

# Researching the other: the use of social distance in Critical Psychology research in France

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## Abstract

Using examples from the fieldwork from two different studies, one in Sociology and the other in Psychology, we analyse how interactions in the field impact the resulting data. We analyse situations of incertitude in the field through the lens of social distance in order to understand their transformation into an epistemological tool of study. Our analysis is situated at the intersection between theoretical and methodological elaboration and highlights the asymmetries between the researcher and the research participant. A framework of Critical Psychology in France apprehends these epistemological shifts in the research process.

*Keywords:* Social distance, positioning, critical methodology, epistemology

## 1. Social distance as a means of practicing Critical Psychology in France

We aim to illustrate how our sites of qualitative fieldwork call for a critical research methodology. Taking into consideration how the analytical lens and the research object mutually construct one another, we explore how social processes such as stigmatisation can be activated in the researcher/research participant relationship that reveals, or even creates, social distance. Drawing from two fieldwork-based qualitative studies, we use the analysis of social distance to explore two examples of research in Critical Psychology in France.

We focus on two dimensions of social distance: when the researcher is not a member of the group being studied, and when inequalities exist within the relationships between researcher and participant (Bonnet, 2008). How are data and academic borders influenced by interactions between researchers and research participants? Specifically, we draw upon interactions in which there was resistance in against our being accepted, and from which, which we can explore how social distance was strategically used. This illustrates, both the social relationships at the core of the critical research process, and how multiple academic disciplines are needed to render social distance analytically useful. First, examples are drawn from a Sociological study<sup>1</sup> that examined systems of sex categories amongst transsexual

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<sup>1</sup>Based on the doctoral work “The Study of Category Changes in the Context of Sex Change: Between individual experiences and public action” by Alexandra Levasseur, PhD candidate Department of Sociology, Université Lyon 2, France.

people. Secondly, we use examples from a study in Social Psychology<sup>2</sup> that sought to understand the transmission of gender identity between parents and children in a migration context. Both studies highlight how power relations are activated by differing social attributes between the researcher and the participant. These illustrations of how social distance gives way to methodological and theoretical adjustments aims to underline how we are summoned to go beyond the boundaries of our respective disciplines to practice Critical Psychology in France.

## 2. Social distance as a theoretical lens

Our practice of Critical Psychology begins by taking social distance into account. We consider social distance as an extension of self-reflexivity, a topic central to classical Anthropology since it first interrogated the implication of the researcher in the analysis and the construction data collected amongst out-groups. Indeed, the work of Malinowski (1967/1985), Adam *et al.* (1980), Van Maanen (1988), Kilani (1994) among others, highlight research topics from objectivity to participatory observation that question the way in which field-based data is collected and produced. For example, the necessity to understand the point of view of the research participant through their own socio-cultural codes and references is a classic point made in research manuals, soliciting the researcher to be reflexive about their own codes and references (De Sardan, 2008). Self-reflexivity, rather than simply describing the field (Pottier *et al.*, 2003) requires taking the conditions of the field into account (Agier, 2005, Fassin, 2005). Furthermore, self-reflexivity includes exploring the negotiations at play within the dialogues that preclude and include the production of data (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Finally, self-reflexivity can even be extended to analyse the disciplinary stakes that are expressed in the production of research data (Hacking 1999, Shinn & Ragouet, 2005; Dafermos & Marvakis, 2006). Therefore, reflecting upon social codes and references can be constituted as an operational tool for elaborating and questioning the construction of the process. By characterizing the relation to the research participant, reflexivity can also be used to analyse the relationship that the researcher has with neighbouring disciplines and their use in the theoretical production and the methodology in Critical Psychology.

Secondly, our practice of Critical Psychology applies a self-reflexive analysis to the specific institutional context in which we have been trained as young scholars. Our university has a conflicting theoretical heritage that in turn impacts our methodological approach to carrying out research.

Since the 1960's, a close proximity between Psychology and Sociology evolved at our university through the development of a Feminist Research Centre, the "Louise Labé Centre"<sup>3</sup>. The relationship between activism and the social sciences at our university, notably through the bias of gender analysis, trained us to move between different disciplines to account for the analysis of inequalities and asymmetries. The institution can be considered as an instrument from which and within which social actors forge themselves to regulate their interactions and obtain the minimum cooperation necessary to follow through on collective objectives whilst maintaining their individual autonomy (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977, p.197). The friction that results from the intersection of different disciplines of knowledge, power

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the doctoral work "Gender Identity Transmission Among Migrant Families in France" by Rebecca Weber, PhD candidate, Department of Social Psychology, Université Lyon 2, France.

