

**The Arena of Othering**  
**A Narrative Study with Women Living in**  
**Poverty and Social Marginality**

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*Abstract*

This paper documents the encounters between a researcher and interviewees who were women living in extreme poverty and social exclusion. It presents these encounters as taking place in what I call an arena of Othering. The arena of Othering is a sphere of power relationships in which each participant defines both herself and the Other. In this arena two reciprocal social images interact, one is perceived in social terms as more powerful, the other as inferior. The paper analyses the effects of the dynamic of Othering upon the research process as demonstrated in the interviewing, in the interpretation of the data and in the writing of the research. The paper also suggests some possible strategies to resist Othering.

**Key words:**

Women, poverty, life-story study, Othering

*"The translation of difference into Otherness is a denial of dialogue, interaction and change." Pickering, 2001: 49*

### **Introduction**

- *Are you married?*
- *Yes*
- *Have you children, or not yet?*
- *I have children.*
- *Not true! (Surprised) Little ones?*
- *Not so very. 12 and 6.*
- *Wow. It's not true. I'm stunned. You don't look it at all. You look like.. like.. kind of a student. I thought you were... kind of... an educated student.*

The one who asks the questions in this short vignette is the (original) interviewee. The one who gives the answers is me. This is part of an interview from a life story study with women living in deep and long-term poverty and social marginality (Krumer-Nevo, 2000).

My premise in this article is to use this dialogue, as well as other dialogues with other interviewees, to understand what I shall call **the arena of Othering relations**. My claim is that the research interactions are taking place within the framework of reciprocal Othering relationships, the effects of which on the research process, I shall try to describe. I shall also suggest some possible strategies to resist it.

Othering is the mechanism of creating splits between groups, between "us" and "them". This mechanism is a symbolic cultural code for the distinction between human categories which forms the basis of social order (Chazan, 1994). "We" are perceived, in this mechanism, as possessing good and positive qualities while "they", the Others, are the owners of negative qualities. As such Othering is used mainly against those in the margins

of society – women, the disabled, the poor, people of minority ethnic background or people who belong to any other minority group because of their ‘race’ or sexual preference. "We" are subjects while they are "objects" (de Beauvoir, 1984). The differentiation between "us" and "them" leads to a devaluation of the Other. “We” project upon the Other that which is undesirable in ourselves or repressed and buried in our unconscious (Kristeva, 1991).

Most of the treatments of Othering in the literature take a one-way view of the phenomenon, whether the point of departure is Eurocentric, phallogocentric, colonialist or chauvinist (de Beauvoir, 1984; Fine, 1994; Pickering, 2001; Said, 1985).

I suggest that we approach the phenomenon of Othering in research through the notion of an *arena of Othering*: a sphere of power relationships in which each participant defines both herself and the Other.

### **The Arena of Othering**

In the arena of Othering two reciprocal social images interact, one is perceived in social terms as more powerful, the other inferior. Each of these images is perceived as a fixed entity and tends to be based on a single category of identity which has become dominant, rather than on a rounded, holistic view. Thus they are characteristically stereotypical, one-sided, provincial and superficial.

What is it that turns research into the creator of Othering? Fine answers by pointing to the power gap between researcher and researched. The power which determines what constitutes data, how to interpret and write it, is in the hands of the researcher and not in the hands of the researched, the interviewed. The power relations which determine every research are intensified in research settings where gaps in the social ladder between researcher and researched are evident (Wolf, 1996). This is especially so when the researcher belongs to the middle class while the researched belongs to a lower class, or to a very low class.

In a situation where there is such a disparity in social power relationships, the question who has the prerogative to define whom, who is the definer and who the defined, becomes a site of conflict as is the case presented here.

### **The Study**

The interactions I am describing took place in the framework of a life story study (Krumer-Nevo, 2000). The aim of this study was to explore the point of view of women living in poverty in Israel concerning their lives - their struggles, pains and failures, hopes and aspirations. I myself am a Jewish Ashkenazi woman. My own mother was brought up in poverty, and this might well be one of the reasons for my interest in and involvement with the lives of poor women. But the women I was going to interview did not know the memories I carried. They could not know that I felt so close to the realities of their lives.

