

## **Internet, Gender, and Identity. Using e-mail as a tool for Ethnographic Research**

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### **Abstract**

The problem of electronic identity is a major one when the researcher is using tools such as chat rooms or e-mails to obtain information about people. How can we be sure about the “reality” of the person with whom we are talking and constructing discourse? Are they who they say they are?

In a recent private investigation, our research group –JovenTIC/e-remeneuTIC- used the methods of electronic ethnography and observation in various Spanish chat rooms on gender and sexuality. After several attempts we selected a 28 old woman who offered to talk with us freely and sincerely about these topics. Our aim was to work with a case study and to apply Discourse Analysis technology to understand her opinions and ideas. As a result of this work we have interpreted and compared her discourse with the gender stereotypes of western culture.

In this paper we present the results of our investigation, and hermeneutic and methodological reflections.

### **Introduction**

A few months ago our research group carried out an investigation on the co-construction of gender identities through conversations in love/sexuality chat rooms and private e-mail communications.

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<sup>1</sup> Other Group members that have contributed to this paper are: María Teresa Martín, M. Carmen Peñaranda, Isabel Rivero and Jordi Sanz.

From a theoretical standpoint in this paper we have followed the Discursive Psychology points of view; and socioconstructionist psychologist John Shotter –and others-, who thinks that personal identity is constituted on the basis of two sociocultural goods: the institutional objects and the *imaginary* ones. The latter are those that refer to, according to Shotter (1992, p. 128), “*daily uproar*” that formulates what we call psycho-social *magma*, as symbolically viscous matter that impregnates all our activities as human beings.

The structure of the imaginary objects -unlike institutional (the normative things, the political, scientific ones)- is more diffused, forming, nevertheless, the basis of most of people’s daily narratives, interactions and conflicts, as much at micro and macro social constructions level: gender, social class, ethnic group, race, nationality.

We believe that the question of identities is at the basis of any psychological speciality, from the more clinical (and even biological) ones, to the ones that studies social groups, or institutions. And this question leads to a significant problem: how to approach the methodological process.

Thus, the social problem of which we take care is going to establish a constant dialogue with the form in which we investigate it. Our aim now is not so much to generate knowledge but to reflect on the different ways of applying it to a specific problem. In this sense, we follow the proposal of the Italian psychologist Alberto Melucci (1998, p. 24) of a “*reflexive methodology*”, epistemologically characterized by the problem of :

- a) the centrality of language,
- b) the dichotomy of the researcher/field,
- c) the hermeneutic as “*narrative about narrative*” (p. 23) and,
- d) the presentation of the results.

We, as social scientists are establishing an interactive curl with what people perceive about themselves and what we say about the construction of their identities. Our

responsibility is, thus, large enough. We cannot limit ourselves to be mere spectators, analysts and interpreters of *social realities*. Our intervention contributes to form a minimum structure of the social magma, structure that allows people to reach some agreement around the imaginary objects, their formulation and operation.

So, following Gatti; Gómez and Tejerina (2004), we ask ourselves,

- The notion of the subject in a social context –there are no other- is diagnosed as something “liquid”, “evanescent”, “fragile”, “weak”, and so on... replacing the modern –old- conception of the individual as something “strong”, “solid”, “lasting”.
- So, it requires Social Psychology and other social sciences to construct a new concept of the subject’s action, discourse and meanings.
- And if it is so, it must imply the construction of new methodologies to know what –and how- people are saying and doing, and in what contexts.

Going forward, (Figueroa, Steel and Ferrari, 2004),

- How to settle down the connections and disconnections between the so-called *virtual* and real environments?
- How do the new narratives reproduce or destabilize previous scientific accepted truths and hermeneutics on race, ethnic group, gender, class and others?

### **Objectives and methodology**

Our general objective was to find out if interactions on the Internet are a continuity of those outside the network, particularly in the construction and maintenance of gender stereotypes. We took the social life on the Internet as a context for interactions analysis and made an incursion in the discussion forums “Love” and “Sex” on the Spanish servers Terra and Wanadoo.