<sup>3</sup> The Louise Labé Center is currently directed by Professor Patricia Mercader, Université Lyon II, for more information please visit: <http://sites.univ-lyon2.fr/centre-louise-labe/7-Presentation.html>.

dynamics between scholarly actors, and the way they are regulated, nourishes the idea of “crisis” as a theoretical approach (Dorlin, 2005). Therefore, to understand the multiple levels of interactions in the field, we must study the succession of various systems of knowledge and their related power struggles that have marked the institution to which the researcher belongs.

This contextualisation of our academic training is a means to advocate a critical interdisciplinary reflection on the construction and impact of institutional realities in the social sciences. This heritage brings us to consider the social dynamics that go from the scientific to the profane sphere which influences the knowledge produced within specific paradigms. The following analysis of the interactions between researcher and subject are contextualised within this institutional heritage.

### **3. Social distance in the field: two examples of Critical Psychology in France**

We consider that the interactions between researcher and participant condition the results of the research, which can bring the researcher to revisit the definition of their research object. We are particularly interested in examining data produced in moments when the researcher and the participant interact in a situation of friction or uncertainty. We ask ourselves what personal, structural, social positions and identities are revealed by interactions marked by lack of mutual understanding and potential discomfort? By taking the notion of social distance into account, we will look at such interactions that therefore question the certainty of our position as researcher. We examine the way in which the intersection of social attributes mobilises both the researchers’ and the participants’ social identities that highlight social dynamics. By allying notions of Psychology and Sociology, we will specifically examine how these difficulties are related to dimensions of social attributes that emerge as frictions during the interaction. Negotiations and adjustments in the methodology emerge as a necessary response to the interactions that take place in the field.

The first encounters between researcher and potential participants mark the beginning in a process of confidence-building, which can already underline differences in social statuses that evoke stereotypes related to the ways such differences are treated in the given society. With such subtle elements at play, how does the researcher contact and begin the dialogue, and construct the relationship of confidence to carry out the research?

#### **3.1. Social distance as a source of conflict**

In the first example from the field, we sought out participants for our research on categories of sex and transsexuality by attending public debates on transidentities organised by non-profit community organisations. Having defined our theoretical question through an exchange of academic and activist environments, we presented ourselves at the debate as an LGBT activist.

##### **Extract from our field notes**

“During a debate held by a “trans<sup>4</sup>” organisation, the presenters spoke about the construction of femininity and masculinity and then cited the famous Simone de

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<sup>4</sup> We will continue to use the term “trans” which is an umbrella term that regroups various denominations. For further reading please refer to Bereni, *et al.*, 2008.

Beauvoir assertion “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Then they made an opposition between what they called “bio<sup>5</sup>” and “trans” people. Not understanding the content of this discussion, we asked why they made this opposition, in particular following the Beauvoir statement. We said that for us, both this opposition and the Beauvoir citation reified the distinction between the categories of biological/cultural and innate/acquired. We instead proposed the categories “declared sex at birth” and “chosen sex”. We believe that such a framework allows for a wider and more open discussion without restricting certain people more than others to the category of “bio” and those to “social.” Instead, this allows one to distinguish those who decide to change sex categories while the rest remain within the category of declared sex. Instead the presenters responded with their critique of what they thought was our “shock” at their use of the term “bio.” Our proposition was rejected and furthermore, the presenters expressed their perception of us as “shocked” because, they assumed, we must be heterosexual. In this context, being categorized as heterosexual not only made us an outsider but also in a dominant position to the group.

Having been perceived as outsiders appears to have been what rendered making contact with potential research participants so difficult. First, there appears to have been a misunderstanding in regards to the opposition made between the feminist constructivist reference, as relayed by the quote from Beauvoir, and a return to biological essentialism made by the opposition “bio”/“trans” which dominates. Their perception of us as being “shocked” made us wonder if they had categorised us as being part of an activist movement that dominates their own? Was there an implicit comparison between minority groups to determine who has more social recognition? In other words, having identified ourselves as an LGBT activist may have identified us with a social movement that is more normative, and therefore more powerful, than their own.

