

## RESEARCH REPORT

# CULTURAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN FRENCH AND NORTH AFRICAN PARENTS IN TWO INTERACTIVE CONTEXTS

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**Abstract** – *The purpose of this article is to present a conceptual framework illustrating the dynamic of intercultural attitudes between indigenous French and North African immigrant parents living in the same 'banlieu', a suburban underprivileged neighbourhood. Both these sets of cultural actors participate in meetings organised by community workers who lead remedial teaching sessions with the purpose of assisting children with their homework after school hours. The hypothesis being pursued is fairly straightforward: During one's socialisation, a specific idea of 'the other' – as a native of a different culture – is progressively constructed. This idea is then confronted with the perception of the other in one's day-to-day life and encounters in the same neighbourhood. Consequently, and specifically in this context of neighbourhood, the sense of identity can be threatened and tested because 'native' and 'immigrant' occupy the same space, and will therefore be obliged to reconsider their prior, generalised constructs of each other's cultural traits. Defence mechanisms such as introjection and projection come into play as the persons select 'facts' taken from reality to protect themselves and strengthen their cultural prejudices. Thus, while a psychological balance is possible, existing prejudices can change or be reinforced in the context of personal encounters. In these situations, positive attitudes are more likely to develop because parents gather together in an harmonious space, where they are considered collectively by community workers as parents, irrespective of their ethnic background.*

## Introduction

**T**his article draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with indigenous French and North African immigrant parents whose children attend remedial classes after school hours. It sets out to understand the social construction of identity, as this develops first in the context of 'neighbourhood' – where perception of the 'other' is marked by one's own personal history, prejudice and

the dynamics of reciprocal exclusion – and then in the context of encounters where the ethnic background of ‘native’ and ‘immigrant’ alike is subordinated to a goal pursued by both groups alike: the educational success of their own children.

The research on which this short report is based draws on a post-graduate study undertaken in the locality of Empalot in France. Empalot has a high number of French ‘native’ people and ‘immigrants’ who come from a working class background. Many of the children in this *banlieu* also come from single parent households. The area is characterised by poor quality housing and high unemployment. A few buildings are particularly looked down upon by the majority of the residents of Empalot. These are high-rise, eight to twelve storey constructions with flats having only four or five rooms each.

Within this neighbourhood, community workers have introduced programmes of remedial teaching for children, and these meetings also involve the parents of the students not doing well at school. There are formal sessions with parents, with discussions on themes related to the programme of instruction that is followed by the children. However, parents, monitors, children and community workers also gather together for informal functions, such end-of-the-year social events with plays for children, cakes, drinking and dance (Regnault 1988).

## **The data**

Data were collected through a number of qualitative research strategies, including the construction of a series of case studies based on in-depth interviews and participant observation (Regnault 1994). The sample of interviewees was chosen from a list of parents of children involved in remedial teaching who regularly participate in parent meetings. 10 French parents and 10 North African parents were interviewed four times over a period of twelve months, with interviews being held after meetings in which these parents had taken part. Apart from these 80 interviews, the parents’ interaction during the formal and informal meetings described above was also observed.

The North African parents come from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, are generally working class, and, like many ‘native’ French citizens from the same class location, inhabit suburban districts. The specific aspects of the linguistic, religious and historical backgrounds of the three Maghreb countries have not been differentiated as variables in the survey. Rather, what is highlighted is the fact that they share the same subordinate status in French society.

## **The conceptual framework**

A psycho-sociological framework was used to illuminate the data gathered. The concept of attitude construction used in this study is therefore based primarily

on the theoretical writings of Moscovici (1976), who proposed two processes to define how attitudes develop. The first process is that of 'objectification', whereby, during socialisation, mainstream cultural values emanant from society, parental values and one's own personality influence one's way of being and acting, and of perceiving and defining 'the other' as belonging to a culture different from one's own. Furthermore, it is assumed that the relationship between French and North African people depends also on the status of the two cultures in the receiving society. Indeed, French culture is a majority one and North African culture is a minority one with regard to the specific historical relationships which exist between these two civilisations.

