

THIS BOOK: chapter description.

Approaching *la chance* and *la chance*.

Three blind people examine an elephant by the means of touch. They do not know they are dealing with an elephant. They investigate by the means of touch. They compare the surface and the structure of what they touch to what they know and conclude accordingly: “It’s a snake”. “It’s a rope”. “It’s a tree”. “It’s a fan”. The elephant consists of a snake and a rope and a tree (even four trees) and a fan (but only at times: sneezes, breathes or does other elephant things). Though the results of the men’s analysis seem incommensurable (compare Kuhn 1962), all these elements make an elephant. The parts, and the whole. But also, how the parts speak to the whole and vice versa. The elephant is only complete in its relations and connections.

“Methods, after all, are not neutral devices” (Hine 2005, 7). In other words, the methods we apply in order to see our research object define the way we see our research object in the end. In that sense, we do not see *la chance* as it is, but *la chance* how it appears through a particular method or lens. Examining *la chance* with this approach, all we are going to end up with is particularities. We won’t find *la chance* (the elephant). We only find single *la chances* (a snake, a tree...).

The empirical phenomenon of *la chance* is an experience (phenomenology), a practical accomplishment (ethnomethodology), a narrative (narrative analysis) ... *La chance* is all of these things and not just one in contrast to the others. *La chance* is defined by the way a person sees it. And yet, though different to each and every individual, *la chance* is out there – not as a pattern, not as one phenomenon, not as an experience... – *la chance* is out there in relation. Therefore, this book is an attempt to describe *la chance* in relation. I am blind and I approach *la chance* by listening to those who conclude “it’s *la chance*” and examine how they came to these conclusions.

What are university graduates dealing with when they are dealing with *la chance*? And what are we dealing with when we are dealing with *la chance*? What can I learn about the world if I take *la chance* into account? Through the exploration of these relations in which *la chance* emerges, i.e. between graduates and researchers, individuals and all of us, between Bamako and the world, this book offers a unique view into what we take for granted.

This book is an ethnography (part one) and an assemblage (part two).

Part One of the book ethnographically situates the empirical phenomenon of *la chance* in graduates' lives in Bamako. Part Two is an assemblage (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987) which sets out to analyze the phenomenon of *la chance* and develops a conceptual framework of *la chance*. It is based on graduates' knowledge accessed through narrative interviews.

As a method, the combination of both approaches helps me describe and grasp the (in)stability of *la chance*. Whereas the ethnography empirically situates *la chance* in graduates' lives, the assemblage is a tool which epistemologically accounts for emergence and, therefore, captures the general logic of *la chance*, while keeping it open.

The second part of the book is in the form of an assemblage which allows it to be entered at any point, encouraging an explorative reading experience. Offering the schemes extracted from coding with MaxQDA, and a map for orientation, you will be able to move around in the book, not reading it in a linear fashion, but moving through its parts at your own pace and according to what you would like to read about.

Let me explain:

To me, *la chance* is a fascinating and continuous puzzle, an omnipresent token in my thinking and, ultimately, a provider of a career in the social sciences up to this point.

My first answer to the question of "What is *la chance*?" is inspired by ethnomethodological thinking (see Chapter 4 and 5. Layer One). This first layer offers a systematic account of what *la chance* is to university graduates in Bamako, i.e. prerequisites, sprouts and outcomes. Overall, *la chance* emerges as a product of graduates making sense of circumstances that do not make sense. I continue with a second investigation of that very same question "What is *la chance*?" two years later. Of course, I did not start from scratch here, but used the data I had organized during my initial research process.

And whereas the first time I concluded “It’s a fan!”, the second time, my conclusion sounds more like “It’s a tree!”.

Thus, the picture I will be able to paint is a bit more complete, yet far from being comprehensive and far from being clearer. Both conclusions are far from “It is an elephant!” However, put together and in relation (see Assemblage), they show that *la chance* is not only part of graduates’ lives in Bamako and of my life, but also inherent in the research process.

To you, *la chance* might be the same, but chances are you draw your own conclusions about *la chance*. My mission here is twofold: It is to make visible how both graduates account for *la chance* and how I see *la chance*, but also to encourage you to develop your own understanding of *la chance*. This is what “The assemblage of *la chance*” in the second part of the book attempts to accomplish. It provides both the conclusions and constraints resulting from my own thinking and opportunities for you to explore by yourself and draw conclusions of your own.

Part One: Ethnography of *La Chance*. Or, What Graduates Know and What They Know They Don’t Know.

The first part of the book ethnographically situates the empirical phenomenon of *la chance* in graduates’ lives in Bamako.

Chapter 1: Situating *La Chance* in Knowledge.

What do university graduates know about their society in relation to the national labor market? And how do they account for that knowledge?