We separated our general objectives into sub objectives and interactive operative phases,

<b>Sub-objective</b>	<b>Operative Phase</b>
<b>1.-</b> To review literature and definition of the concept "gender stereotype".	<b>a.-</b> Construction of the theoretical base. Formulation of hypothesis.
<b>2.-</b> To analyse the context, specifically, the discussion forums with contents related to narratives about construction of gender identity.	<b>b.-</b> Field work.  b.1.- To delimit the field.  b.2.- Non-participant observation.  b.3.- Participant observation.  b.4.- Semi structured interview.  b.5.- Data transcription.
<b>3.-</b> To verify -seeing what people say- if those gender stereotypes exist in the network.	<b>c.-</b> Data interpretation. Analytical phase.
<b>4.-</b> To compare the analysis and preceding verifications with the point "1" reviewed and defined theoretical assumptions.	<b>d.-</b> Contrast of the analysis with what is found in phase "a" (theoretical) and the formulated hypothesis.
Conclusions and discussion proposal.	

### **Searching for references: identifying the electronic field**

The use of classic methods of ethnographic work in the so-called *virtual* environments generate a lot of problems, "... some of them entirely new to sociology" (Hamman, 1996, p. 3). Traditional notions like identity, community or culture can be perverted as Howard Rheingold said in 1993, in one of the first works on virtual communities. The concept of field as a geographically defined area is today problematic even in physical cultural ethnography (Marcus and Fischer, 1985; Wittel, 2000). We are, then, very cautious in our approach to the field. Ardévol et al. shows some new orientations. If we look at the subject of the boundary of the investigation context, the authors notify about a possible problem: the pure analysis of those linguistic, in fundamentally textual

environments, "...the connection between the lines of text that appear in the screen and the sense of interaction for the participants is not in the text, but in implicit form which the participants assume on the meaning of their actions and in the memory that is retained from previous interactions..." (Ardévol et al., 2003, p. 5). If the connection and the sense of the social interaction are not in the text, where can we look for them? Where and how can we find the social "implicit meanings"? If it is not in the text –what the participants in the interactions are saying- what delimits the field, of what does it consist?

In the electronic field we are talking about –following Ardévol et al., 2003- "to recognize social bonds ", "web relations ", "affective bonds", "established hierarchies ", "collective dynamics"... as concepts that are constructing the "interpretative frame of the researcher". Will we be able to focus our social *microscope* beyond the text, to the search of those bonds, relations, hierarchies, and dynamics that are, at least, those that delimit the space of people's participation?

Anthropologist George E. Marcus proposes "a multi-located" ethnography. Perhaps it is here where we can find the key for the answer to our questions. The North American lean heavily towards interdisciplinarity, considering that the objects of ethnographic study do not have clear, pre-defined limits. In this sense it is necessary to go beyond the analysis of the speech, deconstructing it. Marcus (1998) points out six possibilities of constructing an ethnography, following to:

- people,
- things,
- metaphors,
- the plot, the history, the allegory,
- the life or the biography,
- the conflict.

And he proposes a strategic position towards some of these possibilities. Ours is clear: we followed the metaphor that is implicit in the text. We considered people, things, the plots, the lives and the conflicts as metaphors, as multi-located constructions. If

someone is saying “I’m in love” we do not understand this expression literally, but as an emotional metaphor of a social construction, perhaps of a stereotyped one. We ask ourselves and the subject what social, affective and emotional bonds they hide behind that phrase. We worry about the relational, hierarchic and dynamic nets -following again Ardévol and his colleagues- that phrase crosses over; it is the intimate, made public.

Christine Hine makes her proposal of "a co-located" ethnography that, in our opinion, complements the one of Marcus. Hine (2000) speaks of an adaptive ethnography that allows social scientist to move with a certain amount of comfort in the environments of confusion. We believe that this adaptability contemplates the technology of co-construction of the field because of ethnographic intervention and presence. The field itself does not exist previously to our incursion. It is us, the social scientists, who creates it with the collaboration of its other actors of course; of its implicit ones such as bonds, dynamic, relations, hierarchies and so on. It is needed, then, so as not to lose the conscience of the person who -with his participant observation- is constructing something new, multi-locating himself in the environments to which he belongs. This conscience is, from our standpoint, the only method to avoid the problem that Rheingold warned us about (1993).

