

# Semi-Directive Interviews: The Intersectionality of Power Dynamics and Social Attributes

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We examined the role of gender in the construction of cultural identity and identity strategies put into effect by migrant women when transitioning from one culture to another in which the gender roles are contradictory<sup>1</sup>. Our theoretical research showed that gender is in fact an important element of the impact of socio-cultural changes for migrant women's identity strategies. However, the results of a series of semi-directive interviews demonstrated how, in the population we worked with, gender norms were notably stable across the social structures of the countries between which the interviewees migrated. This represented an invariant component of their cultural identity. Our fieldwork emphasized how identity strategies are activated when migrants are confronted with multiple asymmetrical relationships, specifically man/woman and native/other. Our statute as a white and occidental researcher, studying a population of African refugees in France, made the interviews themselves a space in which this very intersection of power relationships was expressed. In this paper we aim to bring to light the impact of the intersectionality of social attributes on research results, as manifested through the methodology of semi-directive interviews.

To study the impact of gendered sociocultural changes on women migrants, we started by examining the identity mechanisms that are put into effect by migrants. However, the results from our semi-directive interviews demonstrated how, in our population, gender norms were notably stable between the two countries social structures and thus represented an invariant component of the research participants' cultural identity. On the other hand, our fieldwork emphasized how identity strategies are activated when migrants are confronted with multiple asymmetrical relationships, specifically man/woman and native/other. This research allowed us to discover the identity strategies that are inspired by the intergroup interactions that accompany the migratory experience. Specifically, we were able to identify ways in which intergroup interactions appear during the interview and can influence research results.

As our point of departure we used the notion of cultural identity in which two processes are present: the protection of one's sense of self-worth and the maintenance of a sense of identity unity (Camilleri, 1990/2007). These mechanisms are chiefly put into effect when subjects experience the oppositions between "modern" and "traditional" societies (*ibid.*). To examine the effects of these hypothetical oppositions we studied Sub-Saharan African

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women refugees who had migrated to France. We chose three indicators with which we examined how this population might live in a new sociocultural model, specifically in relation to the gendered structure of the culture. First, we chose the indicator of work because the relationship between the social groups of men and women is everywhere characterized by the tension produced by labour divisions (Kergoat, 2002, Molinier, 2006). These divisions assign women to the private sphere, the reproductive domain where maternal practices are put into effect. This brings us to our second indicator, maternity, which helped us to understand the role of women in the cultures we studied. Our third indicator was the notion of legitimation in the framework of cultural references, as schemas of explanation can differ between cultures. These gender indicators helped us to examine how a migrant lived as a man or woman in their country of origin and then in their host country. We then reviewed these three indicators in the ensemble of countries studied and were able to conclude from our theoretical research that gender is in fact an important element of the impact of socio-cultural changes for migrant women's identity strategies (Mama, 2005, Solari, 2006, Oso-Casas & Garson, 2005, Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2004, Laoukili, 2005).

From our theoretical research, we hypothesized that the process of cultural changes would not only be specific to their experience of migration but would also be impacted by the fact they were refugees. In terms of our first indicator, work, we expected that African women would not experience a change in the content of their work when migrating to France, but in the shape of employment structures. We hypothesized that the sexual division of labour would persist between the two countries but that the remuneration structures would change. We hypothesized that the enlarged family system in the African countries would be replaced by the nuclear family structure and the French childcare system. As a result, we postulated that this could result in a change in the processes of transmission of the traditional model of femininity. In this context of change, we hypothesized that the religious cultural reference would remain a pillar: that the religion in the country of origin would both provide stability in terms of identity construction and be a way to transmit cultural practices to ones descendents.

Differences in the social relationships between men and women in different cultural systems could cause a disparity in the gendered cultural codes experienced during migration (Camilleri, 1990/2007). For migrants, this disparity could stimulate the development of identity strategies contributing to maintaining the first of the two processes we identified, namely a sense of identity unity. We thus chose to study a population of Sub-Saharan African women in France whom we expected to have experienced contradictions that result from such disparities, in terms of gendered sociocultural changes. In addition to being migrants our population was composed of political refugees due to our collaboration with a charity association. As refugees, our research participants all originate from countries that are experiencing serious conflicts, or even wars. Even if our central question did not define war as a factor of cultural difference, our fieldwork confirmed the omnipresence of war both in the social construction of the countries and in the definition of the role of women in their societies.

We conducted semi-directive interviews in the homes of our research participants. We hypothesized that gender roles in the African and French sociocultural systems would vary in terms of work and maternity, and that this would create contradictions that would then have an impact on migrant women's identity strategies. However, by taking into account the position of the researcher and the social dynamics present during research interviews; we were able to examine the multiple social attributes present in migrant women's identity strategies.

