

## Migrant identities and cross-border dialogues

Round table:

New perspectives on qualitative analysis. Contribution to the analysis of migrant identities

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### Elaboration of categories for the qualitative analysis of dialogues and interviews.

#### Preliminary observation

The validity of a research design is measured in terms of the effectiveness of the methods used to collect and analyze the data to answer the study questions. This also applies to qualitative research. Therefore, on the one hand, the category or coding system for analyzing qualitative data is of crucial importance; on the other hand, it seems rather foolhardy to consider developing such systems without reference to the specific research questions.

Therefore, the following contribution can only elaborate very general suggestions for the development of a category system for interpreting verbal data from conversations with immigrants about their social situation and their identity problems in their current situation. However, the suggestions are of little help if those conversations have other research objectives, for example, if one wants to tap the situation of the family left behind and the meaning of financial transfers.

Nevertheless, I hope that the following considerations can provide suggestions, even at the necessary abstract level, on how analytical categories can be derived from the theoretical background of a study.

#### Introduction

Interindividual differences have always proved to be a problem in the educational system on a smaller scale. Migratory movements in recent years have added a new dimension. Here are some key words about the most important differences to which education should pay more attention. I refer here to Allport (1968):

- (1) Ethnicity: membership and identification with a group characterized by common attributes, e.g., physical traits, cultural traditions, belief systems, language, etc.
- (2) Gender: biological and socialization-related differences (e.g., role identification).
- (3) Social class: attribution of social position (according to income, education, occupation, family history).
- (4) Culture: complex that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, customs, law, norms, etc. that one adopts as a member of a society.
- (5) Language: means of communication, but also collection of symbolically represented experiences, interpretations, patterns of interpretation.
- (6) Cognitive styles: relatively consistent patterns of individual mental response to specific situations. The most frequent categories are abstract vs. concrete style, field independence vs. dependence, uncertainty vs. certainty orientation.
- (7) Temperament: relatively consistent emotional response patterns characteristic of an

individual. Aspects of temperament are often mentioned in the literature, such as rhythm, adaptability, energy expenditure, mood, attentiveness, etc.

(8) Identity: Unity and persistence of personality.

(9) Motivation: Traditionally a personality variable representing a person's ability to exert effort even in the absence of extrinsic reward.

(10) Condition, physical: The state of biophysical equilibrium of the organism in its environment.

Given that racist and sexist attitudes and practices appear to be widespread, it is difficult to have an emotionally neutral discussion about differences between individuals when differences in status are also attributed to them. Thus, in the debate about gender differences, the suspicion is repeatedly raised that the motivation for addressing certain characteristics is the desire to discriminate. In the United States, recent approaches to describing the possible different learning styles of African American and Latino populations (with the goal of improving instructional delivery) have become the subject of heated controversy. Several factors come into play here:

(1) Any attempt to generalize a conclusion to all members of a group is frivolous and suspect.

(2) Historically, every effort has been made to promote the idea of equality, so any focus on possible differences is immediately misconstrued as an argument for inequality.

(3) Difference is often identified with deficit. Attitudes such as Eurocentrism and/or machismo often color the identification of difference, i.e., otherness, with valuations such as "inferior" or "deficit."

(4) In the field of education, there is still a lack of developments that could guide educators on how to deal optimally with group and individual differences.

Given the political sensitivity of the issue of differences and the pedagogical ambiguity of possible solutions, i.e., adaptation to the "here" or the "now" it should come as no surprise that this area of research and its proposals have been rather neglected. However, three approaches can be identified:

- The oldest tradition, born of ignorance and misunderstood equity, advocates dispensing with differences, treating everyone equally, and accepting the "survival of the best."

- The second tradition demands that all receive the best and most appropriate of the educational opportunities available. From this follows the need to provide equitable access to the best developmental supports.

- The third tradition seeks to tailor opportunities for learning experiences to the unique characteristics of different individuals or groups.

The last two approaches have generated the most heated debates, as both have quite a few implications for educational practice, the economy, and society in general. The third approach, however, is the one that best reflects the growing efforts for social justice, according to which equitable distribution ("watering can principle") is not enough, but rather a distribution of resources that meets the needs of specific groups is necessary. (Examples: medicine; individualized education).

Behind this problem lies a more fundamental one, that of taking into account both individual style (specific to the situation) and individual behavior patterns (trans-situational) and harmonizing them with sociocultural norms (specific to socialization).

However, "the" socioculture is a fiction: subpopulations with specific background experiences are the reality. Consequence: experiences with the ingroup, experiences with members of outgroups and, in the case of a minority, also experiences with the majority group (and other minorities) have to be taken into account. In addition, there are intragroup differences: gender, age, status, etc.

## The contribution of social psychological theories

The interaction of people from different social backgrounds has been an important topic of social psychological theory for decades. Explanatory approaches to the problems and their solution in in-group/out-group encounters range from actual conflict theory to reinforcement theory, the similarity-attraction hypothesis, the contact hypothesis, the ignorance hypothesis, expectancy theory and self-categorization theory, and social identity theory. The last two approaches, in particular, provide fruitful clues for the qualitative analysis of interaction between members of different groups.