A second element to be considered is that of gender performance and normativity. While our distance from normativity is not visible, the activists of the “trans” organisation perform their discrepancy with gender norms and sex categories by physical modifications. The “trans” activists projected us as being heterosexual and therefore normative, most likely due to our dress codes and *corporal hexis* (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 117), which they considered “straight” because not far enough away from the norm, or rather not close enough to their own norms. Having been classified as different from them, we were not accepted into the social group and were unable to carry out further fieldwork. Finally, it is essential that we contextualise the history of scientific disciplines that appear to directly inform the interactions in the field. There are four principal conceptualisations of femininity and masculinity<sup>6</sup> in the context of “trans” that range from a medical discourse that considers transsexuality pathological to a feminist discourse in which masculinity is described as being rejected. The interactions from the field bring us back to the analysis of the impact of the academic discipline on social reality as we will observe how elements inherited from the past are incorporated, both institutionally but also by actors participating in the research. Our “critical knowledge” of previous theoretical work on transsexuality serves as a base framework for understanding that which appeared to have been mobilized during the interactions in the field.

<sup>5</sup> As noted, the term is not “biological” but “bio” which in French is slang for organic agricultural production in which there is no hormonal modification. “Bio,” as here applied to people, refers to a person who has neither transgressed gender norms nor claims to be transsexual.

<sup>6</sup> For further reading see Ebing, 1886; Cauldwell, 1949; Benjamin, 1966; Money, 1995 ; Ekins, 1996; Devor, 1995; France, 2002; Kockott & Fahrner, 1998; Halberstam, 1998; Hale, 1998; Feinberg, 1996 ; Bornstein, 1994.

This experience of being perceived as socially too distant and the participants use of the distance to withhold according us legitimacy, in turn resulted in our need to reevaluate our methodology. Whilst we were frustrated because we were not heard or understood during the debate, we identified with the feelings they themselves may have had when not given the right to speak nor the possibility to name and create their own experience. By assigning us to the group of “non-trans people,” we were implicitly linked with the outsider groups and institutions that stigmatise “trans” people. Furthermore, the classification “bio” is defined in relationship to “trans” which becomes the unit of measure. Speaking of “declared sex at birth” and “chosen sex” would, however, no longer allow for this definition nor this positioning in relation to how group membership is defined. This reversal appears to signify the power of being able to reappropriate the definitions of social categories. We can see how differentiated treatment that operates through societal gender regimes can be mobilized when a researcher is classified as an outsider and therefore as holding the power to potentially stigmatise.

In the end, this uncomfortable experience in the field allowed for new understanding as we considered their perception of our social distance as a signifier of meaning. Having been categorized as a member of the dominant group that stigmatises the population at hand, we no longer considered direct fieldwork to be an option. Social distance then brought upon a methodological shift, which allowed us to take a certain distance from the field and to theorize what is at play in the researcher/participant interactions. As a result, we did not carry out direct interviews or observations but instead studied written autobiographies.

### **3.2. The strategic use of social distance**

In the second study, we observe how researcher and participant’s perceptions of one another produce social categories and social distance. The context of the study is the transmission of gendered social identity amongst Sub-Saharan African migrant families settled in France. We carried out interviews with migrant parents and their children both in their homes and in an Evangelist church where we simultaneously conducted ethnographic observations of religious practice. To develop this application of Critical Psychology we intersect how the field site can activate our own hidden stereotypes, social asymmetries and perception of being stigmatised. A dynamic of exchange and obligation emerges within the interaction between the researcher and the participant, highlighting a strategic use of social distance.

#### *3.2.1. Stereotypes as a first base of exchange*

Our first interactions in this field were marked by stereotypes, whose deconstruction proved essential to unravel preconceived ideas and use them as a starting point for contextualising this social space. Firstly, the geographical location activated our own stereotypes, which informed our initial interactions with research participants. The research field site indeed is a social space that is not mixed in terms of social classes, primarily composed of working class people of immigrant origin who carry the stigmatisation of ethnicity that underline the class system in France. The urban location in the downtrodden suburbs of a French city, activated a series of representations rooted in films and video clips that portray such spaces as dangerous, violent, and dominated by groups of rioters who sell drugs. Such televised images combined with the inequalities materialized by structural differences (quality of the schools, ethnic stigmatisation, public transport services, access to training programs) added to our stereotypical representations of the research participants. When we first went to participant’s homes to carry out interviews or to the Evangelical church for observations we were fearful of venturing into dangerous neighbourhoods. However, in contrast to such stereotypes about the

potential violence in these neighbourhoods, we did not witness violence or the exchange of drugs throughout our research.