### **THE INTERVIEW AS SOCIAL INTERACTION**

We began our research with an interest in the impact of gendered sociocultural changes on migrant women, but as we conducted our fieldwork, it became apparent that gender did not emerge as a central theme during the interviews. In fact, the predominant element that came across out of the discourse analysis we conducted was the application of alterity to the notion of "foreigner". This imposes a dichotomy between "native" and "other" within which migrants themselves are stigmatised as "other". As we conducted the interviews we identified the predominant role of intergroup interactions in the activation of identity strategies. Where we had assumed the presence and relevance of a question centred on gender, we identified the preservation of a coherent sense of self within a context of migration from a dangerous world towards a more stable world. Our central hypothesis that changes in gendered sociocultural codes would impact women migrants did not appear relevant out of the interview results. It appeared that the population of women refugees with whom we carried out this research did not experience social interactions in terms of gender asymmetries. Taking into account our subjective role our interactions with our interlocutors allowed us to begin to apprehend the impact of intersectionality of social attributes on our research results.

We will now discuss how the interviews served as a framework to help us understand the intergroup interactions that appeared prominently throughout the discourse analysis. More specifically, we will first discuss our bias in the construction of our literary review and of our hypotheses. Then we will see how taking our subjective position into account permitted us to be more open to recognizing what was relevant to the research participants, as far as their experience of migration is concerned. In particular, by paying closer attention to the dynamics at play during the interviews, we were able to identify the identity strategies of assimilation and differentiation.

### **The Subjective Position of the Researcher**

The way in which we articulated gender in our central question points to our own subjective position as researchers: our own theoretical training is such that we tend to consider social relationships through the lens of critical gender analysis. As a result, our literary review work and our hypotheses reflected our training as well as our own sociocultural background. In fact, we identified ourselves to the "modern" cultural system as defined by Camilleri (1990/2007). By unravelling our *hidden representations* (Devereux, 1967/1980) of African countries, we identified our implicit prescription of "traditional"

characteristics to the group “women in Africa” as stereotypical. To flesh out these *hidden representations* we had to adopt a reflexive posture (Jodelet, 2003) in relation to both the theoretical study of the African countries examined, and our fieldwork. This led to a shift in our perception of these countries from a perspective inherited from our literary review, and towards a perspective that focuses on the relationship between these cultures and European cultures. For example, it was important to resist holding a fixed historical analysis on the statute of women in the African countries examined, a perspective that would hold to a static view of victimization. Rather, it was important to examine those strategies that refugee women put into place and that emphasize just how notions of crisis and victimization are situated in a historical and dynamic trajectory. Our examination of those strategies highlighted the fact that social power and identity construction are permanently negotiated. By working to detach ourselves from our original perspectives, rooted in projection, and from certain theoretical conclusions, embedded in precipitated interpretation, we were able to be more present to experience the discourse of the interlocutors who could then show us their principal objects of investment (Devereux, 1967/1980). This process of inversed acculturation (Laplantine, 1996, Jodelet, 2003) helped us to decentre our work from our own cultural practices to be able to integrate the subjects own cultural practices and thus to apprehend their signification from their own point of view. In order to achieve this, it was important to allow the research participants to both respond to our interview questions in the context of our hypotheses, and to allow them to speak on other subjects and rather than bring the interview back to our central questions. This allowed us to be able to hear the categories of language and of thought that structured their discourse without the filter of our own representations.

### **The Permanent Negotiation of Social Dissymetry**

Bourdieu (1993) explains how social proximity and familiarity can assure that non-violent communication takes place between the interviewer and the interviewee. This most likely occurs when there is a lack of interchangeability of social positions. In our fieldwork, while we didn't have any social proximity or familiarity, the dissymetry seemed to be in permanent negotiation throughout the interviews. For example, the question of war was not intended to be part of our research focus, yet it was the major reason for migrating to France for most of the participants to our research. Therefore, by asking about their migration experience we implicitly placed the question of war at the centre the interviews. Still, despite our dominant position as the interviewer in this fieldwork, the participants managed to avoid talking about war, all the while enriching the discussion on the themes that were pertinent for them. This can be seen as an example in the fluctuation of roles, the binary separation between dominant and dominated appearing as too simplistic to express our interactions and the intermediary roles that define them. As a result, we attempted to adopt a passive role during the interviews, to try to diminish the social dissymetry between us and the interviewees, while simultaneously letting our participants control what they did or did not want to share.

### **Our Role as Representative of the Dominant Group**

Minority and majority group dynamics appeared around ethnic identity during our interviews. As a white interviewer our presence seemed to evoke representations for the interviewees, who were black, illuminating certain aspects of the discourse analysis. The role in which those women put us, the *complementary role* (Devereux, 1967/1980), informed us on the configuration of their ethnic identity. Our interactions awoke certain dynamics around the asymmetry native/other through our interpersonal variables. Their representations of French people allowed us to understand that they perceived us as French (although we are not French, we are white and western), putting forward the weight of ethnic stigma. We understood the equation « white equals French » through their experience of stigma of skin colour as an expression of our *complementary role* in the interviews.