Uncertainty is inherent to action, since the outcomes of action are never fully predictable. “We all navigate” (Vigh 2009). However, when navigating uncertainty, people know and understand their environment as they go along; they have to be able to analyze and evaluate it. Navigation requires knowledge, which is essential to certainty. In accordance with the main concern of the sociology of knowledge, I understand knowledge as “everything that passes for ‘knowledge’ in society” (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 26), and that includes “common-sense ‘knowledge’ rather than ‘ideas’” (ibid. 27). Examining graduates’ common-sense knowledge about their everyday lives and the Malian society, I show how they make sense of an environment that appears static for the most part and and

then suddenly moves sometimes. I argue that uncertainty is about knowledge, which includes both what is known and what is known to be unknown.

There are official systems of job distribution, but nevertheless graduates know that getting an employment is actually *la chance*. I examine “le bras long” (“the long arm”, with reference to social networks) and “le concours” (the national system for the distribution of employment in the civil service). We will encounter both as cases of ordinary and extraordinary situations, i.e. situations in which graduates find themselves knowing about the circumstances that led to the situation at hand (knowledge about the presence of knowledge) and knowing they do not know about these very circumstances (knowledge about the absence of knowledge). The commonly used expression “l’homme propose, Dieu dispose” (man proposes, God provides) accounts for graduates’ knowledge of what they do not know. This intersection between what graduates know they know and know they do not know is right where *la chance* kicks in.

Chapter 2: Situating *La Chance* in Graduates’ Everyday Lives.

Graduates — who are these people? What are their questions? What do they know (they don’t know)?

In this chapter, I investigate the relationship between graduates and situations that raise questions for them in order to find out what they know and what they know they don’t know. The focus on everyday situations in individuals’ lives allows me to relate the known and the unknown and in doing so carve out challenges of everyday life. We will see that the unknown is not the counterpart of the known, but a part of it. Ultimately, I use these situated empirical accounts and questions as an entry point in approaching conceptual unknowns.

The first part of this ethnographic chapter starts off with vignettes (a soccer game and a wedding) connecting the two respective protagonists with each other (Madou and Amadou, Simone and Safiatou), followed by an introduction of each university graduate individually with a short biography and a vignette accounting for an everyday situation I extracted from participant observation. The fragmented character of this part of the chapter allows the reader to get to know the four graduates exploratively just like they get to know *la chance* in the next part of the book.

The second part of this chapter presents situations that raise questions for the graduates introduced above. The sections are arranged according to

questions highlighting aspects of their professional and family lives, as well as their temporal dimension, i.e. present and future.

Part Two: Assemblage of *La Chance*. Or, The Emergence of *La Chance* in the Encounter.

The second part of the book is an assemblage, which sets out to analyze the phenomenon of *la chance* and continues to develop a conceptual framework of *la chance*. This part is based on graduates' knowledge accessed through narrative interviews.

Chapter 3: A Manual.

What is an assemblage? How is it used in this book and in relation to *la chance*?

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: The reader is directly addressed and provided with a map and manual for orientation in the assemblage and an invitation to explore. For orientation, I describe the following two chapters (chapters 4 and 5), their layers and tracings, which are based on different methodologies. I further invite readers to explore the assemblage either in a linear way, which then tells the story of a journey of discovery documenting my research process, or in a fragmented way, which will allow readers to explore *la chance* on their own.

Overall, the content and the shape of an assemblage allows us to get from a perceived idea of *la chance* and its elusive character towards a systematics of the unknown. The assemblage of *la chance* has two layers which guide us through chapters four and five.

In the first layer, I approach the questions: "What is *la chance*? And what does *la chance* do?", applying Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), which helps me to systematically account for graduates' knowledge. Scanning the devices that members, i.e. graduates, employ describing *la chance*, I focus on predicates (in order to find out what *la chance* is in chapter one) and activities (in order to find out what *la chance* does in chapter two). All in all, MCA shapes the first layer of analysis, which I call systematization of *la chance*.

In the **second layer**, I revisit this systematization of my data. This time playfully exploring the accounts' contents, I go through them looking for

conceptual clues independent of the Bamako context. Later on, I arrange these clues which account for the emergence of *la chance* (in chapter 4) and *la chance* in the encounter (in chapter 5).

At the end of each section, I offer **tracings**, which summarize my findings and abstract from them. I use the word tracing because I understand that the map allows for more connections in addition to the ones I see and it is up to the reader to add to the assemblage.

Chapter 4: Emergence Of La Chance: Types and Relations.

What is *la chance*?

Layer 1 (L1). Systematization of *la chance*.

To graduates in Mali, *la chance* is common sense. Common sense is “just life in a nutshell” (Geertz 1975, 7) and it “lies so artlessly before our eyes it is almost impossible to see” (ibid. 25). This layer makes *la chance* visible as it analyses *la chance* as a members’ category.