### **In the field**

It’s time to focus clearly the social microscope. Evidently, we have to move somewhere,

-- > Physical context, > [HTTP://www.terra.es](http://www.terra.es) > Forums > People and Friendship  
> Love > “Is the same happening to somebody else?”

We pay attention -without participating- to the origin of the field, how it was constructed. In this case, day 14/10; 12:25, Katia created a message in the reviewed context with the title reproduced in quotation marks. Basically, she has a problem: she loves sex and attractive physical characters are very important for her; but she says that

she is also very romantic and that the physically attractive boys are idiots and “*golfillos*”<sup>2</sup>. She is very worried and wishes to know if this is something common. It is interesting to indicate that in this first message she already gives significant data about her identity: she has work, her narrative style -correct, without misspelling- seems to show a person of a certain cultural level and it does not show morbid intentions, because it seems an acceptable reason to think that she is a woman. A day later (15/10; 09:06) she offers more personal data: she is 28 years old and lives in Madrid.

Now it’s our time to participate. We register a nickname -GUAPIIIIIITO-. We take part as a participant, 17/10; 12,33, with our only objective to introduce ourselves in the field, to familiarize with it, “to make friends”. We send a provocative message to a man and a flattering one to Katia. In addition, what we want is to collect definitions about the sexual identity that can sustain the reconnaissance target. For example,

**GUAPIIIIIITO, 27/10/04, 18:57** Hello Katia. It’s true, I like you. I would like to get to know you better. Well, at this moment I’m doing it this way. We will speak, if you want. From me, at the moment, I can say that as well as being guapito (attractive), I’m not sexist. Kisses,

**KATIA, 29/10/04, 11:42** Well.... look at this guy!, in addition to guapito, not sexist!!!.... I don’t believe you.... Kisses. K.

**GUAPIIIIIITO, 30/10/04, 11:48** You don’t believe me? So, Katia, don’t tell me that in addition to attractive you like “sexist” ones!!!

**YO\_KATIA, 02/11/04, 11:41** Noooooo!!!....how am I going to like sexists guys!!!....it is only that so much perfection sometimes sounds like utopia, incredible, and that does not exist...

In this intervention there is an evident manipulation. We take the conversation in the direction we are interested in: the dialogue about the sexual stereotypes of sexism. And here it would be possible to present some reflection about the ethics of this performance, in line with Alison Cavanagh (1999). The question is where is the limit between the co-construction and the manipulation of the social actors.

Anyway, this narrative collection –like those of the archaeologist who is collecting pieces that, together, show some “reality”- is the base of the *database* that allows us to work in the analytic phase.

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish colloquial word meaning good for nothing, layabout with loose morals.

Why did we selected this context? We have introduced ourselves in a micro-field, with all the limitations that it supposes. However, we hope to find sufficient elements in the final collection that allows us an approach to the elucidation of the problem of investigation defined agreed with our objectives. We follow Silverman (1993): “better much on little than little on much”. The context, in addition, created by KATIA has characteristics of enormous value for the research, that justify its election,

- Easy access.
- Friendly and usable communication environment.
- Interactivity.
- Control of simulation and deceit factors.
- Its own topics.

The best method to talk about cyber-sex (or cyber-love, or cyber-whatever) is to make it connected (Hamman, 1996). But we must be alert to the ambiguities and misinterpretations that the context itself favours (Hamman, 1997). Following Christine Hine (1998, p. 4), “I am using ethnography ... as a device to render the use of the Internet as problematic: rather than being inherently sensible, the Internet acquires its sensibility in use”.