### **Alter-strict and social comparison**

In the situation of an interview, the ternary scheme “ego-alter-object” Moscovici (1970, 1984) positions the interviewee as the ego in relation to the research object in a way which is mediated by the alter (Haas & Masson, 2006), or researcher. This alter is can either be similar, “an alter ego”, or different, “an alter-strict”. Our interpersonal variables and the nature of the themes proposed during the interviews influenced in many ways the role of alter that the interlocutors gave us. Since we are white and occidental, our population did not perceive us as belonging to the same social group as them, nor could we experience, in a country like France where the dominant group is constituted of white westerners, ethnic stigmatization as they would. There also existed a difference in privilege in that our own migration to France from another western country represents a clearly reversible choice, whereas their experience is one of migration for survival with the possibility that it may never be reversible. This alone made our interest in the objectives of this research seem far from their own preoccupations about their experience of migration. As a result, no mutual identification was able to take place. They most likely represented us as an alter-strict, which in turn allowed us to take into account the social comparison that takes place in the interaction between a stigmatized group and the group that does the stigmatizing (native/other), as this interaction was present during our interviews.

## **RESULTS**

Because of this analysis on the subjectivity of the interview, we turned to the notions of social identity (Tajfel, 1981, Turner & Tajfel, 1986) and stigma (Lacaze, 2006) in the framework of social interactions between groups.

### **Between fidelity and integration**

In response to the experience of stigma, we identified that the participants to our research created a group that they would then be able to identify themselves to. In the interviews they described this group as “those Africans”. The imbalance produced by negative stigmatization therefore seemed to create a double phenomenon of favouritism of the out-group, “the French”, and a contestation of their in-group, “those Africans” (Jost & Burgess,

2000). In reaction to this asymmetry in intergroup relationships, they appeared to have developed identity strategies (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). In particular, we identified strategies of differentiation, to distance themselves from “those Africans”, as well as strategies of assimilation to bring them closer to “the French”. In addition, we identified how assimilation was considered by these women as an effort of individual will, as they repeated “one must integrate”, reflecting the need to appropriate the stereotypes present in the cultural common sense (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007). Additionally, this approach to integration reflects the appropriated of the ethos of individualism.

### **The stability of gender**

We found that the role of gender through our three indicators of work, maternity and cultural references was in fact stable throughout the migratory experience. It appeared that the change in the organization of work along gender roles as evoked in our hypothesis did not have a significant impact on our population. We found continuity in the sexual division of labour which provided a stable cultural code for these migrant women. We observed that this division of labour is based on asymmetrical relationships between the groups man/woman but also between the groups native/other. This intersectionality of intergroup relationships is at the origin of the identity strategies that the research participants put into place. In terms of maternity, we expected that our population of migrant women would experience cultural changes that were specific to their gender roles. However, they appeared to adhere to the concept of “universal motherhood” that doesn’t vary with cultural change: the role of the mother is to take care of children. The gendered role of childcare is attributed to being innate and is not questioned with their migration. This conception of “naturalist ideology” (Kergoat, 2002) is such that changes in gender codes did not stimulate identity strategies in this population who did not seem to experience asymmetrical relationships in terms of gender inequalities but rather in terms of ethnic status. With the loss of the enlarged family structures, recourse to religious practice appeared to provide a bridge with the culture of origin and in addition to psychological support for war-related traumas. Faced with the devastation of family structures, the religious framework is larger than international borders and appeared to take on the role of transmission of the “traditional” culture in the context of the “modern” culture. However, to compensate for the asymmetry produced by stigma, the participants to our research leaned upon this equilibrium, where gender represented a factor of stability. In the end, we were able to confirm that gender is central to the stability of the sexual division of labour, to the stability of naturalist ideology and to the sexualized maternal identity remaining intact.

### **EMERGING CONCLUSIONS: A THEORETICAL MIGRATION**

Having carried out this work and taking into consideration the position of the researcher we learned of the importance of multiple social attributes in migrant women’s identity strategies. Methodological intersectionality is the analysis that renders the mechanisms and influence of different factors of discrimination simultaneously visible, while identity

intersectionality is the combination of social hierarchies that frame, inhabit and constrain social actors (Mc Dowell, 2008). Methodological intersectionality brought us to pursue our own theoretical migration and to then apprehend the role of identity intersectionality in the studied population. Initially, the analysis of our own subjectivity within the construction of our literature review and our fieldwork revealed the importance of recognizing and integrating an ensemble of questions regarding the boundaries of our theoretical choices, and the interpersonal dynamics that we experienced in the field. We were able to see how the social interaction of the interview was in itself an instance of power negotiation. Subsequently, it is through the interlacing of multiple intergroup social relationships that migrant women develop and articulate identity strategies between ethnic and gendered identities. We identified a double movement (Jodelet, 2003) between our theoretical work and our fieldwork which allowed us to take the necessary distance from our hypotheses to be able to identify in what respects they were or were not relevant to the experience of the population studied. Importantly, instead of finding man/woman asymmetries at the heart of their identity strategies, we learned that the intersection of this first asymmetry with a second one, the native/other asymmetry, is what activated their identity strategies. In this work we learned that a double movement between fieldwork and theory could allow us to employ subjective elements of our interviews, as expressed through the intersectionality of power dynamics and social attributes, as tools for analysis. This led us to a theoretical migration that helped us better capture the identity strategies at play in this population of migrant women.

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