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# MARGALIT COHEN-EMERIQUE



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## 2.1. Introduction to Margalit Cohen-Emerique and her method



### Who is Margalit Cohen-Emerique?

Margalit Cohen-Emerique is a psycho-sociologist, researcher, and trainer. It is not by chance that she found the field of interculturality. Her life path has led through quite different environments, all of which were themselves in continuous evolution. She was born in Tunis, into a Tunisian Jewish family, marked by processes of acculturation: her grandparents did not speak French, were deeply religious (she recalls a great-aunt dressed in Turkish style with baggy trousers) while her mother addressed her daughters in a correct French, while spoke to her relatives in Judeo-Arabic or in a mixture of the two languages. She spent her childhood shared between these references of a world "from before " and an education turned towards France, a modern Western world, highly valued in her family. Accordingly, she received her education in French schools. France attracted her in a thousand ways, seeming to her to be a kind of paradise both near and far, near because she knew its history and geography at her fingertips, but far because she had never been there and did not have the French nationality. She felt first and foremost Jewish, because she belonged to this close-knit minority, living together, within a colonial society that was then very compartmentalized, even if this Jewish identity was inscribed in a modern and secular conception. And even if she was interacting with members of the Arab-Muslim majority or the French community in the school, she had no deep contact with these groups, as each lived in separation.



It is this contradictory mix and the search for her identity that led her to join a leftist Zionist movement at the age of 17, and to leave, with her high school diploma in her pocket, to settle in a kibbutz in Israel. At first, she experienced this mini collectivist society in a state of euphoria and enthusiastic interest, thanks to the values she shared with the other members and to learning Hebrew, which would become her second language, and all this, despite the very rustic living conditions. After a few years, this collective life began to weigh on her, especially with regard to her activities (she worked as an educator of young children, after having spent a few months in the fields and in the kitchen), wondering whether she wanted to work like that all her life, especially since the possibilities of work for women were quite limited, despite the - theoretical - principle of equality between the sexes. But what really triggered her off was the group's refusal to give her a break from her life in the collective to engage in higher education: she was revolted by this refusal and decided to leave the kibbutz forever.

She then left for Paris to study psychology, where it was a third immersion in a new cultural environment: she discovered Paris (rather than France), its climate, its architecture (with a little disappointment, as she found it dark) and university life with enchantment. But it was above all the encounter with the French language with all its richness of expression and nuances that fascinated her. However, all her energy was invested in her studies, to obtain the diplomas that would allow her to practice clinical psychology in Israel. This is what she achieved after four years of study, and she returned to Israel. She first worked as a psychologist for immigrant adolescents, and then at the Ministry of Health in a mental health service and aftercare centre. It was during this first part of her career, through various personal and professional experiences, that she understood the need to take into account the cultural variable. And this, not only as a diversity of world views and lifestyles, but also as the domination of Western models and the hierarchical classification of group identities and the preconceptions attributed to them. At the time, in the 1960s, few highly educated North Africans had emigrated to Israel and she discovered the strength of stereotypes, prejudice and even discrimination against this category of migrants, although she had never had to suffer from them.



She only perceived a certain astonishment when people discovered her origins. This gradually led her to questions on identity: socialized in French culture and education, but lacking French nationality, she was also Israeli by choice and commitment, sharing the values of Israel. Finally, she was also a Jew from North Africa, but without substance, since there was almost nothing left of her roots. It was this set of questions that led her to address issues of multiple identities.

And there she was once more in France, thanks to a scholarship from the French government, for a doctorate in psychology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. The topic of her research was "the acculturation of North African Jews in France, in particular Moroccan Jews". The research she carried out for this thesis was a crucial period for her, as it gave her a better understanding of her parents' life history, placed in a multidimensional context. Her research also helped her to find her place in this current that carried the community of her childhood to other places and other identities. It was a founding period for her. Then, after her doctorate, she decided to stay in France and began a new career that led her to become, with other researchers and trainers, one of the pioneers of interculturality in France, in several European countries and in Canada (Quebec).