### **The interview**

This is only a brief summary of the total electronic interview,

- 1    **Researcher**    I'm doing research on emotions on the Internet.
- 2                    Many people think that it is impossible that they are  
                          the same as those in "real life".
- 3                    I've been entering this forum for a long time with the  
                          nickname that you already know and, as you can imagine,
- 4                    I have read a lot of messages but yours have always  
                          grabbed my attention.
- 5                    In first place I liked how you write and your clear  
                          style of expression.
- 6                    And the facility you show in describing your emotions,

your experiences, your sensations...

7 they have been very interesting to me,  
8 not only as a researcher but, mainly, as a person.

9 **Informant** I am perplexed with your message, the truth is that I  
wasn't expecting something like this...,  
10 but far from disliking it I can say that you have me  
totally at your disposition.

11 I hope that this is interesting to you as an  
introduction,  
12 I am happy to continue our conversation and to be able  
to help you.

13 **Researcher** Do you think that the traditional forms of relationship  
between male/female -for example, as regards the  
14 domination of the male, his supposed initiative, his  
power...-  
15 are also reproduced on the Internet?  
16 Tell me, please, what do you think, how you feel, what  
are your experiences...

17 **Informant** The Internet is used as prolongation of real life  
18 according to it is knowing more and more.  
19 No matter how much we try to adorn it, we are animals  
and as such we rely on  
20 primary impulses, instincts, behaviour.

21 → The man himself is a hunter, he is the head of  
household, he is dominant and strong.

22 → The woman is practical, reflexive, less impulsive and  
in addition a mother.

23 → We are not equal nor will we ever be, the man is  
impulse, the woman is brake,  
24 we are complementary.

25 → (the men) they have been designed to fertilize many  
women,  
26 the species can't be allowed stop reproduction in the 9  
months that a pregnancy lasts.

27 **Researcher** Have you have ever had indecent proposals made to you?  
28 How did you feel? Did you answer?

29 **Informant** How did I feel?.... Often sad, sometimes furious,  
30 On a few occasions I felt good, at other times I had to  
restrain my character,  
31 to be less communicative or affective; I would like  
guys to value me for other things,

- 32                   sure at first sight that is an utopia....
- 33                   It is not difficult to ignore the messages, it is just  
like ignoring the slimy guys in the street, in the  
bars...
- 34 →               The women we took that ability from the factories...
- 35                   Sometimes it makes me sick and I forget all protocol  
with the aim of frightening off boys,
- 36 →               What I really want to say, is that to be a woman is not  
a lucky thing.

### **Doing Discourse Analysis (DA)**

The transcription of the dialogue takes time to summarize. In this case, the technology is transformed in itself: when there is no oral conversation the transcription is easy. It is reduced to copy and paste from the original. No interpretation is needed. We have the original complete conversation *as* it was constructed. If we want we can reproduce it completely. It's better to make a summary –subjective, without a doubt-, of the reality that was created during the interview with Katia. “In summarising it is likely to lose the detail and discursive subtlety of the original” (Antaki et al., 2003, p. 8).

Communication through electronic mail is quite linear. For example in chat-rooms the conversation is much more dynamic, less directed. There is almost more movement than in face-to-face communication! However electronic mail makes some distance between interlocutors possible which facilitates reflection, and makes the preparation for the dialogic construction more *conscious* than in face-to-face -or electronic chat-environments. There is the accessibility and immediacy of new mass media (Selwyn and Robson, 1998), but also the possibility of stopping the conversation and taking it up again when you want, locating the participants at the same level. In the proposed case we say that it is difficult in many occasions to find out who is the interviewer and who the interviewed person<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This is so if you accede to the complete textual conversation. Text reproduced here is manipulated and reconstructed by the authors, because of this the interviewer/interviewed difference is clear.

This summary can give the reader an idea of the work that the analyst has formalized; but it is not DA in itself. It is part of the technique, as is the data transcription. But, "...we mean to warn against the notion that transcription can be a replacement of, or substitute for, analysis" (Antaki et al., 2003, p. 8).

The discourse analyst works on the ordinary speech of ordinary people, the one that constructs the social life that "...is a continuous display of people's local understandings of what is going on (...) people accomplish such local understanding by elegantly exploiting the features of ordinary talk" (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998, p. 1).

