

# Young Sexualities: Crossing Methods, Techniques and Approaches

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## **Abstract**

This article presents some results of two research experiences on sexuality among adolescents and young adults that show empirically the sense of these complex contemporary processes. We discuss some conflictual aspects of our research experiences and we offer an analysis of the use of different methodologies – in particular, “classic” and “virtual” ethnography – in order to observe how youth cultures are built through sexual behaviors.

**Keywords:** Sexual behaviors. Adolescents. Virtual ethnography.

## Introduction

**F**rom the late sixties, the sexual revolution has imposed the ideal of sexuality as an “individual choice” through which people could express their autonomy (Reich, 1969). However, as Michel Foucault (1976) explained, this revolution, and the institutionalization of a social discourse on sexuality, also produce control *dispositifs* that regulate individual and collective conducts. The governance of sexuality can become a governance of the bodies, of the subjects, of their lives. Thus, what it results isn’t so much a complete autonomy of the individual about his/her sexual choices but rather the emergence of a socially shared perception, according to which sexual rules aren’t external but internal to the individuals (Bozon, 2004). In other words, people seem to be convinced that they choose how to behave regarding their sexuality, even if they are still subjects of social controls.

At the same time, the influence of different socialization agencies still persists. In this scenario, peer dynamics often clash with family education; new communication technologies offer virtual representations of reality, where traditional ties are renegotiated through new symbolic meanings. Individuals try to find their own paths, by exploring different processes of individualization of their intimacies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992).

In this article we present some results of two research experiences that show empirically the sense of these complex contemporary processes from a methodological point of view. We focus on two researches on sexuality among adolescents and young

adults. We discuss some conflictual aspects of our research experiences and offer an analysis of the use of different methodologies – in particular, “classic” and “virtual” ethnography – in order to observe how youth cultures are built through sexual behaviors.

### **Sexual experiences, norms and inter-generational relationships**

The first case study that we will deal with concerns part of an ethnographic research carried out between 2011 and 2015 on a population of Moroccan Muslim men, who have migrated to Italy, and specifically to the Region of Tuscany. This study aimed at exploring sexual conducts of these young men by analyzing their biographical experiences during their transition to adulthood. Indeed, this study focused on young people arrived in Europe between the ages of 10 and 20, and being between the ages of 20 and 30 at the moment of the research. One of the main scopes of this study was to explore how primary socializations lived in the home country were negotiated abroad during the phase of transition to adulthood. We were particularly interested in exploring how such negotiations also reshaped relationships with parents in the context of intergenerational ties. Sexuality was, in this sense, a fascinating topic to deal with, because these young men often experienced sexuality in a forbidden frame (according to Islamic precepts): the premarital one (Boudhiba, 1998). Such an inconsistency not only led the interviewees to reflect on their sexual biographies and choices but also to rethink their role as sons and their relationships with parents.

During this research, semi-directive interviews accompanied ethnographic observations through which the researcher spent a long time with the interviewees outside the formal moment of recorded conversations. It was necessary to build a confidential relationship with these young men while asking them to talk about their sexuality in the frame of a recorded interview. The combination of these two techniques was fundamental to explore some controversial aspects of the study that allowed, at the end, a better understanding of the entangled construction of sexual conducts, Muslim identities and family relationships.

*Karim's story: the power of the unspoken words*

Karim is 22 years old. He lives in Florence since 2006. Karim migrated to Tuscany with his mother, his two brothers and his sister. His family is from a rural area near Marrakech. Taking advantage of the efforts of his father (who arrived in Italy during the '90s), Karim – with his brothers and his sister – had the possibility to continue his studies up to the university, in Florence, easily succeeding to integrate the Italian society.

Karim, who still lives with his parents at the moment of the interview, has many Italian friends, and he started to build a new connection with his home country, only at the beginning of his university studies. Indeed, at the faculty of biology, he met many other Moroccan students who moved to Italy to study. Thanks to these friends, Karim rediscovered his cultural roots, he restarted to practice the Arab language outside of the domestic walls, and became much closer to the habits of the “*good Muslim*” as he said,

meaning respecting seriously practices like the Friday prayer or the Ramadan fasting.