### **The origin of her approach**

It was during this period, in the early 1970s, that Margalit Cohen-Emerique began training social workers working with migrants, in a period when immigrants were still considered temporary residents. From 1975 France drastically reduced the possibility of immigrating for work, making family reunification the only remaining door for immigration. As a consequence, public social services were more and more called upon to meet the needs of these new types of migrants who were settling permanently in the country. These services were then confronted with unknown and



sometimes strange demands and problems for which they had neither the means to understand nor the means to answer, resulting in great difficulties.

It is in this context that Margalit Cohen-Emerique was contracted, as early as the 1980s, for specific training courses. Her objective was then to transmit knowledge about these migrants in different domains: cultural specificities, acculturation, identity crises, adaptation process. The trainees were mostly practitioners in social and educational fields: social workers, social economy counsellors, specialized educators and also teachers in literacy and French language. The idea was that by combining theoretical input and awareness-raising based on case studies, these field workers would be able to discover all the elements that would enable them to understand the situations of individuals and families as precisely as possible. This was to equip practitioners against misinterpretations and erroneous assessments such as equating migrants with social or psychological deviant behaviour, accusing them with the abuse of French society, and considering their children as potential delinquents, all such preconceptions leading to inappropriate interventions. She also believed that a broad and in-depth knowledge of other cultures would make it possible to overcome those difficulties.



### **Her observations**

After a one-year follow-up of a few groups of practitioners on case studies or specific issues, it became clear that her training model was inadequate. Three observations gradually became clear to her:

\* First of all, in spite of always connecting the theoretical inputs to practical situations, professionals did not apply them when they had to assess the demands and needs of migrant clients. They



continued to refer to their usual frames of reference, such as the psychoanalytical approach or simply a legal and bureaucratic framework. It was as if cultural differences were merely a folklore that was worth to be aware of for the sake of exoticism, but which were not essential for the professional expertise based on the respect for the "universal man". And paradoxically, at the same time, trainees continued to request trainings on the 'original cultures' of the migrants without thinking that these could be modified through contact with the host society.

→ Hence her first question: why were the theoretical inputs not integrated? What were the cognitive, evaluative, and affective filters and screens?

\*The second observation concerned the way in which people used the knowledge they received in the courses concerning the cultures of origin. Whenever the professionals referred to them, they did so in the form of stereotypes (negative or positive), without, however, seeking to test whether they were suitable for a given individual with their particular personal history, their multiple identities and in a given context. It was as if the individual dimension of the person was totally erased at the expense of a cultural dimension of the natural order, which was frozen, without any evolution in contact with the host country.

→ Hence the second question: why do trainees use the cultural information they received in the training in such a way as to lead to the essentialisation of identity? What could be the impact on the relationship with the client and, first and foremost, on the possibility of establishing trust?

\*Her third observation was just as paradoxical as the previous: during the trainings participants asked many questions about the unusual behaviour and customs observed by the people they accompanied, but none of them seemed to have made any steps to search out these answers before the training begun, either from books or from informants or the clients themselves. This resulted in a serious lack of basic information on the socio-historical context of the families and individuals they accompanied. One could summarise this posture by saying: "everything happened as if the migrants only existed from the moment, they set foot on French soil".



→ A third question then arose: why this lack of openness, curiosity, and interest in others?

It is all these three observations and the questions that followed that led her to review her concept of training and to profoundly rethink it. She became aware of the fact that providing knowledge on the meaning of migrants' behaviours was certainly necessary but could not be sufficient or worse. Exposed out of context, such knowledge could even have the opposite effect, i.e. reinforce and deepen misunderstanding and intolerance. And in any case this knowledge could not cover the many real-life situations of interaction in professional practices. Hence her methodological shift: her focus, both for training and for research, had to shift from migrants to professionals, without, however, refraining from referring to the former.

She has therefore constructed a new paradigm for training, which can be stated as follows: the objective of training is to make social workers involved with migrants aware of perceiving, recognising and researching cultural differences (norms, values, world views, needs) but also migratory trajectories, types of family reunification, acculturation processes and adaptation in the host society, in order to integrate them into the professional practice. For her, these three aspects are fundamental:

\*Perception, because despite the contributions of knowledge, there are obstacles to this perception.

