



**HAL**  
open science

## ”Being affected”: a necessity to work on a women-only group?

Agathe Rochet

### ► To cite this version:

Agathe Rochet. ”Being affected”: a necessity to work on a women-only group?. Congreso internacional antropologia feminista, Université de Grenade, Jul 2024, Grenade (Espagne), Spain. halshs-04707978

**HAL Id: halshs-04707978**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04707978v1>**

Submitted on 24 Sep 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

This paper will be based on fieldwork on non-mixity in the worlds of art and culture in Lyon and St Etienne (France), and mainly on a six-month study of a non-mixed creative writing workshop. The aim of the study was to understand the place of solidarity between women in the art world and the extent to which this can be a vector for change.

Although non-mixity is a frequently used form of political action in France, particularly in feminist movements, and has been since the first feminist wave of the suffragettes, it wasn't very successful in the town of St Etienne, where the writing workshops took place. Although politically very much on the left, St Etienne is and always has been a very active city, both in terms of associations and trade unions, feminist movements are not very well organised here and non-mixed groups are on the fringes. Today, however, rather than organised movements or collectives, we are seeing the use of this mode of collective action within the cultural world. A case in point is the Paroles de femmes programme, created in 2021 by the Paroles et Musiques music festival. Each year, a series of creative writing workshops will be organised. For 2023, the year I joined the scheme, participants were invited to register by email and to attend an introductory meeting at an alternative venue. This was followed by 6 open workshops between the beginning of February and the end of April, as well as a full day of residency and a spinning session before performing in public as part of the Paroles et Musiques festival. I was involved in the whole process.

Although my integration into the scheme was very straightforward, I chose to reveal my status as a researcher and the purpose of my research to all the organisers and participants at the very first meeting. This choice was part of a reflexive approach that was crucial to my research work and which enabled me to question the way in which I could combine scientific research and feminist commitment. For me, it was also a question of constantly moving back and forth between practice and theory, and of paying attention to the commitments that bound me to my feminist position. Theorising as a feminist implies addressing feminists, recognising and establishing relations of a specific nature with them, to use the terms of E. Lépinard (2021) *DIAPO*. The feminist project is a project for social change, with the aim of emancipation, and so for me it was a question of putting the relational aspects of my research at the centre of my concerns: what are the consequences of my actions and my discourse? What impact can they have on my respondents and, more generally, on all women and all feminists?

Initially, my involvement in this project was based on my desire to observe the writing group and to understand how bonds of solidarity could emerge within a non-mixed group, through a creative process. This first objective was evinced almost immediately, from the very first information meeting, and was transformed into observational participation. My research work became a *DIAPO* 'adventure', to use the terms of Jeanne Favret Saada (90), in which I gave priority to involvement and participation in the creative process rather than observation, which would have required me to take a certain

distance from the scenes unfolding before my eyes and in which I was taking part. I 'let myself be affected' (Favret-Saada, 1990) DIAPO, without thinking about my research work, which I carried out after the event, once I got home, or a few days later when the emotions I felt during the sessions prevented me from processing the information. Here, the reflective approach enabled me to question my work methodology and my practice.

Participant observation would not have enabled me to produce knowledge, because of the distancing it implies. Removing myself from the group would have automatically positioned me as an outsider, but I didn't want to observe the participants, I wanted to observe the relationships that developed within the group. My participation therefore became a priority. On the other hand, distancing myself and positioning myself as a 'semi-external' element would also have meant building a kind of boundary between myself and the rest of the group, whereas working on gender, and this reflexive approach to feminist commitment, which I had begun at the start of my research, was mainly about considering the implications of research work with oppressed social groups and questioning my position as a researcher so as not to reconstruct an asymmetrical relationship with my respondents. My respondents were not to become research 'objects' to be analysed by a 'scholar'. On the contrary, my approach was to enable my respondents to constitute themselves as subjects, reflexive and creators of knowledge.

However, participating as an observer and transforming my research work into an "adventure" meant taking risks in terms of collecting data. I had to consider letting myself be affected as a means of producing knowledge, which was built up through the experience of the group and of others. This method enabled me to grasp and become aware of the effects of the study rather than trying to minimise them, to use Emerson's terms (2003). Participating fully in the workshops and allowing myself to be affected did, however, require a form of scientific rigour, later on, and through the fieldwork notebook. For me, it was a way of putting things straight, of going back over certain dialogues or certain behaviours. Sometimes it also allowed me to go back and question my own feelings and reactions. This stage was necessary, because the workshops were like a therapeutic process for me. The writing exercises led us to open up about our lives and our experiences, and to allow ourselves to be invaded by those of others. In this sense, the exercises also strengthened the cohesion of the group and the bonds of trust that bound us together. This cohesion was also evident in the speeches we produced, which showed a high degree of regularity.

The collective writing, formed from extracts of individual writing, reveals a "focus" on similar moments in the lives and psychological states of all the participants (SLIDE - exquisite corpse extract). Through the writings, we see in particular life paths that highlight "highs, lows, holes, bumps, knocks, twists and turns, moments when we don't feel capable, moments when we feel taken for incapable, then moments when we pull ourselves together and regain confidence" (extract from field notebook - 26 April 2023).

This extract from my field notebook shows, on the one hand, this form of group cohesion, but also the way in which the workshops affected me. The workshops often led me to experience - in the same way as this extract from the exquisite corpse - contradictory feelings. I was often very affected, sometimes feeling as if I was losing control of my emotions, but at the same time feeling as if a new energy was being born in me, a kind of inner power.

In conclusion, my research on non-mixity has enabled me to give a new place to emotions in my research work. Working on the bonds of solidarity between women requires finding a research methodology that is adapted to the field and to the study of relationships. Letting my emotions run away with me enabled me to create a means of communicating with the other participants, but also to strengthen the cohesion of the group and the trust between its different members. Affect was a necessity in order to understand the relationships that were being created, because it is affects that are the building blocks of bonds and interactions. On the other hand, letting your emotions speak also meant that you didn't distance yourself from the other members of the group and create a boundary between 'them' and me, and that you saw them as people, as active subjects, and not as objects of my research who would be subject to the expert's gaze, which is an essential thing when working with oppressed populations.