The second process proposed by Moscovici (1976) is that of 'anchorage'. In a specific interactive context, when one meets another person, the ideas developed and objectified during early socialisation are necessarily and rudely confronted by the real time perception of 'the other' as one goes about one's living in the same neighbourhood. When something new happens, instead of changing attitudes, one may selectively exploit certain facts taken from the observed reality to strengthen one's cultural prejudices. Thus, one protects oneself from a socio-cultural reality, which is both complex and threatening, since it is composed of situations which suggest a fundamental confrontation of the fixed, objectified cultural construct of the other. Two broad outcomes are possible here: the attitude can be reinforced or else it is obliged to change.

## Observed data

Joëlle<sup>1</sup>, a 'native' French woman, internalises the status of her culture in the receiving society and therefore develops a superiority complex. She is convinced that she is rightful because she is French and that North African people fall into a lower social bracket because they are strangers, even if her own economic status is equivalent to theirs (Guillaumin 1972).

She works as a housemaid in a hospital. She lives in Empalot-Daste near the low-status buildings, in a little flat with two rooms. She underscores the fact that she is *une vraie française*, and reproaches North African people who consider themselves likewise. She comments:

*"North African people have got a national card which grants them permission to live in France. But that does not make them exactly French. I tell them: 'No, you aren't French, you belong to this race (...). A condition of being French is to be born in this country, to have the same way of life as French people'."*

Aziz, a North African man, also internalises the status of his culture in the receiving society and therefore develops an inferiority complex. He however projects this negative self-image onto other people belonging to the same community. In this way, he valorises himself positively and cleanses himself from the cultural prejudices concerning North African people in the host society, France. He thus distinguishes himself from his community and tries to align himself with the majority culture. For these reasons, he prefers placing his children in a school where there are only a few North African children.

Bagley (1995) presents the findings of a study carried out by the British Government, investigating the implications of re-structuring state schooling. In this study, parents received a self-completion questionnaire which asked them to specify their first-preference secondary school and the reasons for this preference. The quantitative findings on 'race' and choice suggest that the 'ethnic/racial make-up' of a school is more likely to influence white parental preferences in the case of schools having a student complement with a majority of white children. Aziz develops the same attitudes as native people who exhibit a clear preference in favour of a school with a majority of native, French children.

Aziz works as a bricklayer and lives in a private building on the outskirts of Empalot. He refuses to live in Empalot and accepts the dominant prejudices without criticising them. He exhibits a specific identity strategy which is termed 'projected negative identity' (after Camilleri 1990). Consistent with this, Aziz notices that:

*"North Africans will never change in the host society because they keep the same way of life as in the native country. They disturb customers in a pub because they discuss loudly and the clients are fed up with seeing so many North African men in that place. The consequence is that the bar attendant does not want to serve these people any more."*

The idea of 'the other' which emerges from a different culture depends also on the specific, cultural perception of space, time and body (Hall 1971, 1984). Subjects can project their own cultural perception on the shared space and judge the manner in which this space is occupied and this time is lived and distributed by the other person. Given the different cultural points of departure, the utilisation of space and time of the subordinate culture does not – indeed cannot – tally with that of the host culture. The attitude of the minority culture is thus summarily condemned.

Annie, a housemaid, lives in a place called Empalot-Poudrerie, which 'enjoys' the same low social standing as Empalot-Daste. Annie feels that 'these immigrants' are omnipresent, and that they are more numerous than the French, 'native' people. She therefore feels culturally victimised, and experiences these

feelings with such an intensity that her condition verges on the paranoid. That sense of anxiety extends to the sphere of language, since she, like most French people, does not understand the Arabic language, and therefore considers that North Africans are at an advantage because they know French as well as Arabic. She believes that North Africans criticise the French people, using Arabic so that the French do not understand what they are saying. She projects her own perception of space, time and body on the locality she shares with immigrants, the 'shared space', to the extent that she does not want to see North Africans passing in front of her flat, especially if these are children. She also detests smelling North African cooking:

*"When the Moroccans, the Algerians, pass in front of my flat at anytime, with their children, I just can't stand it. If the Moroccans, the Algerians, open their kitchen window so that I can smell their cooking, I can't stand that either... Those persons come to France to steal our money to send it to their country. They come here to fleece us."*

In a similar manner, Joëlle feels culturally victimised because she notices that North African families are more numerous than 'native' French families. She also feels bad because during the meeting with community workers, North African parents try to give the impression that they do not understand French. She however thinks that this is a strategy on their part, and that community workers should be on their guard. In this case, the perception of 'the other' in the context of parental meetings reinforces and strengthens her cultural prejudices:

*"They understand what we say perfectly, we French people. They also understand the French language well. They know how to manage in any situation."*

Djamila is an unemployed North African; she lives in the high-rise, run-down blocks at Empalot-Daste. She feels rejected and condemned when she speaks in front of French persons during a meeting with parents and community workers. Djamila expresses this by saying that other parents give her "dirty looks", because she has difficulties in speaking French fluently and correctly.

The experiences of Joëlle and Djamila help us understand the extent to which communication between persons can be regulated by cultural prejudice. Clearly, such a bias keeps citizens from acting as equal members in the host society (Perotti 1986). In the two interactive contexts of the neighbourhood and the parents' meetings, the sense of identity is threatened. Identity (Mead 1934), the 'I', tries to create a psychological balance between one's notion of self-esteem and the onslaught of negative ideas. In fact, the internalisation of such 'prescribed identities' – what Camilleri (1984) refers to as *identités prescrites* – is similarly

projected spatially on specific buildings where North African people live. The purpose here is to assign a value and higher social respectability to one's living place, in order to protect oneself from the complex and threatening reality. Benayoun et al. (1987) argue that the image of one's own living space depends on the construction of the space of 'the other' as negative, unbecoming. Joëlle creates a psychological balance in the following manner:

*"Empalot is considered as a dirty, squalid area. There are a majority of North African people living here. They are placed in large blocks of flats. In my building, there is no North African. I'm privileged."*

She feels culturally victimised by the uncomfortable closeness of the buildings where some North African families live. She is afraid not of cultural difference, but rather of undifferentiation, that is of the possibility of not being sufficiently differentiated from North African neighbours. This constitutes what Lorreyte (1989) calls '*risque d'indifférenciation*'. She consequently decides to leave this area and settle elsewhere.

In a survey concerning multicultural neighbourhoods in Toulouse, St Raymond (1985) suggested that spatial prejudice is the mirror image of racial bias. The perception of shared space and of 'the other' who comes from a different culture proceed from categorisation and generalisation. According to different historical periods, one can always come across a process of ghettoisation in the perception of observers and citizens with 'prescribed identities'. We thus get notions of 'the Jewish Quarter', or 'the Arab Quarter', even when these neighbourhoods are, in fact, very heterogeneous. Saadi's (1982) studies of inter-ethnic relationships in the area of *La Goutte d'Or* in Paris is a good illustration of this use and construction of space. Saadi observes how, for instance, residents of some buildings refuse to socialise with – or even get to know about – neighbours on other floors in the same block. Such decisions are made on the basis of ethnicity, so that 'foreign' residents constitute a social barometer, signalling the level of social standing of a floor, or of a block.

However, in the process of inter-cultural encounters, attitudes are open not only to reinforcement but also to change. Djamila, for instance, first observed that during the initial parent meetings she attended, someone gave her "*dirty looks*" because she had difficulties in speaking French correctly. After attending a series of meetings, however, she reported that she had grown confident in the use of French, and she no longer feels a victim of cultural violence:

*"I feel well now, I have taken on the habit of speaking out. Before, I felt ashamed. I couldn't speak French properly. I had got the impression that everybody looked at me every time I spoke."*

Annie took part in a number of informal meetings organised by the community workers. Little by little, she was observed changing her cultural ideas concerning North Africans. She has reported that she no longer feels victimised and that she was not disturbed by the number of persons of Maghreb origin attending the parents' meetings. Moreover, her interaction with North African women has steadily increased since the initial meetings, when she practically did not communicate with them at all. In this regard she said:

*"It is easier for me to meet North Africans in a parents' meeting than as neighbours. We are together in group, we don't pay attention... We are happy to be together discussing the similar problems of our children. I have noticed the presence of many Algerians, but they have decided to communicate with us. Maybe, I have the habit now. During this meeting, Arabic women spoke their own language but they didn't speak ill of French people, in Arabic."*

## Analysis

The data seem to suggest that the likelihood of attitudinal change depends on the nature of the interactive situation. Change is more likely to occur in meetings where inter-cultural debate and discussion cannot be excluded, rather than in the context of casual neighbourhood life. This is because, in the latter, persons are more liable to exploit the facts selected from reality to strengthen (rather than question) their ascribed prejudices. The changing attitudes can be seen as a result of the influence of the specific group dynamics introduced by the community workers during these meetings. Mucchielli (1989) proposes that the two major functions here consist of:

- *focusing upon the task*: the persons share a common objective, that of helping their children become successful at school through remedial education. In fact, they have 'a superordinate goal' (Sherif et al. 1961). This present research suggests that the realisation of common goals reduces hostility and hatred between the two groups of children; and

- *focusing on the relationships* between group members: individuals get used to meetings with the same persons. The mistrust, experienced by parents during the first meetings which they attended, disappears gradually as more meetings are held. Annie and Djamila both observed how they have got into the habit of being and mixing with others. Consequently, the persons located in different cultures are considered in a positive way. People thus gradually eliminate this sensation of being threatened. Communication facilitates, and is in turn facilitated by, this thaw of inter-cultural prejudice.

Such group dynamics lead native French and North African parents to develop high levels of self-confidence and, therefore, to change their cultural prejudices owing to a better appreciation of each other. Such an interactive situation which induces such a change in attitude is specific because parents gather together in a harmonious space where they are considered by community workers as parents, irrespective of racial or residential background.

Nicole works as a housemaid in a hospital. Like Joëlle, she lives in a private flat at Empalot-Daste, near the high-rise, run-down block of flats. She says:

*"The North African children have got specific problems because the parents, especially the father, impose the choice of career on their children. They consider that their children must be assisted more than those of the native French. Moreover, the behaviour of women is likely to be the same as the behaviour of native, French women."*

Djamila lives at Empalot-Daste, within the block of flats of low social regard. She asks:

*"If we were to return to North Africa now with our children, what will they do at school? In Morocco, it is important to know the Arabic language to follow courses and it is difficult for my children. The French school system is better for them."*

It appears that the North African parents are very much concerned with the academic success of their children and they are keen to encourage them to learn the French language. As these children become more acclimatised to the French way of life, the reality which fuels inter-cultural prejudice is bound to change.

## Concluding comments

This study explores how identity is 'threatened' because French and North African subjects are both sociologically victimised by the negative image associated with the residential suburb of Empalot. This image, unconsciously internalised, is objectified and projected onto specific buildings where North African families tend to live. Recourse is made to defence mechanisms such as introjection and projection so as to prevent anxiety and to bolster an individual's relative social standing.

Nevertheless, ambiguity seems sensible. In fact, Annie is more positive when she refers to interaction during parental meetings than when she discusses her relationships in the context of the neighbourhood. It is in the context of parental meetings that Annie – and others like her – transcends prejudice in order to develop a different intercultural attitude, one which exhibits more openness



and tolerates a mutual recognition of each other's reality beyond the negative stereotype.

One could posit that such an openness could be extended from parental meetings to other spheres of life. However, it is not sufficient to create opportunities for intercultural encounters in the context of the school. One must also look to the neighbourhood, where negative constructs of 'the other' are produced and reinforced. It is for this reason that over and above intercultural encounters, one must also consider the reconceptualisation and reorganisation of space in suburban, underprivileged neighbourhoods. Among other things, housing must be rehabilitated and employment opportunities must be provided if the structural problems which fuel inter-cultural difference and prejudice in the first place are to be effectively addressed.

<sup>1</sup> All names are fictitious.

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