\*Recognition means both knowing and understanding, but also being able to tolerate and respect others, an essential condition of the helping process.

\*Research means having an active attitude, openness, authentic interest, curiosity and even questioning towards the client, the primary interlocutor and primary resource.

There is nothing really original about these statements: if we read from theoreticians of social action, particularly about case studies, we find the same humanistic principles. However, none of these many texts talks about how to overcome the obstacles that arise in encounters with diversity, or even how



to manage conflicts of values when dealing with populations whose values are incompatible with those of our Western societies. It is therefore this uncharted territory that she has chosen to explore.

The originality of her approach also lies in the fact that she did not build a training course based only on her theoretical and practical knowledge but chose to go out into the field of professionals to explore, understand and then to elaborate. She has therefore decided to carry out an action-research, centred on professionals, through an approach that can consider them holistically, in their interaction with the culturally different "others", individuals or collectives within the professional context. She defined interaction as a process of sharing in the professional context which, through communication, will enable the interlocutors to mutually influence each other. This became the object of her study.

At the same time, she needed a theoretical basis for the construction a training programme that would improve the understanding of professionals. In the end, her objective was therefore twofold: within her action-research she wished to map the difficulties of professionals and to identify the sources of these difficulties, and in parallel she had to define the appropriate objectives and methodologies for a training. As a result, the professionals she would work with became both the objects of study and the subjects of training.

When her research began in the late 1980s, in France there was very limited theoretical knowledge available focusing on the interactions between people with different cultural roots, and practically non-existent concerning the professional interventions with migrants. In view of this conceptual void, she realised that it would only be possible for her to access theoretical references in successive stages, by crossing existing theoretical currents and the experiences of practitioners in the field.





## **The theoretical references at the basis of her approach**

Margalit Cohen-Emerique therefore chose to borrow concepts from different scientific disciplines that she felt were relevant, the focus remaining on the interaction processes as closely as possible. They will only be cited here for the record, to also show the diversity of approaches that fed her reflection and theoretical elaboration:

- Research in cultural psychology helped her discover that differences in norms, values and codes are a main cause of difficulties that professionals have in understanding their clients.
- Studies in acculturation, exploring different processes that are not always easy for practitioners to decode.
- Research on inter-group relations and perceptions in social psychology contributed a lot to the study of ethnocentrism, prejudice, and discrimination, which tend to be systemic in this professional field.
- The study of attributing causes to conduct (including attribution mistakes) was central to Margalit Cohen-Emerique's research, considering attribution a cornerstone in professional expertise.
- Research on migration, a large field of study bringing essential information.
- Intercultural communication provided an important theoretical framework for describing the dynamics of exchange and communication between different cultural models.
- The Social Representations (SR) stream, providing key concepts for research as well as for training.



- The School of Palo Alto, which focused on possible interfaces between cultural differences in relation to the body, the representation of space, time and in modes of communication. These interfaces have served as explanation for certain difficulties in the analysis of practices and helped to relativise the obstacles to communication.

The training programmes that existed at the time, in the French National Education system and for development workers, were of no help to her. They only superficially touched on the essential problem of the relationship between different cultural models, often only anecdotally. In the same way, American training manuals on intercultural communication proposed artificial methods, which were not adapted to the problems encountered by these actors of integration. These two experiences of practitioners enabled her to make considerable progress in both research and training.



### **The contribution of practitioners**

- The observation of development workers in 'Third World' countries.

Cohen-Emerique's reflection gained new inspiration from the research carried out by R. Preiswerk, carrying out consultancy with Western professionals in contact with other societies and other agricultural practices. Preiswerk's observations and proposals reinforced her choice of an approach that focuses on the practitioners, on their ways of grasping realities. Preiswerk's findings helped to fine tune her training objectives, i.e. to help professionals overcome the obstacles to understanding. However, this advance in her thinking led to a new questioning: are the conceptions of social and educational intervention, as they have been constructed in Western societies, adapted to migrant populations?