The women I interviewed were all struggling with poverty and problems related to and deriving from poverty, such as lack of education, unemployment, housing difficulties, health problems, problems of parenting and problems of relationship within the family in general. Most of them got married and became mothers when they were younger than 18. Most of these marriages were unsuccessful, and were accompanied by violence and abuse. Some of the women were found by the social services as abusive or neglecting mothers and they had their children removed from their care. Some of the others were constantly afraid that their children would be taken from them.

In social work discourse these women and their families are referred to as “multi-problem families” (Kaplan, 1986; Suarez, Smokowski & Wodarski, 1996; Wood & Geismar, 1989). Although they are well known to the various social work services for years, the attempts to help them to break out of poverty and deprivation have been minimal. The interactions between these families and social workers tend to be characterized by

alienation, suspicion and hostility on the one hand and on the other hand as exhibiting a constant "pattern of failed connections" (Schorr & Schorr, 1988).

Research in the field of social work tends to either ignore these women or to regard them as objects, rather than subjects (Abramovitz, 1995; 1996). Too often, they are represented in the professional discourse as the sum of their difficulties, deficiencies or pathologies (Parnell & Vanderkloot, 1994). As such they are the ultimate Others.

From the early age of five, poor children are aware that they are part of a social group, which is treated with humiliating, even incriminating condescension and disdain. They know that the public perceives them as being "lazy, dirty, unorganized and stupid" (Weinger, 1998). The fact that the images of these women in the professional discourse are not flattering is not a surprise. Their images in the professional discourse are indeed very similar to their images in public opinion: They are perceived as being different, marginalized, good but weak in the better case (the victim prototype), or strong but dangerous, in the worst (the guilty party prototype) (Rainwater, 1970). Society reflects them to themselves as failures, victims or deviants.

### **The Research Interactions**

The meeting between us, apparently for the "innocent" purpose of the interview, thus became in effect an indirect dialogue on Othering and social power. From the very first moments of our encounters they check their reflection in my eyes. They are defending the images of themselves and of their stories. They try to reject the definition imposed on them by the meeting, the image of themselves as inferior, which they have always seen in the eyes of society, which look at them. In the dialogue between us each attempts to define, or redefine herself, her world, and her relationship with the Other. These negotiations, which started even before the meeting itself, were, it appeared, necessary for the meeting to

come about at all, and they lasted, in some way or other throughout all the encounters with the women.

### **Preliminary Encounters**

I had thought that once I had the names of the potential interviewees, who had given their preliminary agreement to take part in the research to the social worker or nurse in the mother and child clinic, all I had to do was set a time and place for the interview, and to proceed with the meetings as arranged.

This was no, however, what in fact happened. The list of names I had in my possession was merely the beginning of a series of lengthy, exhausting, meandering and confusing negotiations between the women and myself over every little detail.

There were some homes in which my phone calls went unanswered for days at a time. Other phone calls were answered by a boy or a girl. "Mommy is outside, I'll call her," the boy or girl said. This was followed by shouting: "Mommy, it's for you!" I could hear the woman's voice through the receiver shouting from a distance. "Who is it?" "Michal, tell her she doesn't know me. I just want to talk to her". I noticed that the women who refused to come to the phone: "Tell her to call back later", and who wouldn't permit the initiation of any type of contact or meeting did not agree to be interviewed in the next telephone call, either.

With other women, long conversations ensued. In all the cases where women refused over the phone to participate in the research, the reason they gave was the feeling that the stories they had to tell about their lives were too painful to be related, and that "talking about the pain could reawaken it". One woman said: "I am alive because I don't talk about it".

Some of them, in the very act of announcing to me that they were not interested in being interviewed, would tell me over the phone very intimate and painful details about

their lives. Nevertheless, even after such phone conversations still they would refuse to be interviewed.

I understand these refusals as rejections of the opportunity to cooperate in creating a sharing relationship. Rejection of the opportunity to make me, the listener, a witness, and rejection of the opportunity to change the story from being in the sphere of personal, private experience, to the shared domain of public utterance.

