

## Closeness and distance in qualitative research

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### Abstract.

#### Conceptual framework: Eli Buchbinder - Moderator

One of the key avenues to meaning lies in the spatial representation of experiences. "Close" and "distant" represent various qualities, significance, intensity, and strength of life-motifs. The panel aims to present the reflective processes involved in the researcher/participants relationships in various areas of inquiry. Our view is that closeness and distance are not only positional metaphors but represent critical ontological and epistemological issues in qualitative research. Closeness and distance are essential in all stages of the research process: the choice of the topic, entering the field, the relationship with participants, the ways of data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations. The panel will reflect on questions such as the advantages and disadvantages of studying the close and the known as opposed to the distant and unfamiliar; the meaning of transparency and reflexivity between the known and the unknown; how to cope with either option (e.g., to bring the distant closer and create optimal distance with the close one), in a manner which enables a multi-dimensional optimal balance by which the researcher can get close enough to understand the phenomenon under scrutiny while remaining far enough for enabling a both/and perspective.

#### The Anthropologist as Chameleon - Rivka A. Eisikovits - Presenter

During anthropological fieldwork, the researcher often has the feeling that she/he is modeling a chameleon in the attempt to best perform her/his mission. In this paper I am concentrating on the aspect of distancing between researcher and informants. The researcher must make conscious decisions as to the degree of researcher-informant proximity most appropriate for performing various research tasks in different research settings. This consideration changes along the research process. At various stages different degrees of proximity will serve the researcher best as she/ he wishes to zoom in on a specific aspect of the culture studied or to take a broad view of an entire setting. The roles researchers assume or are allotted by informants or research circumstances also affect considerations of optimal distancing. These concerns of positioning clearly bear on researcher's skill development and adjustment, reflexivity, and overall professional identity formation. The presentation will examine costs and gains that accrue from social distancing throughout the research process and provide illustrations from a variety of fieldwork experiences.

#### Being inside and outside— reflections on positionality through the lenses of mindfulness, marriage, and divorce - Guy Enosh- Presenter

One of the most crucial and perplexing issues in qualitative research is being *a part* of the phenomenon studied vs. being *apart* from the phenomenon. This has been dubbed the "etic vs. emic" positions. Being apart from the phenomenon, one may be able to see processes, interactions, and patterns that those who are a part of it may not. One may have a larger context to relate to, knowing details that those absorbed in the here-and-now of living may be oblivious to. Alternatively, being a part of the phenomenon, one may get to sense, feel, experience the "thing" studied. Have an insider information and knowledge that no outsider may ever gain. The leap between the horns of



this dilemma may be found in the metaphor of mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness means to be with the experience and to observe it at the same time. There may be three ways to attempt this feat. (1) By becoming so close to the studied "other", to what Buber has called the I-Thou experience. (2) By being an outsider that has "gone-native", and immersed oneself so much in the studied phenomenon or context, that one has (temporarily) forgotten the external perspective, and adopted the internal one. (3) The third way will be to detach oneself from being part of the phenomenon in order to gain an outsider's perspective. The current presentation will use a triple auto-ethnographic perspective: of a veteran of high-conflict-divorce, of a couple/family-therapist working with high-conflict divorces, and of a qualitative researcher studying interactions and relations in high-conflict divorce.

**Like talking to myself: old people studying old people - Zvi Eisikovits- Presenter**

The purpose of the presentation is to reflect on the experience of an old researcher studying old people. It will address some themes involved in such research situations. The boundaries of time and location will be addressed along with rhythm changes and tensions as to the priorities of the protagonists. What needs and what can get done within the time limitations of age will be also considered. The location of narratives in space may add complexity to the understanding of the interviewee's stories vis-à-vis that of the researcher. Losses may be expressed in spatial experiences (e.g., loss of home), "housekeeping" to make space familiar). Questions regarding the tensions between expectations and facts of the researcher and the researched will be addressed. The multiple ways of being an outsider, living in another time another place will be examined. The Sartrean "no longer and not yet" statement with its spatial equivalent in old age will be discussed along the ways it affects the experience of the protagonists. The body as a locale and source of both time and space-concerns in old age (e.g., illness, weakness) and related issues of what can and cannot be taken for granted will be discussed. These topics will be addressed in the context of the old people's organization of their narratives by significant life events rather than time. In the shadow of "being towards death" the last chance of being authentic, for researcher and researched, is addressed in the context of moving towards each other in the interpersonal space socially and psychologically constructed.

**Men interviewing women: Is the gap bridgeable - Eli Buchbinder- Presenter**

The starting point in reflecting over men interviewing women is the recognition that gender constructs the interview process. The feminist movement altered the essence of interviewing women. First, gender is now perceived as an organizing concept, essential to understanding and analysing reality. Female interviewers share the same social situation with their female interviewees and hence experience closeness. Ontologically and epistemologically the question is whether a male interviewer can know, understand, and interpret authentically women's being in the world. Second, an argument often made is that women lose some of their authenticity in the presence of men. An additional risk is that the male interviewer might express explicitly or implicitly a masculine ideology. The question becomes whether a man interviewer can enable a safe space for the female interviewee to overcome the risk of marginalization and distortion of the female voice. Finally, feminist perspectives seek to advance new ways of interviewing based on empathy, partnership, and mutuality, possible only through their shared experience. In contrast, the male interviewer is always expected to stay at a distance. The presentation reflects my experience as a male in interviewing women survivors of intimate partner violence. These issues challenge the male researcher to enhanced awareness to the on-going process of reflection on the multiple ways in which gender organizes the perspectives and interpretations of reality throughout the interview process. I will illustrate the ways in which critical reflection on distance-closeness as "the other" can enhance the depth of such interview situations.