But in Italy, Karim also found love, his girlfriend, Elisa. Although all their friends, both Italian and Moroccan, knew that Elisa and Karim were a couple, this young man and his girlfriend didn't show their relationship explicitly in public. More particularly, as we observed during our fieldwork, wherever the sister of Karim was present – she was a university student too –, this young couple never showed complicity or any other references to their relationship (kisses, caress or hugs, and so on). What was at stake, according to Karim, was the fact of avoiding that his sister witnessed a relationship that his father didn't approve, being a non-licit relation, outside of the Muslim marriage. With his brothers, on the contrary – as Karim underlined – the necessity of hiding this relation didn't exist.

The situation seemed quite paradoxical. Since the beginning of the ethnographic observations we had the sensation that all people were informed about this relationship between Karim and Elisa, but that, at the same time, nobody would made explicitly reference to it.

An episode told directly by Karim, during a recorded interview, perfectly explains the complexity that characterized the situations we faced during our ethnography. We, then, could understand how the power of unspoken words shaped family relations between Karim and his parents, especially his father:

My mother, she knows that I am with her. My brothers, my sisters, everybody knows it, but my father ... He knows it, I think he knows it, but he acts as if he doesn't

know at all! He knows that I have sexual intercours, he isn't ingenuous! But he doesn't accept it because it means not respecting our religion, our Muslim rules. So, for him, the relation doesn't exist: It must not exist. [...] Once, he was back at home from the mosque and said: "Today someone told me that with your friends you are always together with girls". In practice he heard me and my brother speaking about Elisa and he wanted me to tell him more about it. But didn't have the courage to say that explicitly! [...] he gives me notices to make me understand that he doesn't like this, but he never tells it to me directly. It is my mother who plays the role of the mediator: she translates his thoughts to me. [...] I am Muslim like my father, but for him it isn't possible to be both Muslim and having sex without being married. This question is a real problem with my father.

The relationship with Elisa, in fact, isn't an officially recognized one and this situation forces Karim to be permanently in confrontation both with the religious illicit and with his father's judgment.

I always think to the day in which I will be able to finally introduce Elisa to my parents. Because, now, for example, when she comes to pick me up by car, I always suggest her to meet far away from my house. My father often goes out to walk around in the neighborhood and so he can find us. It doesn't matter if he thinks that we are a couple, what is important for me is to avoid him to see me and Elisa together. [...] She doesn't understand that she isn't the problem. The problem is the mentality of my father. He is part of another world, he doesn't conceive the habits of the young generations, especially the Muslim ones. He thinks that everything has to be like thirty years ago in

Morocco. He comes from another society, but I don't want to accuse him: especially because until he doesn't see me with her, I haven't done anything for him [*laughing*]!

*Arranging relationships through normativity*

As we can observe, it is always through references to the question of the sexual illicit that different conducts and relationships are built and negotiated. In particular, Islamic precepts aren't so much socially reminded but rather individually reproduced.

The distinction between licit and illicit confirms its normative power, and its ability of regulating individual conducts creating different interactional frames (Goffman, 1967). In fact, Karim's father is himself submitted to the *dispositif* of control that defines the conducts of his son. Both – Karim and his father – contribute to make of this *dispositifs* not only the tool through which to build their conducts but also the reference to interpret the heterosexual scenarios of the couple, the meanings of sexuality and the parental relationship.

The reference to the religion – often used by Karim in his account – reveals itself not so much as a fixed and immutable rule but rather a normative instrument to adopt according different relationships (Gross, 2005). The reference to the forbidden preconjugal intercourse, in fact, doesn't prevent Karim to have sex before marriage: on the contrary, this precept becomes the first rhetorical pretext to justify his illicit conduct.