Some of the women agreed to be interviewed, but asked that I call back, for various reasons, at a later time: "Next week," or "in a couple of weeks", "now I'm very sick, I need to go into the hospital tomorrow, and I'm going to the Rabbi today"; "I need to visit my child at the boarding school, the social worker at the boarding school called and told me to come"; "I don't know if my husband will agree". In all these cases I called again. Sometimes only to find out that there were other reasons that prevented the women from being interviewed. No matter whether the women rejected the interview for genuine reasons, or whether this was their way of saying that they did not want to be interviewed, the reasons for refusal were always related to the reality of their lives, their roles as wives and mothers, their lack of support.

If I had hoped that the negotiations concerning the interview itself would be completed over the phone once we had agreed on the time and place to meet, I was mistaken. The power of the women I interviewed was revealed to me in their ability to surprise me, at every stage of our encounters. The power relationships between us changed quickly. One minute I was the "important" interviewer, with power and status, moving around the neighborhood with curious eyes. And the next minute I would find myself facing a closed door. The woman who had agreed to be interviewed was supposed to be at home. I knocked on the door since we had made an appointment. Nobody was at home. Despite the fact that we had set a time. Despite the fact that I had cleared my morning.

Since many of the doors have no name for identification I think perhaps I'm at the wrong address. In short, I am outside, I don't belong, I have no access. So I have to call again.

I understand this too, to be part of the negotiations regarding who defines whom as the Other. As long as I am standing in front of a locked door, I am the Other - an outsider. I am the object of prying stares from neighbors, questioning looks from the men in the grocery store. "Who are you looking for? Are you a social worker?". Evidently, I am already marked. The things that characterize me at the university as belonging, and as having power: my clothes, my glasses, small status symbols, characterize me here as someone who does not belong, someone whose power is subject to question.

### **The Arena of Othering as a Place of Reciprocal Othering**

My suggestion that the research meetings constitute an arena of Othering means that there is a two-way process between the researcher and the researched. Each is potentially Other to the other. Both are involved in a struggle for and about social definition. The tendency towards a superficial, one-sided perception of each other is mutual. It colors the perception of the interviewees in the eyes of the interviewer and vice versa. Interviewer and interviewees perceive each other equally stereotypically.

Let us take the small vignette, which opens this paper as an example. The astonishment in Dalit's voice when she heard I was a mother and not only "an educated student" was surprising. What did she mean when she said I looked like "a kind of student"? Did she mean that I looked to her too young to be the mother of two children of the ages I mentioned? Dalit herself is 23, married and the mother of three children: a boy of three and twins two years old. She herself looks young. Why was she so surprised to hear that another woman, (I was 37 at that time), is a mother? Perhaps because she knows I am a "student"? Could she mean that it is hard for her to believe that a student can also be a mother? Could it be that in her view of the world women are either students *or* mothers?

I am different from Dalit and from the other women whom I met for the interviewing. I am "a student".

My laconic answers in the vignette, which opens this paper, betray my embarrassment. I am here to interview her, not the other way around. The questions interviewees ask during interviews are often meant to help them to place the interviewer in relation to the subject that is the focus of the interview. The women who participated in the study try to place me in the world of categories that interest them. But the unconcealed surprise in Dalit's response, the binary opposition posited between "student and mother", reveal her world, indeed, but also witness to the class origins of her Othering. The very fact of my being a student signifies to her my being Other, my belonging to a social class in which being a student is a natural stage of maturation. She, as well as the other women, are "students in the university of life", not because they lack intellectual abilities, but because of the intersection of economic limitations, poor support and membership of a social strata which does not regard "the university" as a legitimate, possible, available for choice channel. They are from another story.

The very fact that they see the status of "student" as contradictory to the status of "mother" testifies to the categorical distance between us that they feel. If I were to be perceived by them as "a mother", I would be felt as closer to them. Since they know that I am "a student", I am perceived as distant.