As in quantitative methodologies, in qualitative ones there comes a moment when it is necessary to interpret the collected data. To interpret is always to take sides, to locate oneself for or against the data, to show or not sympathy towards the informers and their information. Antaki and his colleagues recognize that this happens. They alert us that this, again, is not DA, "If data analysis requires that the analyst offers something additional beyond presenting or summarising the data, then this does not mean that every additional offering is analysis". (Antaki et al., 2003, p. 9).

The transcription of the data and, mainly, its organization facilitates the abstraction of some of it for its analysis. Let us take one that Katia offers us in line 36, "... to be a woman is not a lucky thing". This affirmation -that carries far, generalist, demonstrative content of the Truth (Edwards, 2000)- is based on what the informant herself has said previously. Also she assumes her own experiences and reflections during her 28 years of life. In our opinion this phrase has an elevated emotional load. Does this transmitted emotionality allow us to take sides? We think so. We suggest that the analyst can -and, perhaps, he must- take an emotional position himself too. In addition, we believe it is inevitable. Erica Burman (2003, p. 3) explains it, "...my point here is that we need to take seriously how the tools of our own discursive practice inevitably speak of their own assumptions".

As social scientists we deal with social problems, not with varying abstract organizations of nature. And those problems that are there become present in the reality co-constructed by the human inter-subjectivities. And we can focus their analysis and resolution from different points of view -functionalist, structuralist, conflictivist,

constructionist...-. We can take part -for example from the option of communitarian Psychology and the Participant Action Investigation- or not.

But all this is not DA either. The intervention, participation in the social problem analysis object can be one consequence of the technique that we use to approach its understanding/construction. But that intervention, or that side that we took is not by itself DA, nor Discursive Psychology. We believe that it comprises part of it. We propose that *we get wet* with our informants when we try to process the data that they facilitate to us. But we can't confuse this commitment with the analytical technology.

We know that individual speeches are absolutely immersed in -and constructed by- his or her sociocultural context. Thus, phrases like the ones reviewed in lines 21, 22, 23, 25, 34 and 36 show clearly some of the gender stereotypes broadly accepted in our context,

21 → "the man he is a hunter, he is head of the household, he is dominant and strong "

22 → "the woman is practical, reflexive, less impulsive and in addition a mother "

23 → "we are not equal nor will we ever be "

25 → "(the men) they have been designed to fertilize many women"

34 → "the women we took that ability from the factory "

36 → "to be a woman is not a lucky thing"

Here -in the speech of Katia- some of the topics on gender that we are looking for are reflected. The informant bases all her theory on inequality ("we are not equal nor will we ever be") in genetic questions (the maternity; "... of factory"), those that seem to limit the destiny of people, specially women. It seems there are no exit. All possibilities are closed. And the informant speaks with certain bitterness (line 37) of an incontestable fact: to be a woman.

Where is the limit between the personal and social speech? It is here where Antaki and his colleagues alert us again: the circularity between both constructs -individual and group ones-. It would be precise now to see how they are interact. That is, to make DA is not to show how Katia -western woman, 28 years, cultural level...- assumes totally the concepts of the social macrostructure in which she lives, but how the interaction between the social group generates "young woman and everything about this" concept

and the rest of groups giving rise to the institutionalisation of individual/microgroup/macrostructural interaction.

Really, it is not enough to simply interpret the speeches in function of the sociocultural environment. We must go further by means of a very fine work of analysis of all the circumstances that make people to speak like they speak and our society *stereotype* like it *stereotypes*.

Following Jonathan Potter (2003, p. 20),

“...discourse analysts are concerned to use evidence from the materials as far as possible rather than basing interpretations on their own prior assumptions about people, mind, society or whatever. In this case, note that the idea that there is a stereotype about madness and creativity is not my own it is introduced in the text itself. Moreover, the analysis does not depend on this stereotype actually existing, merely that it is invoked as an issue in this text. Note that this not mean that the analyst expects to be able to free themselves of all their preconceptions, rather it is that analysis is, to an important extent, an interrogation of those expectations.”