The role of the unspoken words is decisive in this dynamic, as it has been possible to observe during other different ethnographic situations. For example, during a dinner at Karim's house, to which the researcher took part, Elisa as well was invited. However, instead of being introduced as the girlfriend of Karim, Elisa was invited as friend of his sister. As Karim underlined, his father probably knew about the presence of Elisa as the girlfriend of his son, especially because during these dinners she was always the only Italian girl who was present. Anyway, these different actors participated consciously to keep this manifest situation unspoken. In this way, both Karim and his father – as the other members of the family of the young man, his sister included – contributed to the “normative arrangement” with the illicit. Sexuality and intimacy experiences become the organizing field of family and intergenerational relationships. The individualization processes through which this young man rethinks and negotiates his sexual biography according to his own personal rules and arrangements – as well as their social and private declinations – explain how strategies of automatization and dependence from family members coexist by contributing to make of youth a phase of life characterized by the construction of a balance between control, exercised by adults, and emancipation, attempted by the young (Fidolini, 2015).

## **Analyzing sexuality in the making**



The second case study focuses on a research started as part of a PhD thesis. The goal of this research was to describe and analyze the daily conducts, the imaginary and the set of attitudes associated with the construction of the sexual and gendered body-*Self* during adolescence. In 12 months (2009-2010) we have been around fifty Italian adolescents (especially in the areas of Rome and Turin), aged between 14 and 24.

As we observed in the previous case, the researcher often must rethink his/her research tools. This obligation can be determined by some factors that aren't related only to the content of the research. It can result also from some ethical questions. For example, after having received a prior authorization of the father of a 14 years old girl (which already knew the object of the interview), following a question concerning the sexual field, she exclaimed: "I can't talk about these with you!". We experienced the same situation when another parent remarked that a researcher shouldn't expect a father to accept this kind of issues related to the sexuality of his daughter, who was 14 years old too.

To deal with these problems, mostly relating to the legitimacy of a content felt as "inappropriate", we built a research strategy based on a combination of "open" survey tools that led me to approach from different angles both the issues and the subjects involved.

### *A mixed approach*

Our research, mainly descriptive, was based on the assumption that adolescence is a sort of “re-birth” of the individual, in which sexuality plays a fundamental role in the construction of the bodily self (Porrovecchio, 2012a). From the methodological point of view, we used three different techniques: in-depth interviews, which led to the construction of some sexual biographies; focus groups; virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000; Porrovecchio, 2012b).

During the first phase of the fieldwork, we conducted 20 non-directive in-depth interviews, trying to emphasize the evolutionary process and the chronological dimension of the phenomenon analyzed: our aim was to build as many sexual biographies as possible. Through the focus groups we tried to build a sort of “mental map” of the adolescent imaginary related to sexuality, affectivity, relationality and self-perception of the gendered body. Even if some authors originally tended to compare focus groups and the study of online forums (see for example the review proposed by Di Fraia, 2004), in our case we couldn’t deal with the issues of intimate experience of adolescents without canalizing the group’s attention on some specific topics, exploring the forms of the relationship with the Self of every teenager in connection with his sexual biography.

As concerns the *online* techniques<sup>1</sup>, each blog provided a more or less linear description of some moments of its author’s biography, and offered an overview of his everyday life context and

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, we analysed 12 blogs and 4 online communities (forums). The collected material was subjected to content analysis (blogs) or conversational analysis (forums).

of his processes of personal growth and socialization. This kind of virtual space has been very useful to investigate all matters relating to self-assertion of the blogger: fears, interactions with the reference groups and the real, ideal or platonic partner, only fleetingly touching the aspects related to transactional sex (Tabet, 2005).

*The “man in the head”?*

To introduce the complementarity between these techniques, we will address one of the themes that emerged: the issue of transactional sex, especially the case in which the exchange is symbolic and asymmetrical, and takes the traits of the reproduction of male domination (Bourdieu, 1998). The individual identity construction process can be analyzed as a set of transactional processes, through which the individual defines and redefines his/her place in society negotiating the features of his/her sexuality, also through the exchange of more or less mutual sexual pleasure. On this basis, in the context of transactional sex, the study of male domination allows a privileged view of the processes of construction of the gendered bodily self during adolescence (Carvajal Sanchez, 2013).