### **Resisting Othering in Research**

In an excellent article: "Working the Hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research", Michelle Fine (1994) analyses the structure, the ideology, the context and the practice that create the Other in research. Fine and others (Chazan, 1994) describe how attempts to build bridges between the I and the Other paradoxically strengthen the resistance to so doing and in fact create the social Other as insignificant,

strange, different and threatening. In order to resist Othering researchers should develop ways to "talk with" their interviewees instead of "talking at" them. The "talking with" opens the way to view the other as "neither the Other nor the Same" (Fine, 1994, p. 71). Fine describes the process of resisting Othering as mainly an intersubjective process. Lal (1996), an anthropologist, describes similar process in which the researcher moves from an "outside perspective" to an "inside perspective". Lal calls this process "the development of nativised selves":

"As we begin to develop "nativised selves" we see phenomena that we explore more from the perspectives of those who live those realities rather than from our imperialists academic vantage points, ever ready to appropriate the experience of others into our preordained theoretical categories". (p. 192.)

Is it possible to resist Othering in research? If so, what should be done in order to do so? What happens when "talking with" the Other just verifies the prejudices, the caricature perceptions of both interviewer and interviewee?

The women I interviewed see in me only a student. But the tendency to stereotypical listening, that is, listening from within a relationship of Othering I find also in my questions during some of the interviews. If Fine (1994) sees the "talking with" as critical for resisting Othering, I found out that dialogue is not enough. Sometimes "talking with" can verify the worst prejudices. In order to resist this, there is a need for a specific effort.

I want to present an example in which the tendency to a one-dimensional listening is revealed in the course of the interview, and to follow it with an example of an interview, in which an attempt is made toward a more complex listening of the speaking person. My claim is that open-minded listening, listening in a way which rejects the stereotype, affects

the interviewee and helps her to present herself in a fuller way. Being listened to in such a way opens to the interviewee options of self presentation, which were not available beforehand.

The two cases exemplify different things. In the first the woman expresses a complex message, with an internal contradiction, and I find it difficult to accept it. I see this as an example of my being under the influence of Othering. In the second, the opposite happens. The woman expresses an apparently unified message, and with the help of an obstinacy on my part and the asking of further questions she is discovered to be more complex. In this case I am well served by the will to resist Othering, and am enabled to see in the woman strengths, which were not revealed to the eye at first glance.

***Example no. 1: Othering in the interviewing***

Idit is unmarried and the mother of two children fathered by two different men. The father of her eldest son was her boyfriend ever since she was 17, but after the birth of the child he began to physically abuse her and she, after a short time, took the baby and left him. She was then 18 and decided she did not want to live her life with a violent man. During the 12 years that followed she raised the child, and the daughter who was born later, "completely alone" in her own words. She describes herself as a woman who struggled to keep a job and as a devoted mother, who was involved in everything that happened to her children in every aspect of their lives. Nevertheless, two years before our meeting, in response to a claim by the father (the violent boyfriend from the past), the court, advised by social workers, decided that he was the preferred parent and had the son transferred to his custody. The father and son lived since then at the father's place in a nearby town. In the interview Idit recounts this event with great pain, anger and non-understanding. I tend to identify with her non-understanding, with the sense that injury was inflicted on her with no justification. At this point in the interview I am taking her side, by seeing her as a "good

enough" mother, one who feels that the taking away of her son means losing the reasons for life. If I perceive Idit in this way I am seeing her as a victim. Seeing her as a victim is a view influenced by Othering since it is stereotypical, and does not take into consideration either her strengths or her contribution to the situation. This is a flat, non-complex and superficial view, and it is undermined immediately in the continuation of the interview, when Idit explained what happened after the father received the child into his custody:

- *Since then...he's already two years with his father, I hardly see him 'cos he lives in....(a nearby town), they decided that twice a week I'll see him, and... every second Shabbat, but I don't see him twice a week, I see him only once a fortnight.*
- *Why?*
- *Because the father is far and I can't get there and until two months ago I also worked and besides, its...I...I... and....Ramat-Gan (the name of the nearby town where the boy lives with his father) are not friends, I don't....I haven't the patience to go there, so.... and it's....it's....to go to.....to sit for an hour and come back by bus, perhaps if it was in town, it'd be fun..... by bus I won't do it.*
- *And he doesn't come here, the child?*
- *No, only once a fortnight.*
- *Only once a fortnight he comes here?*
- *That's it.*
- *That's very hard.*