These stereotypes highlight the pre-existing distance between the minority group studied and the majority group to which we belong. Concretely, they translate into the impossibility of an immediate identification between the researcher and the participant. Whilst in a position equated with the power to stigmatise, we tried to transform such stereotypes into material for use in the framework of “good social distance” (Bonnet, 2008), by which differentiation occurs, without reifying stereotypes. Through time, we were able to deconstruct our own prejudices and favour the construction of a research relationship based on academic distance and social ties. We examined what these stereotypes reveal about logics of inequality and social asymmetries, which in turn create the context in which identity is inscribed and produced by social position (Capdevila, 2011). Each of the actors in the field became a complex subject, irreducible to different social identities that could characterise them, and our interactions moved beyond the research relationship initially established by the dichotomy of researcher/participant.

### 3.2.2. *Social asymmetries and perceived categorisation*

Equipped with the deconstruction of our initial stereotypes, we sought to analyse the interactions without reactivating the different asymmetries but rather using them as a means of analysis. We developed an analytical lens to account for the ways in which we positioned, and were positioned by, the participants. For example, one interviewee positions us as “*a white French woman.*” Considering we are not French we understand this categorisation as an assimilation of the idea that non-white people, such as the participants, are not perceived as being French. By our physical attribute of being white, we appear to physically recall the norms expected by the interviewee, which informs the content of their discourse. In other words, their use of social categories highlights how they may feel perceived in France by white French people. To assume that we are French because our skin is white engages them in a relationship that opposes the categories of foreigner/native within the specific boundaries of contemporary France. Being attributed to the dominant group meant being perceived of having the power to stigmatise members in the minority social group. These differences appear to have mobilised distance amongst participants: as a member of the dominant majority group, are we going to stigmatise them? Will we assign them as members of a specific minority group? Will we position them into specific social identities? Such a connection made between French nationality and white skin colour speaks to the relationship between native/foreigner stimulated by our presence in the field site.

Whilst the participants projected us into certain categories with the threat of being stigmatised, some projections however are not related to social attributes but belief systems. For example, in the context of observations in a church, we were perceived as a religious believer, our inscription as a member of the in-group based on symbolic meaning that has no physical or social manifestation. Their perception of our religious group membership appeared to condition our interactions, notably their perception of our capacity to listen and understand their experiences facilitated by the idea that we share their religious frame of reference. We strategically used this categorisation to create dialogue and build relationships with the churchgoers, which eventually lead to being able to carry out our ethnography. We tried to uphold different social positions to temporarily materialise imaginary interlocutors (Haas & Masson, 2006, p.81), such as provoked by a shared belief system. The shift in the social category attributed to the researcher by the participant allowed us to use our position,

and its social distance, to create a dialogue throughout the research process we accounted for and analysed the way in which we attributed one another to social categories, highlighting social identity processes at play.

### 3.2.3. *Exchange and obligation as a result of social distance*

As we have seen, social distance is not a necessary restraint on the research process, particularly when participants appropriate it to request exchanges for their involvement, or exploit it to reduce its effects or use it to negotiate the power relationship from the researcher to their favour (Bonnet, *op. cit.*). Therefore, each relationship of exchange participates in the creation of social ties woven between the different parties that builds a relationship of giving and obligation as a motor of action and commitment (Pihel, 2008; Mauss, *op. cit.*). We observed how participation in the study was sometimes followed by participants' spontaneous solicitation of their own requests. For example, we interviewed parents who asked us to help their children with their English, our native language, and others who wanted us to organise a cultural exchange for their children in our home country, or to bring them gifts from our vacation. Another young interviewee asked to practice her English together to help prepare for her high school exams. In the following excerpt from an interview, a participant asked for support in his administrative request for asylum in France:

***Excerpt from interview with Pierre<sup>7</sup> (P=Pierre, I=interviewer)***

*P: Thank you very much and maybe, one day when you will have the Ambassador or the Minister or the lawyer once you have your position do you think you will think one day of me, a man, a young twin who is an athlete*