**Keywords:** Closeness, distance, reflexivity



**Necessary resources:** Technical resources should include a video projector and microphone, and ability to connect a laptop computer to the projector, or alternatively, a connected computer that will accept external memory stick (USB)

### Organization of the Panel Discussion

- 1- **Brief context:** One of the most crucial and perplexing issues in qualitative research is being *a part* of the phenomenon studied vs. being *apart* from the phenomenon. This has been dubbed the "etic vs. emic" positions. The panel aims to present the reflective processes involved in the researcher/participants relationships in various areas of inquiry. Closeness and distance are essential in all stages of the research process: the choice of the topic, entering the field, the relationship with participants, the ways of data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations.
- 2- **Objective(s):** To advance reflective stances and practices of the audience as qualitative researcher, vis-a-vis their own research projects, in the past, current and future, in terms of their closeness and distance from the phenomena and participants involved.
- 3- **Dynamics / Strategy:**
  - a. Presentation (Group Activity). The moderator will present each presenter, including their expertise and research domains, while asking them thought provoking questions regarding their presentations.
  - b. Theoretical Exposition of the theme:
    - i. The panel will begin with the moderator - Eli Buchbinder - presenting the overarching theme, and presenting the major questions of the panel to the audience.
      - 10 minute presentation
    - ii. Rivka Eisikovits will discuss the theme of "Anthropologist as chameleon", focusing on the variations in terms of closeness and distance a researcher has to decide upon in order to fit oneself into the background of the research context and over various stages of the research project.
      - 15 minute presentation
    - iii. Guy Enosh will discuss the movement between being inside and being outside the phenomenon studied, and the space in between, while relating notions of qualitative research to notions derived from the practice of Mindfulness on the one hand and marital counselling on the other.
      - 15 minute presentation
    - iv. Zvi Eisikovits will discuss an autoethnographic perspective of being/becoming old and studying other old people, focusing on issues of time boundaries and rhythm changes. Questions regarding the tensions between expectations and facts of the researcher and the researched will be addressed.
      - 15 minute presentation
    - v. Eli Buchbinder will discuss the gap emanating from a context of man interviewing women. Is it possible for a male interviewer to know, understand, and interpret authentically women's being in the world? He will discuss with the audience the possibility of bridging such a gap.
      - 15 minute presentation
    - vi. Audience participation, questions and answers, reflections.



- 20 minute presentation

c. Application in other contexts

The theme of the panel is broad, and applicable to all contexts and subjects of qualitative research. This fact is demonstrated within the panel itself, where each panelist is presenting a variation on the theme as it applies to specific contexts and domains of research, each panelist focusing on different domain and contexts. Those include gender issues, age and time issues, marriage and divorce, family conflicts, and various stages of the qualitative research project.

d. Discussion

Qualitative research comes in many forms, methodologies and techniques, at times even leading to so-called "paradigm wars". Whereas each qualitative research project is different and unique, still, there are some themes and issues that cut across all approaches, methods, and paradigms, weaving like a fine thread through all forms and contexts of qualitative research. One such theme is the theme of "closeness and distance". Our panel is aimed at demonstrating just that, while challenging the audience to personally and collectively reflect on the application of this theme to their own research and research relationships.

4- Application of the proposal in reality / practical examples;

The panel is focused on demonstrating the application overarching theme of closeness and distance in to the reality of various research projects, including gender differences, issues of age and time in research, family issues with specific emphasis on high conflict divorces, while drawing from reflections on the practice of mindfulness, and the various stages of the research project. Therefore the panel – by design – is practically focused. Furthermore, the audience will be challenged to reflect and relate the panel theme and the different presentations to their own research projects in their various stages.

5- Expected results.

The audience participants will appreciate the centrality of the theme of closeness and distance to their different and varying own research projects, and will integrate reflective practices regarding closeness and distance in the research relationships and in their personal practice/

## References

No references are used in the abstract

## Biographical notes:

**Rivka A. Eisikovits, Ph.D.** is a Professor Emerita of educational anthropology, former Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy. Research areas: culture acquisition, culture change and adaptation, multiculturalism, immigrant education, interaction between migration and globalization. She is an expert in ethnographic research methods. Authored and edited seven books, numerous articles, and book chapters.

**Guy Enosh, Ph.D.** is Professor at the School of Social Work, University of Haifa. His research focuses on conflictual and supportive interactions between family members, service providers and clients, and among social systems. He volunteers as a family therapist in a public service unit, specializing in high-conflict cases. He formerly served as the chair of the Committee for Ethics in Research with Human Beings, at the University of Haifa, Israel.

**Zvi Eisikovits, PhD,** is a Professor Emeritus of social welfare and criminology former Dean of the Faculty of Welfare and Health Studies at the University of Haifa and former director of the Center for



the Study of Society. He published about 120 articles and 5 books mostly on the topics of intimate partner violence and elder abuse and recently on existentialism in practice.

**Eli Buchbinder**, PhD, is associate professor at the School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, University of Haifa, Israel. Eli specializes in qualitative research on intimate partner violence and has published numerous journal articles in various fields of practice. He has extensive practice as a social worker in different social work institutions, including a public welfare agency, a children's residential care facility, a family therapy facility, and a domestic intervention unit, and has served as a mental health officer in the army.