My repeated questions testify to the difficulty I have in seeing the complexity of the picture. Idit is perhaps a victim but seeing her as a victim does not exhaust all that happens

within herself, or fully describe her. In fact seeing her as a victim superficially romanticizes the figure. Her sorrow that her son has been taken from her and has passed into the care of his father is convincing in its sincerity. Hence I find it difficult to digest the fact that she doesn't go to visit her son in his father's house, as the custody agreement allows. Her explanation is strange and arouses my wonder: *".. its...I...I... and Ramat-Gan (the name of the town)... are not friends.... by bus I won't do it"*. (She does not say that she and the boy's father are not friends, which would have been more understandable, but she says that she and the town where he lives "are not friends", which sounds strange.) Her refusal to go there by bus does not seem coherent with the description of her tremendous efforts to raise the child all alone.

It seems to me that if Idit has been capable of raising her son by herself for years, she should be capable of maintaining regular meetings with him even if he does live out of town. The fact that she does not do so seems to me to be an inconsistency in her character and an expression of a personality defect or pathology, or at least a failure of energy. My difficulty in accepting this inconsistency is what accounts for my repeated question.

In fact, the root of this difficulty lies in the tendency to seek coherence, the tendency to fill in gaps and to characterize personalities as possessing qualities which fit and consolidate each other. But the figure of Idit refuses to conform to this flattened effect.

In the case of Idit the difficulty I experience in seeing Idit as complex is linked to my desire not to hear of what I perceive as non-normative aspects of her behavior.

***Example no. 2: Resisting Othering in the interviewing***

Rivka is very different from Idit. While Idit presents herself as active and strong, Rivka presents herself as a weak, submissive and "defeated" woman (Rosenfeld, 1993). She answers all my questions with extreme brevity, and finds it difficult to tell a substantive story. She is 33 years old, married and the mother of 6 children. Her problems,

as she presents them, spring from the illness and death of both her parents when she was a teenager, the physical handicaps of her husband, and the severe poverty they find themselves in as a result. The economic condition of her brothers is better than hers, but she feels that they are not ready to assist her and does not therefore wish to request their help.

Rivka presents herself as a woman who is not used to talk about herself. Her speech is very concrete and simple. She gives the impression that although she is willing to cooperate in the interview she does not know how. It seems as if she can not say anything meaningful, anything which could indicate a complex point of view. It is interesting to examine one section of the interview in which a certain development does occur in her uniform presentation of herself as someone who accepts her fate as sealed and expects no change.

- *Is there something you can think of that could change your life at all, so you would have a better life?*
- *There are a lot of things (grins), but sometimes if a solution doesn't arrive, it doesn't arrive.*
- *What do you mean?*
- *There are a lot of things that could make a lot of change in life.*
- *What for example?*
- *About how you have to make do with however things are (grins).*
- *What else?*
- *Everyone wants to go on and on, more, more more, but sometimes when you don't have, so you have to stand the pace. You can't go on any more.*
- *And what more would you want more?*

- *I say, the main thing now, the most important for me is an apartment the apartment I really want 'cos here is really crowded.*
- *Yes*
- *If, say, I could by myself, I would buy and I wouldn't need all that rubbish over my head. So when you haven't you have to put up with their pace. Dance for them, what they want you have to do, as if you were one worker of theirs, that's the pace, you have to put up with it, and when I have the money in my hand why would I go and ask for something from someone? I could have, like a lot of people, sold and bought an apartment for myself. By myself.*
- *Yes?*
- *But its impossible also without, so (short silence) And then all of a sudden all that, they want an inheritance order, where will I get a inheritance order from? My dad, poor guy, fourteen years paralyzed, what did he have in his head, that now he'll make an inheritance order (long silence). Tuesday, this coming Tuesday, exactly eleven years that we're married.*
- *Oh, really?*
- *(Short laugh).*
- *Nu, so there should be good luck*
- *(Long silence) I laugh with my husband, he would say, come let's go some place (laughter), the wedding day. We'll go some place. He's joking (long silence).*
- *(The mother-in-law, sitting a little apart from us): With God's help it'll be alright. Children grow. It'll be alright. God is great. (Long silence)*