The theme of transactional sex wasn't initially taken into account. Our idea was to focus on other issues. The importance of this aspect emerged only when, accidentally, in an online forum emerged the issue of the trade of self-produced pornographic material for telephone top-ups. A thirtysomething user vented and wrote

A bitch just stole me 10.00 + 15.00 + 3.00 [Euros] of charge card (and I didn't even do anything with her) in her opinion we were getting to know each other: I had to show her that I cared [...] "Recharge my phone and I'll send you my photo" (I saw her live only once) I didn't want to trust her, I told her it seemed to me that she was taking advantage of me, and she said "you don't trust me!!!" in the end I recharged her 15.00 [Euros] she wrote me "thank you, I'll answer you asap", so she didn't send the photo, didn't write me the things that she had to write and she doesn't even answer the phone.

Following the trail opened by this user – in one of the following post he wrote that the girl was underage – we started to explore the issue of transactional sexuality. Later this allowed us to interact with a young girl who claimed to be a webcam girl. Here below a brief part of the interaction:

I do it through the website, it's much more comfortable and secure. The gain always depends on what one is willing to do, I remember that one girl didn't go beyond the strip without taking off her panties... Of course, she couldn't have many people willing to pay only for that. For me it is a comfortable job and it doesn't take me too much time, no one puts his hands [...]

It was clear, at this point, that the topic of transactional sex shouldn't be excluded *a priori* from the overall framework of our research. It should be examined in depth, based on the object of our analysis. We had to take the next step: to focus on the transactional processes in a broader sense, trying to analyze them in the context of the construction processes of the bodily gendered *Self*.

One of the priority areas in which the transactional aspect of human interaction could arise, although in the context of a “protected” research environment, was the focus group. Indeed, when we analyzed the interactions that took place as part of the male and the female focus groups, the size of the sexual symbolic transaction emerged differently. When we read the following testimony:

A guy brings a girl in the cellar, we are five or six, we fuck her. Five or six against a young girl, it's a rape. The girl wants it, but at the same time she pretends she doesn't, that's because there's her boyfriend, perhaps because she loves him, but she's afraid of it (“anonymous boy” in Lagrange, 1999<sup>2</sup>).

Both the boys who took part in the male focus group, and – above all, and so unexpected for us – the girls who participated in the female one, argued the guilt of the young girl, using expressions like:

That's it, boys are hunters, and we must receive... that's nature ... (Beatrice, 22 years old).

Boys must vent, they can't control themselves... we are the ones that ... [shouldn't arouse them] (Serena, 21 years old).

It's a vision of the world that is clearly based on the stereotype of the “hunter” man and the “prey” woman, according to an asymmetrical double standard in which female sexuality takes on the shape of an object of stimulation of a male sexuality referring exclusively to the execution of a predetermined biological order: women shouldn't arouse males' sexuality, they should resist.

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<sup>2</sup> This testimony was introduced as real.

Thus, emerged among the girls the image of “the man in the head” (Holland et al., 2004), through which the criteria of male, heterosexual domination, are reproduced. This image opposes the male’s uncontrollable sexuality and the female’s subordinate position, and it’s reproduced, built and supported also by the female point of view. This logic became even more apparent during the analysis of some biographic narrative stories recorded during in-depth interviews. This theme emerged strongly in the case of Sabrina, a twenty-one years old girl of the province of Rome:

This guy, I loved him... after going out together, he asked me to do something that for me, in those days, the first experience, was unthinkable. He told me “touch yourself”, it was just something out of the ordinary! And yet, this time, for him, just to be what he wanted, I did it. It was awkward, but I did it! I stopped immediately because then I was ashamed ... (Q: Why did you do that?) Because at that time, the only thing I wanted was to be what he desired [...] you know, he was there, he asked me one thing, it was “oh no! I have to do it! Because I love him, and maybe then he will love me!”