Conducting Membership Categorization Analysis, which originates in ethnomethodology, I present a systematization of graduates’ knowledge of *la chance*, which consists of three types: prerequisites, sprouts, and outcomes. Prerequisites are constituted by graduates’ social context, their families, the environment they grew up in, and their education. Graduates possess prerequisites which have either been assigned to or accomplished by them. Prerequisites have the potential to further enable *la chance*, namely, sprouts of *la chance*. Sprouts of *la chance* are opportunities; they appear and they need to be identified by graduates. Sprouts potentially advance new paths which can be established by graduates as they turn sprouts of *la chance* into outcomes. Outcomes of *la chance* are opportunities grasped and transformed by graduates. Employment contracts based on an internship or the successful participation in a *concours* are instances graduates refer to as *la chance*.

Layer 2 (L2). *La chance* in relation.

In this second layer, by means of an explorative content analysis, I show how *la chance* emerges in relation to others and to oneself, to what is taken for granted and the everyday as well as to what is not *la chance* and *la malchance*.

We will see that:

La chance is the exception, not the norm.

La chance is to accomplish something highly unlikely.

La chance is the preferred option, not just any option.

Drawing from the relational character of *la chance*, I examine the unequal distribution of *la chance*. We see that *la chance* plays by its own rules and therefore cannot be enforced or predicted by graduates. Rather, *la chance* emerges between structural and agentive factors. Furthermore, we learn that there is an important difference between the agency of a graduate and the agency of *la chance*. Whereas graduates' agency is constituted by practices of preparation for *la chance* and its identification as well as its transformation, *la chance's* agency is characterized by its presence and its absence. In other words, the agency of *la chance* reveals itself in its emergence.

Chapter 5: Encounter: The Practice of Opening Up *La Chance* and The Game of *La Chance*.

What does *la chance* do? How is *la chance* accessed?

Layer 1 (L1). Opening up *la chance*.

Led by the question of how graduates open up *la chance* and again by applying MCA, I reveal that most of the activities surrounding *la chance* are bound to sprouts of *la chance* (see chapter four). Sprouts of *la chance* are a bit like serendipitous events, which cannot be planned, so “[a]ll we can do is [...] put ourselves into a favorable position to profit by unexpected occurrences” (Merton 2004, 191). In other words, sprouts are special; they are a rupture of the everyday, which is why they require an explanation.

I present graduates' practices, “looking for *la chance* (sprouts)” or preparation, “finding *la chance* (sprouts)” or identification and “working with *la chance* (sprouts)” or transformation. Graduates “looking for *la chance*” anticipate *la chance* in a concrete or abstract manner and prepare for it accordingly. These practices of preparation are conducted in the present based on their prerequisites, but they are geared towards the future – towards a sprout of *la chance*. Graduates identify and evaluate them, and again, graduates' ability to do so depends on their preparation. Once identified, graduates work on the sprout's transformation into a concrete and anticipated outcome. In contrast to preparation, transformation is not an activity directed toward a

sprout of *la chance*, but a response to a sprout. The intersection of these two kinds of activities is marked by the identification of a sprout of *la chance*.

Layer 2 (L2). The game of *la chance*.

Drawing from the clues extracted in layer two through an explorative content analysis, I develop the idea of the game of *la chance*, which is not about winning, but about playing.

La chance is found in the encounter, i.e. in the relationships and in the collaboration between the players. I describe the players and their relation to *la chance*. I focus in particular on the relationship between player one and *la chance*, which is characterized by knowledge and practices of deciding, preparing, seeing and influencing.

Furthermore, I introduce various plays (workplace, friendship, business, success, by-product and parenthood) in which *la chance* emerges in the encounter between the players. This is also where we find out about the difference between having *la chance* and having the ability to have *la chance*, the co-constitutive relationship between the players characterized by the difference between players seeing and being seen as well as the interchangeability of players one and two. Ultimately, I use these considerations to illuminate what is unknown to the players.

I argue that the practice of opening up *la chance* is a game, a “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (Suits 2014 (1925), 43). To say that graduates are playing the game of *la chance* has three implications: (1) *La chance* matters within the game only (prelusive goal). (2) The game of *la chance* has constitutive rules. (3) The game of *la chance* is played voluntarily (lusive attitude). As a result of the discussion of these points in dialogue with the empirical material, we will see that graduates play the game of *la chance* because they want to, not because they have to. We further see that graduates do not obey the rules of the labor market which is ultimately targeted to procuring employment, but the rules of the game of *la chance* targeted to the continuation of play. In doing so, they play with the rules of the labor market. Playing the game of *la chance*, graduates know they cannot win against the background of the labor market. However, within the game of *la chance*, they do succeed and thereby appropriate the labor market.