*I: Yes*

*P: Think of me too to help me evolve in terms of my asylum to make me evolve in terms of my mentality to make me evolve in terms of my work...*

Here Pierre expresses multiple requests that during the interview we did not consciously take note of, they appeared only once the discourse analysis had been undertaken. His requests reveal how he invested his participation in our study as a potential relay that could help his administrative situation. Moreover, we observe how he positions us as a member of a privileged social category and therefore we will one day have professional interactions with people in high administrative positions such as with the actors that currently determine his legal status in France. As previously underlined, the object of this study, migration, highlights multiple social representations that are pre-existing in which our research is inscribed (the idea of the migrant, the context of migration). The above example of social distance rendered strategic bears witness to the explicit role of social reality, the subject's administrative needs for example, that cannot be left outside of the research context. The social distance between us appears immense. We begin as being perceived as an "alter-strict" (Haas & Masson, *op. cit.*) as there is no possible identification between us. However, far from a fixed and static asymmetry, the difference between our social attributes are marked and used by the participant for his own objectives. Our research interests intersect with his quest for administrative status, reinforced by his projection and use of the category of white French privilege that could be used to his benefit. Such respective interests shape the discourse produced in the interview and reveal the dynamics of the larger social context of privileged migration and migration for economic survival.

<sup>7</sup> Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

By taking into account both real and imagined social distance we are able to gain a wider perspective that goes beyond the recorded data. The different positions adopted and ascribed by the researcher and the participant reveal the dynamics of social interactions at work, inscribed in the social logics that frame, inhabit and restrain the research site (Jodelet, 2003; Devereux, 1980).

#### **4. The researcher perceived as the Other**

The question common to both studies is the following: who are we for the research participants? Visibly considered an “Other,” in first example the researcher is classified as heterosexual and therefore a threatening outsider, and in the second example, the researcher is perceived as belonging to the majority national group. In both contexts, categorisation as an “Other” appears to coincide with the participants’ perception that the researcher obtains the power to stigmatise in a social context in which both populations suffer from stigmatisation. Sometimes the perceived threat of stigmatisation is accurate, as observed with our own stereotypes associated to the urban setting of the second study. The exception occurs in the religious context in which the researcher is perceived, assumed to be a member of the in-group.

We have seen how categories related to sex (a “bio” person), or nationality (migrant) or even skin colour (French) brings us to the boundaries set by our theoretical frameworks to which we are sometimes limited if not by our own stereotypes. We adopted a double-sided approach to self-reflection that includes deconstructing our own prejudices and analysing how distance is strategically used. Looking at the ways in which social categories are called upon and created in specific contexts, we observe the effect and influence of stigmatisation in multiple contexts (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008). This theoretical intersectionality allowed us to adopt our methodological work to respond to the research questions.

To understand the perception that participants have of us requires that we reflect upon the production of critical knowledge based on the deconstruction of such perceptions. By using examples of friction mobilised by differences in social attributes, we have aimed to show how the meeting of different regimes of knowledge and power can nourish the idea of the “right distance” (Bonnet, 2008). Examining how social categories based on social attributes function, change and produce identities highlights how the research process reveals identity as a result of relationalities (Capdevila, 2011; Bhavnani & Haraway, 1994) produced in and by the context of our fieldwork.

Finally, it is not social distance in itself that interests us but rather the reflexive analysis that operates within these social interactions, themselves mobilised by distance. Such critical analysis allows us to understand the internal logic of the research context that becomes a methodological key. This reflexive analysis transforms social interactions into analysable data because a fuller account of the social world that is being studied is produced. By carrying out research in a framework of Critical Psychology, we aim to reflect the experience of the research participants that makes up, after all, the object itself of our studies.

These examples of Critical Psychology produced in France today highlight how we render social phenomena in the field operational by integrating them into our methodological and theoretical lens. Asking who we are for the research participants is an interdisciplinary exercise. Indeed, we observed how socio-economic and ethnic categories specific to France

make up a Sociological dimension to this question. Furthermore, in-group and out-group dynamics activated the psychosocial processes of recognition and social comparison that inform us more deeply on the interactions during the research. Finally, asking who we are for the Other, imagined or real, is indeed a question examined within the field of Clinical Psychology. Our duplicitous position, as perceived members of the dominant group and as scholars, influences the validity and analysis of our data and inspires us to further appropriate essential epistemological reflections.

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