This narrative takes the traits of an asymmetric exchange, in which the girl masturbates although ashamed, but she does it because she loves her boyfriend and because “maybe then he will love me!”. Through the *means* of sexual pleasure, she tries to seduce the male. The analysis of Sabrina’s path will show that this story was a very strong element of crisis in her biographical trajectory, meaning the term “crisis” in its etymological sense (change). Later on, in her interactions, Sabrina will incorporate a masculine gaze where her body will take on the traits of an essential element of

symbolic exchange, in order to reproduce her subordinate position towards a dominant masculinity.

### **Concluding remarks**

Taking back the analysis of the experiences introduced, we can trace the real contribution of the combination of the techniques used.

The combination between semi-directive formal interview and ethnographic observation, was vital in reference to the first empirical case presented. It helped to deconstruct the “normative veil” that characterized the stories of the young people met (Fidolini, 2017). The reference to religion, to illicit in Islam, to premarital sex prohibited by the Muslim ethics, was a rhetorical pretext used by respondents to justify their sexual experiences and the guilt associated with their transgression of religious dictates. Only when we crossed the field between observations and interview narratives, we had the opportunity to understand how the reference to religion was just a legal foothold adopted by respondents to describe the dense network of dependencies that characterizes their relations. If we focused only on the study of the formal interviews or just on the observational data, we would have explored only a part of the empirical material, insufficient to account the experience scenarios of sexuality of these young people. On the one hand, a religious reference could be interpreted as the sole indicator that orients their biographies, conducts and choices in sexuality; on the other hand, we would have had the feeling that the authority figure of the father would be the one that decides, according to his

exclusive will, the biographical path and the experiences of the child. Conversely, we understood how these two fronts found mutual legitimization through the actions of the actors involved, allowing each of them to develop their own margins of autonomous action in the dependency of the constructed regulatory order – religious and familiar. Sexuality – although “unspoken”, a taboo topic – then became a mobile *dispositif* (Foucault, 1976) able to regulate, according to its shared norms, not only the experience of sex but – from a much broader perspective – the whole balance of intra- and inter-generational family relationships, with the father-son one at its core.

The combination of methodologies enabled us to transform the normativity that characterized the interview stories, not into an obstacle to be eliminated to find out “what was behind it”, but in the first real data provided by the research, on which it was necessary to focus to understand the logic that wove the relationships between the protagonists of the research.

In the case of the second research experience, the combination of the different techniques allowed the emergence of a rather serious carelessness of the research design: the fact that we didn’t fully consider the transactional dimension of sexuality, and its role as part of the construction of the gendered bodily *Self* during adolescence. Thanks to a situation of serendipity we realized the importance of the topic of transactional sex. The web allowed to reach some subjects that could hardly be contacted in other ways, and therefore to deal with some particularly sensitive issues. The fact that the web makes communication processes relatively independent from space and time constraints made it possible to



circumvent some of the classic “physical” and cultural barriers. All of these aspects find in the interaction with the webcam girl a paradigmatic example: thanks to our “meeting” some themes that until then had remained concealed emerged.

More generally, the combination of different survey methodologies enabled us to understand how the strength of certain hegemonic representations of gender relations and constructions are embedded in the story of adolescent sexuality. Alongside the realization of an effective individualization of sexual biographies, of physical and symbolic spaces chosen to stage and live their sexuality, to tell it or judge it, it was possible to recognize the normative effect of certain dominant representations of gender relations that cross the experience of these young people. Above all, the hegemony of heterosexuality and of the androcentric vision of sexual intercourse – and of the rule of pleasure exchange that it implies – strongly oriented to the reproduction of a dominant male figure, whose dominance appears to contribute significantly to the figure of a complicit femininity (Connell, 1987; Holland et al., 2004). This perspective proposes the urgent need for a complete and complex study of the agencies of socialization, by taking into consideration not only the interaction on the “real” space, but also on the virtual ones.

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