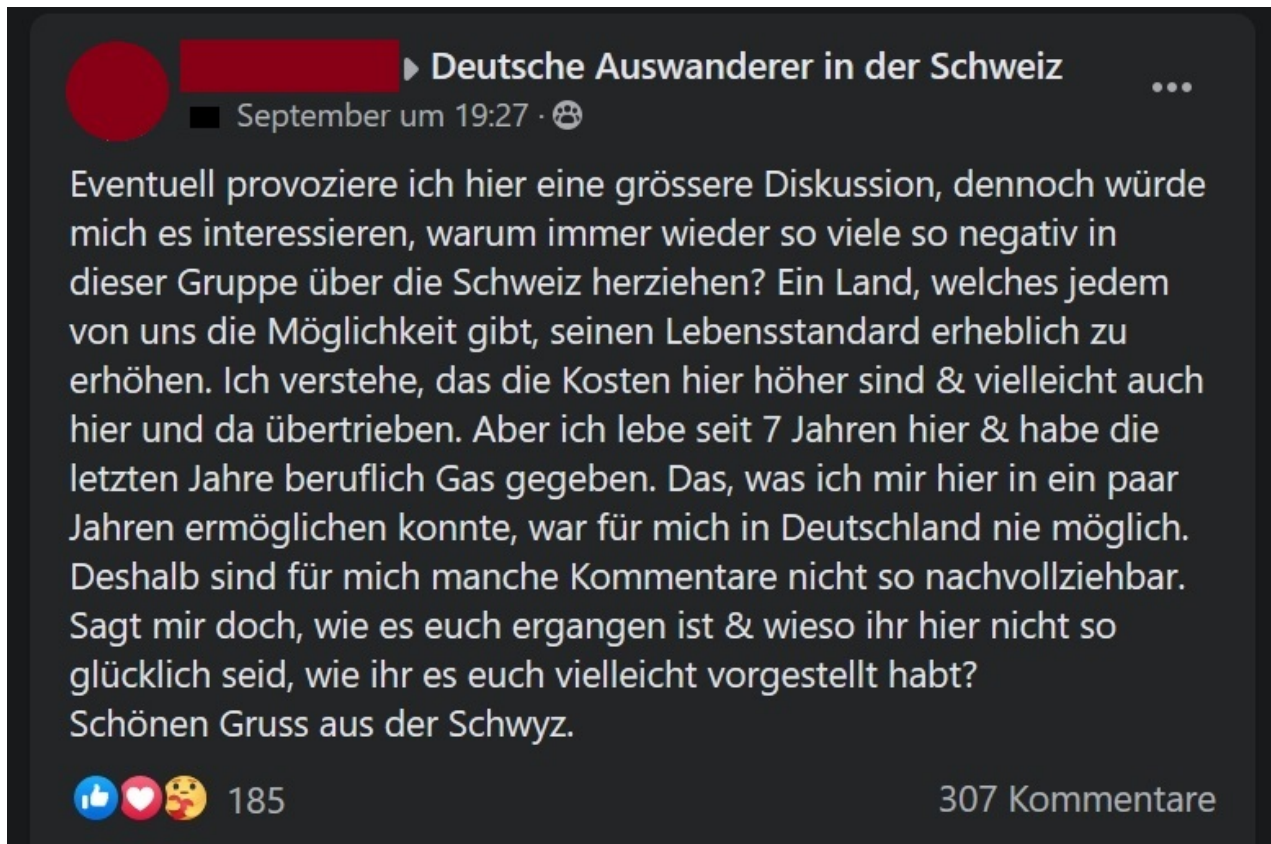


A member of the group looking to identify the Swiss indigenous sport Hornussen; a player from one team hits a sort of puck, called “Hornuss”, while the other team has to block and prevent the puck from landing inside the field with shingles. Copyright: Facebook.

The group was founded in 2013 and currently has almost 11'000 members. It is a private group, meaning new members must be approved by administrators before they can join and view the group's posts. Despite the title, members do not have to

be German emigrants; many members are not yet or no longer living in Switzerland, or they are Swiss nationals with a German spouse.