The analyst's work, then, is to be generating questions parallel to the DA. Fine, non-conceptual and constructive dialogic questions,

- a) What is a stereotype?
- b) What is gender stereotype?
- c) Is it reproduced on the Internet?
- d) Did Katia construct and/or reproduce stereotypes in her conversations at the network?
- e) If the answer is yes, why and how do we interpret it so?
- f) If the answer is no, why?
- g) ...

The process, probably, never finishes since the answers to these questions will generate new ones. As John Shotter says (1993, p. 102),

“we directed ourselves towards a new world of problems created by authentic recognition of the importance of the differences more than of similarities, and of the important influence that that world exerts on character of the questions that now we think it’s necessary to approach.”

The interest now is not to pay attention to the detail of the phrases of the interviewed person. The important thing is to see what is the process of construction of reality that occurs by means of the dialogue, what *cultural instruments* (Vygotsky, 1978; Cole, 1996) both members use to arrive at the affirmations that they do, trying to equip their speeches with a sense of objectivity.

The details are no more than a component to consider. DA is oriented to processes, to how the dialogical relations are always formed moving “... convincingly back and forth between the general and the specific” (Antaki et al., 2003, p. 16).

Neither researcher nor Katia speaks only by themselves. The personal discourse is a deceit. Following Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1934-38/1981, p. 293),

“As a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in language, there are no 'neutral' words and forms --words and forms that can belong to 'no one'; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world.”

The multidirectional and multi-varied (polyglot) language -the social language, the symbolic dialogue- constructs the reality. The individual language is impossible. The inner one, false. It has no reality beyond the symbolic interaction between two -as minimum- organizations that communicate. Person to person, person to culture or culture to culture. Katia and ourselves -with our different points of view; different perspectives- speak from our own cultural standpoints. We are culture. To analyse speech is to analyse a culture. And everything in culture is heteroglotic. Dialogic heteroglossia has to do with the diversity of voices that are patent when Katia says “we are not equal nor will we ever be”.

The construction of Katia's identity -the detail- as soon as to the symbolic difference - between male/female narrated in a so absolute form is inserted in the cultural/dialogic carnival of the Western culture like "abrupt changes of fate, mystifications, and so on (...) everyday life is drawn into the carnivalized action of the plot; the ordinary and constant is combined with the extraordinary and changeable". (Bakhtin, 1929, p. 158).

Finally, Katia also uses examples as tests of veracity –"dressings", she says-. The examples and the dressings are metaphors, like everything from the perspective of the socioconstructionism. "In a sense, then, we are all metaphors of other people" (Gergen, 1999, p. 65). We would say that in all senses. And metaphors have their substance in themselves, they have nothing else behind, nothing else out of metaphoric speech. A single word does not exist nor makes reference to something concrete when we go in the search of the meaning of the speeches, of its sense; "...sense, a meaning derived entirely from what words said about one another in the way, for example, dictionary definitions" (Tyler, 1978, p. 12).

### **Conclusions and debate proposals**

"...the report's author can be held accountable for the veracity of her report, and also for any interactional consequences it may have." (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p. 166)

We do not understand a *cold* ethnography, distant from its object of analysis. In fact, the attempt to be distanced is absurd: the object of analysis is ourselves; we form part of all of it; and are constituted by the psycho-social magma. Abstraction is an illusion, a vain pretension. To generate knowledge in social sciences means to imply ourselves, to take sides, to change the world in some sense. Living in conscience of the inter-subjectivity is to co-construct the reality from the light and the ethical rationality that science can contribute. Humbly. Social scientists are not revolutionary nor heroes; but we participate in the progress and the change, we are influenced by the way in which people think and act.

We are co-constructing our contemporary archaeological piece, our social puzzle, the great cultural rainbow Michael Carrithers talk about (1992).

We present notes, reflections; not a finished work nor the Truth. We use the ethnographic method, based in this case on the history of life and conversation –and its DA- with one specific person. The environment is electronic, as real or more so than life itself.

**JovenTIC/e-rmeneuTIC Research Group. Barcelona/València. Spain, 04/2006.**

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