To my question as to what could improve her life Rivka gives the submissive, defeated reply of someone who expects nothing, in the spirit of the whole interview. Her manner of expression, the choice of words and the formulation, makes for an idiosyncratic

syntax, but her intention can be made out: although there are things that could improve her life there is no way to achieve them "*There are a lot of things (grins), but sometimes if a solution doesn't arrive, it doesn't arrive*". The cryptic formulation, abbreviated and opaque, amplifies the content. It appears that this is a woman who expects nothing. Therefore I too, the interviewer, find it difficult to expect substantive answers from her, which would testify to a complex personality. I persist, however: "*What do you mean*"? and Rivka replies with a paraphrase of the first part of her previous answer: "*There are a lot of things that could make a lot of change in life*". I continue stubbornly to try to make sense of her intention ("*What for example*"?) and she continues with the message of fatalism and hopelessness: "*About how you have to make do with however things are*" (grins). I continue to insist ("*What else*"?) and Rivka explains her condition in general terms, as a law of nature: "*Everyone wants to go on and on, more, more more, but sometimes when you don't have, so you have to go at that pace. You can't go on any more*". Here she modifies a little her previous position saying that she, like everyone else, would like "more" but she knows that it is not possible for her so she "stands the pace". Perhaps because I sense that Rivka could add something at this point I continue: "*And what more would you want more*?" and Rivka replies that she would want to improve the living conditions of the family. It is interesting to note that from the moment Rivka begins to say what she wants her speech becomes richer, fuller and in effect she no longer needs my questions. She moves from topic to topic while I confirm that I am listening with a "Yes". The shift from topic to topic is the shift from the wish that inhabits the public sphere (the apartment) to private and personal wishes - the desire for the respect that is denied her because she is dependant upon the good will of others, and the wish to celebrate her and her husband's wedding day with a trip together. When she speaks of the difficulty of "dancing to the tune determined by others" her speech is very personal, and when she tells of the approaching wedding

anniversary and of her desire to celebrate it, she reveals her pain at her inability to fulfil even that small dream. Together with the pain arises anger against the others "you have to dance for", and the embarrassment. Her need not to desire becomes much more understandable.

By the end of the dialogue Rivka does not seem to me submissive and defeated. The surrender with which she accepts the few possibilities her life offers is not complete. This is not the surrender of one who expects nothing but the renunciation of one who determines to spare herself the pain of desiring in circumstances which prevent any possibility of attaining the desire. Through this dialogue the image of Rivka was changed from a flat character, who does not have a will or a voice to express it, to a rounded character who has her own voice but who prefers not to sound it aloud in order to protect herself from pain and humiliation. I understand this change as a result of my repeated questions. My insistent questioning was itself a message: "I know you have something to say, even though other people do not think so. Even though you yourself may not think so". Despite her inarticulate speech, what she says merited careful listening. It was this conviction that constituted the resisting of Othering in this example.

There is no one way to resist Othering in interviewing but an interviewer can adopt an attitude oriented towards such resistance. That is to say the interviewer must be aware of those junctures where the interviewee will be liable to present herself as a one dimensional, stereotypical character. Reflections of this awareness will manifest itself during the process of the interview by, for example, alertness to strengths in an apparently weak interviewee or to chinks in the armor of an apparently aggressive one.

### **Othering in interpreting**

The reported examples illustrate the difficulty of seeing people as complex characters/persons in the course of an interview. But a similar difficulty comes into view in the course of analysis. I wish to draw attention to this difficulty, to discover its origins, and to suggest ways of coping with it.

The formulation of interpretative academic conclusions from analyzing data, is particularly difficult when the researcher feels a personal involvement in the topic of research. This is the case for instance, when researching the culture and society of which the researcher feels a part. (Ben-Ari, 1998).