The cognitive process of self-categorization (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987) highlights similarities with members of the same category as well as differences with members of other categories. Relevant are the similarities or differences that one considers important for categorization. Through this process, the social world acquires subjective meaning, aspects relevant to action are elaborated. Three levels of abstraction are particularly important:

- The higher level of humanity (human identity);
- the intermediate level of ingroup/outgroup (social identity);
- the subordinate level of the self as unique from other in-group members (personal identity).

Social identity theory (Abrams and Hogg, 1990; Tajfel, 1978, 1981, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1985) starts from four assumptions that contribute to the development of analytical categories:

- The basic need to establish and stabilize a positive personal identity (emotional aspect).
- Identity includes social and personal components. Social identity refers to those aspects of the self that reflect the social categories to which one ascribes and which one shares with others (gender, age, race; religious, political orientation, etc.). Personal identity refers to those aspects of the self that are more unique, by which one is distinguished from others.
- Focus on social or personal identity, both in perception of others and self.

## Implications for the development of categories of analysis.

### *Descriptive categories of interlocutors*

Descriptive categories are generally derived from the list of characteristics proposed by Gordon (1988; see above). In particular, they should be supplemented with categories that can be derived from the individual characteristics that are the subject of the present study (e.g., migration route, asylum status, etc.). These categories can be used as profile codes to form subgroups.

### *Categories for interpreting statements*

For qualitative analysis it is advisable to develop theory-based categories, on the one hand, for the interpretation of dialogues and, on the other hand, for the derivation of action steps. The distinction between cognitive and motivational-emotional processes in social identity theory is especially important here:

- The cognitive component of social identity theory postulates a categorization process in which similarity between objects within categories is exaggerated as much as dissimilarity between categories. An intergroup situation occurs when people observe the presence of members of more than one social category (e.g., children in the classroom, immigrants and members of the majority group in the work team). When category membership is addressed, a unity is formed between the perceiver and others of the same social category: "we". The same happens with the members of the other category, they become the unit of the "others" or "them". When this social categorization is activated, information processing is distorted threefold:

- (1) People who coincide in the thematized critical characteristic are assimilated, i.e., the similarity of these people is assumed in other characteristics as well.
- (2) A contrast is created between the groups, i.e., it is assumed that the members of the groups also differ in other characteristics.
- (3) Thus, although within the in-group as within the out-group the similarity of the members is exaggerated, the perceptions of the out-group are relatively undifferentiated, the members of the out-group are perceived as similar, homogeneous. This homogeneous perception depersonalizes or deindividuates the out-group members.

- The emotional-motivational component is based on the search for a positive identity and postulates a competitive social comparison process. In this process, the person differentiates and distances him/herself from members of other groups. To this end, the comparative dimensions are selected ethnocentrically on the one hand, and weighted accordingly on the other, i.e., greater importance is given to the dimensions on which the ingroup performs better. Finally, there is the "ultimate attribution fallacy" (Pettigrew, 1979), according to which identical behavior is evaluated positively by the ingroup and negatively by the outgroup (e.g., assertiveness in men versus women).

### *Categories for the analysis of behavioral tendencies (as a special case of interpretation).*

From the dynamics of the comparative processes of self and group categorization, important clues arise as to the action tendencies of the interlocutors and thus also to the recommended interaction strategies in the corresponding dialogues and interviews. Particular attention should be paid to the contents and evaluations of comparisons of groups and oneself with others, because they allow action-relevant interpretations to be made, for example.

- Tendencies to distance oneself from one's own group versus tendencies to favor one's own group.
- Devaluation of one's own group norms versus revaluation of one's own group norms.
- Construction of an idiosyncratic system of reference and values,
- Search for alternative orientations,
- Perception and evaluation of individual and/or group disadvantages.

From this are derived tendencies that are registered as categories that aim to change one's own position and/or the position of one's own group in the surrounding social system. Corresponding indications result from

- Talking about disadvantages (versus advantages) when talking about belonging to one's own group (versus not talking about it);
- Frequent comparisons with lower status groups versus the dominant majority group;
- Criticism of the rejection of dominant comparison criteria (preferably dominant group criteria);
- Attempts to construct alternative comparison criteria

### Proposal of a system of categories

The following draft of a category system for the analysis of conversations and interviews with immigrants must necessarily be relatively abstract and be concretized and probably also expanded by the research question of the respective research project.

#### (1) Socio-demographic codes (profile)

- age
- gender
- Ethnic origin
- Physical condition
- Social class affiliation
- Linguistic ability to communicate

#### (2) Interpretive profile codes

- Cultural background (e.g., knowledge, beliefs, norms)
- Cognitive orientation style (e.g., certainty vs. uncertainty oriented, i.e., reference to clear structures vs. openness to newness)
- Emotional reaction patterns

#### (3) Conceptual codes for the general interpretation of the statements (to be differentiated according to the specific question of the research project)

- Perceptions and evaluations of the internal group
  - Selection of comparison categories
  - Weighting of comparison categories
- Perceptions and evaluations of the external group
  - Selection of comparison categories
  - Weighting of comparison categories

(4) Conceptual codes for the special interpretation of statements (behavioral trends)  
(to be differentiated according to the specific question of the research project)

- Attitudes and behaviors towards one's own group (distancing vs. favoritism)
  - Devaluation vs. revaluation of one's own group norms
  - Construction of an idiosyncratic reference and value system
  - Search for alternative orientations
  - Perception and evaluation of the individual and/or group disadvantage.
  - Future perspectives (...)
  - Intentions to act (...)
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