- Training through culture shock. It was an original training approach delivered in Honolulu to future social workers preparing them to work with migrants from Micronesia that brought the key step in the development of her method: the discovery of culture shock. Until then, she had not suspected that practitioners working in their own countries might experience culture shock, especially since they never mentioned it. When she became aware of this phenomenon, she encouraged professionals in training to talk about it, they did so, to her great surprise, without any reservations and without their stories triggering any judgment from their colleagues.

From this moment on, the notion of culture shock leads her to integrate in her methodological construction the epistemological analysis of the concept of interculturality by Mr Abdallah Pretceille, who states that "intercultural" brings three new perspectives with respect to the term "culture": the subjectivist perspective, the interactionist perspective and the situational perspective. Viewing culture shock in the light of these three perspectives enabled her to avoid falling into the trap of considering professional practices as if the people carrying them out were culturally neutral, outside social relationships and without pressure to acculturate. However, since shock is not always conscious, it was necessary to create a research mechanism to collect data for the production of knowledge about the processes involved in interaction, and to provide a training tool that could lead to reflection on professional practices. Thus the "method of culture shocks" or "method of critical incidents" was born.



## **Characteristics of the method of culture shocks**

The elaboration of an analysis grid consisting of seven point ensured standardization and rigour in the analysis, for both research and training.

In training, the analysis was carried out through the choice of the comprehensive paradigm, rather than the explanatory paradigm, implying that the analysis of the meanings of behaviours and demands was carried out by the professionals and always placed in their context.

For research, the culture shock method gave access to this "living experience" which has nothing to do with the practice of supervisors or social work consultants. It draws progress from the processes in intercultural interaction.

At this stage, Margalit Cohen-Emerique took all these data, systematized them and connected them to the theories mentioned above, in order to give it a certain intelligibility.



## **Lessons from the action-research conducted by Margalit Cohen-Emerique**

a. The discovery of "sensitive zones" and the mapping of the obstacles to communication and to understanding the culturally different other. The regularities and redundancies in the data have therefore been grouped into themes called "guiding images" or "sensitive zones", i.e. those where the professional has the most difficulty in communicating with the other, those where



misunderstandings are the most frequent, the strongest, and where feelings are the most violent, potentially leading to professional failures.

b. Constructing the intercultural approach: Margalit Cohen-Emerique has developed her three-step approach involving decentring; the discovery of the frame of references of the other; and negotiation/mediation.



## **Conclusion**

The method of Margalit Cohen-Emerique has today a very specific place in the landscape of intercultural training, which is still too often marked by behaviouralist models providing recipes such as: "How to work with such a population of migrants?"

Her methodology of understanding and analysing situations facilitates the approaching of other cultures and their hidden dimensions, using the discovery of these same aspects in one's own society as a starting point.

\*The method induces important transformations in the way professionals look at their target groups and position themselves in different situations. It is not a question, as in classical pedagogy, of approaching the professionals' own representations and their models in a negative way as erroneous notions or even trying to ignore them. To the contrary the aim is to make them more precise, because they underlie the professionals' practices.

\*The methodology pushes practitioners to take into account the point of view of each party in interaction, be it in the models and emotions felt in the cultural shock experienced when encountering the "different others". The method demands making hypotheses, and not stopping at



just one; all the more so when facing the unknown, the unexpected or when invaded by a preconception.

\*The method obliges them to clarify their own representations, real or imaginary, towards the foreigner or foreigners.

\*It triggers an awareness of their lack of knowledge about the other and of the vital need to seek information, otherwise the professional practice is reduced to uncertain interpretation of the other as opposed to understanding.

It is a process of deconstruction/construction, a difficult learning process, sometimes even painful even for those who experience it. Becoming aware of the intercultural dimension in the professional context is a real challenge. This intercultural approach is a construction, a slow elaboration, not always easy, but always a source of enrichment. It is not evident. It requires a permanent questioning on the part of the people who engage in it, not a renunciation of their culture, their identity, but a new perspective, without a hierarchical cultural ladder.

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