The stories I collected in this study were very "hard" stories. They revealed extremely difficult, cruel life stories. My response to the reading of the interviews is that of horror, anger, and desire to distance myself from the stories, the women, and their children. These feelings were a reaction to the "unordinary lives" which were unfolded in the stories, to the extreme distress - economic, social and emotional - of the women and of their children and other family members.

These feelings were exacerbated in the analysis. The encounter with the texts was harder than the encounters with the women interviewed. Trying to find help I ask colleagues to read the interviews. Their responses were not encouraging. Some of them reacted to the interviews as to a "depressing, burdensome text" causing despair. Others reacted to the interviews as "boring, not interesting narratives, lists of problems and complaints".

I understand both of these responses, as well as my own, as an expression of Othering - a mental state which prevents readers, kind, empathic and sensitive as they may be, from hearing and seeing the interviewees' point of view in its wholeness. I understand it as the lack of a conceptual framework in which the harsh things that were described in the

interviews could fit, while leaving room for other elements of identity, or behavior which, without such a framework, are simply not visible.

Only when I heard the responses to the interviews from my colleagues, did I understand that my difficulty reading the narratives was a difficulty inherent in the encounter with such texts. I withdrew from the texts because when I read them I tended to analyze them either in psychological terms, which led me to see the women as pathological personalities, or in sociological terms, which led me to see them as social deviants. In both cases I saw them only as problematic figures, a bit pitiable and a bit blameworthy, in short, as cardboard stereotypes.

Understanding this I started to read the interviews differently. This time I was able to find the women's strengths without romanticizing them - the women's point of view, the women's voices.

I understand the Othering as a reaction to the pain embodied in the women's narratives. In the face of the depressing, distressing pain there is an immediate need to create a distance. Rainwater (1970) has described the process of perception of life in poverty as a process essentially cognitive. He claims that the distortion influencing the perception of people living in poverty as one dimensional (good or bad, strong or weak), is based on the cognitive dissonance arising from the implicit comparison made by members of the middle class between their conditions of life and those of people living in poverty. But seeing the process as only cognitive ignores the tremendous force of the emotions aroused by hearing the testimony of those living in poverty. It is these emotions that bring about the difficulty of seeing the people as complex, and the self-defensive tendency to a reduction of their humanity, to a stereotypical, flat, one-dimensional paradigm.

### **Resisting Othering in interpreting**

In order to derive richness from the encounter with the women and from the reading of the texts, an *interpretative effort* is required. This effort is based upon an awareness of the presuppositions of the reader/interpreter and an awareness of the distancing processes of Othering at work. The interpretive effort is based upon resistance to the limiting and restricting power of received opinion on the one hand and of the meetings themselves on the other.

The *interpretative effort* requires the researcher to forget, or at least to suspend, the academic knowledge one has acquired from the academy. But it also requires the researcher to forget or temporarily to set aside the normative knowledge acquired from one's membership in a society, a family, an educational system of values: reward and punishment, hard work, personal responsibility. For what middle class values of reward and punishment teach provides a shield against chaos and a promise that persistent endeavor will ultimately succeed.

This simple, intuitive supposition is not always applicable. Chaotic forces, which are not in the control of bourgeois good order, do exist. The notion of personal responsibility for actions taken can obstruct the awareness that whoever is born to a reality as harsh as the one of which the women tell, cannot take responsibility for what was determined from birth.

Paradoxically, the values, positions and attitudes acquired in the process of socialization, which produce good, decent citizens of society, work against the ability to understand those who live in poverty.

The interpretative effort, therefore, must lead to a moment when all those presuppositions are set aside, put in brackets so to speak, until a more aware and complex reading is made possible.

## Conclusion

Qualitative research can be a very fruitful opportunity to describe the complex reality of the lives of women living in poverty, their point of view, their struggles, their hopes and fears, aspirations and failures. At the same time qualitative research entails the risk of presenting these women as Others, pitiable and deserving of mercy, or pathological creators of their own distress. This paper describes the research process as taking place in an arena of Othering, where both researcher and interviewee perceive each other as alien, one dimensional and stereotypical figures. The concept of an arena of Othering is also useful for understanding the dynamics of the interactions between social workers and their clients in the realm of social work practice.

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