The group is very active with over 100 posts a day and used to organize regulars' tables in different cities all over Switzerland before the surge of SARS-CoV-2. The usual conversation topics range from bureaucratic issues – such as registering a new address for a vehicle, recognition of various educational degrees, or the best health insurance – to more social and political subjects – such as the recent popular vote, the search for new friends or a community of likeminded people, or recurrent discussions about High German and Swiss German. Initially, the focus of the group was much more on creating community: finding new friends in a new home and going for a beer. Nowadays, discussions have become heated and are often polarized – with those who successfully “made it” in Switzerland on one side, and those who struggle, be it with certain cultural differences, xenophobia or financial problems, on the other side – with neither side really listening to the other.



A member addresses negative remarks that have been made about Switzerland and sparks an extensive discussion. Copyright: Facebook.

At first, I joined the group only to find interviewees willing to participate in my research. It was only with time that the Facebook group came more into focus for its function as a replacement for regulars' tables and to observe opinion trends. In times of limited public meetings, having this kind of forum immensely boosted my understanding of the community.

Personal approach and emerging problems

I contacted the group's admin and briefly introduced myself and my project before I asked for permission to join the group. I was open about my position as a researcher

and disclosed that I was mainly interested in the group because of my research. After I was accepted into the group, I posted my search for interviewees but kept the post short, expecting to add details and further explain my project individually to those interested either in comments or private messages.

My affiliation with the University of Hamburg was made clear in my first post; however, there were multiple people insinuating that I was a reporter for various different Swiss or German journals or TV stations, with the goal to either badmouth Switzerland or German immigrants to Switzerland, respectively. Because my appeal did not look like what he expected from empirical research, one person was afraid I was a secret Unilever product marketing employee covertly trying to introduce a new product. While I did reveal my nationality to the admin, I did not mention it in my inquiry. Because of that, many people presumably concluded that I must be German based on my affiliation to the University of Hamburg, or Swiss because of my current location (Bern, Switzerland), and made accusations following their conclusion.

I had never experienced such strong rejection from strangers, and I did not understand where that kind of mistrust was coming from. However, it was apparent that there must be some underlying issues that at least some of the members were sharing. During some of my first interviews, participants explained that journalists had “infiltrated” the group before and publicized their discussions in a very popular daily and free tabloid. Subsequently, comments in the online version of the tabloid were often Germanophobic, and subjectively led to a rise of xenophobic remarks towards my interviewees.

I am now faced with the problem that the group has provided me with incredibly valuable insights, which might also show negative sides of German immigrants or strengthen stereotypes against Germans. Especially because of the group’s prior experiences, I feel ethically inclined not to use this material. Some statements or sentiments are not dependent on people from the Facebook group; however, some

topics were only controversially discussed within this group. Even if I do not disclose the source of this material, which is in itself problematic, any negative coverage of Germans in Switzerland could lead to xenophobic reactions. Additionally, while I originally disclosed my role as a researcher, I have no right of usage for any of the posts in the group, nor were posts made knowing I was present. Thus, I need to evaluate how to use the data I acquired through the group, if at all.

More common problems with online research

A completely different set of problems that emerged using Facebook was a lack of personal contact, and with it an insight into people's lives. Switzerland never issued strict no-contact policies. Restaurants and nonessential shops had to close for a short period, and gathering in large groups was prohibited. However, small gatherings and private visits were always possible. People certainly were more cautious in general and tried to limit social contacts, which explains part of the hesitation to meet in person. However, many people who rejected meeting me in person admitted that SARS-CoV-2 was just an excuse. Rather, they felt uncomfortable or even scared to allow a stranger into their home to conduct an interview. The anonymity of the internet made me a stranger, compared to Berlin, where my inquiry through a known club made me more trustworthy. In Berlin, even though I had never met any of my informants prior to the interview, I was always invited to my informants' homes. Being in their homes brought up unexpected topics that neither of us would have ever picked out as a central theme.

Final thoughts

To end this contribution on a brighter note, I want to emphasize that I met many great people during my research. After seeing the negative reactions to my initial

inquiry, I was often met with apologies from interviewees. They participated specifically to display another side of German immigrants in Switzerland. They wanted me to know that the stereotypical German immigrant was not all there was. When I talked about the disadvantage of not being able to see people's homes, some interviewees showed me their homes – phone in hand, answering questions about certain objects – while others invited me to visit them later on. Ultimately, most of my informants were reliable, informative and charming, and I would have loved to have the opportunity to accompany them personally and for a longer period.

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