

Outside home. Notes on reflexivity

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Abstract

There is a wide spectrum of ways in managing subjectivity intrinsic in research. This paper goes through and “lives” (Gregorio Gil, 2014) some research experiences: one on prostitution of minors and another on trafficking in human beings. These two experiences reveal how some of the characteristics of my subjectivity – among which that of being a “young female foreigner and outsider” in academia and in fieldwork – and of my own researches, have impacted that reflexivity practice alongside access to related fields, types of relationships and shared information.

The paper proffers the idea in which a “reflexive process” on subjectivity can involve and/or hopefully involve the entire experience of the researcher, going beyond the borders of a single research. In the process, unexpected elements of subjectivity can come into play; in other cases the meaning attributed to them can change in time or can have a role different from what had been expected. Some elements, objects of epistemological analyses, as imposed by a reflexive approach, can become objects of attention also on the phenomenological level.

Keywords: subjectivity; reflexivity; outsider; qualitative research; prostitution, sex work; trafficking in human beings

For a long time the fear of not returning significant information or of producing an inappropriate autobiography, at times self-celebratory, full of insecurities, anxieties and power games as well as meetings and insights, left experiences and emotions that refer to my own subjectivity in the research processes inside the pages of field notes.

My academic formation in the Italian tradition of Franco Ferrarotti has certainly encouraged an idea of sociology as a science of social interconnection or as a science of self-listening of a society thought as a product of interaction between actors and social circumstances (1999). Society, therefore, understandable through the “participation” of the subject of study and the symmetrical “socially situated” exchange between researcher and researched (1961, 2005). A research conceived in terms of a research-with (1981, 2011). Subjectivity, or rather the inter-subjectivity, as main place of sociological knowledge that, re-humanizing the social researcher, humanizes the investigation.

Despite the epistemological, theoretical, methodological perspective, I experienced all the ambiguity and difficulty of the “reintroduction” of the subject in the social sciences. At times, the Popperian tradition of the scientific knowledge created but

not contaminated by the subjects (Popper, 1935) appeared to me insinuated, without control, under the skin, resulting in a complex dialogue between the “private” and the “public”, the “feeling” and the “thinking”. Probably being a young woman and young researcher in a process of affirmation of a personal and professional identity in the academy, in continuous trading with all its knowledge and recognition’s logic, contributed to this difficulty.

In the last year, I moved from Italy, my home country, to Portugal, for a research project on trafficking in human beings. This field experience suggested - at times, to imposed - the opportunity to carefully reflect on my subjectivity and positioning in the research process. The meeting with the feminist reflection on migration¹ and its broad disenchantment with the positivist illusions and dualisms subject/object and personal/political, further stimulated this reflexive approach to research.

On the occasion of a Rome conference on qualitative methodology in social research,² I tried to go beyond the statement of the relevance of subjectivity and reflexivity in the research process and provide empirically based examples of how, in different research experiences, some elements of my subjectivity had influenced, among other things, access to the field, and all I had perceived, interpreted and published.

After over a year of research “outside home”, I was back in a familiar context, but I did not feel completely at home. The event hosted heterogeneous studies’ traditions of qualitative research. If, on the one hand, there was widespread sharing of the assumption that (qualitative) research is inherently structured by the subjectivity of the researcher, on the other hand, the ghost of his/her neutrality and the objective description of the practices in which he/she is involved seemd raised also in the language of some scholars - not all. A distance seemed to characterize the shared reflexions - again not all - on the reflexive approach in the process of knowledge production. In short, during the event I felt “the fears that working on this topic may damage one’s reputation as a scientist” are still current. The Editorial that introduced two volumes of the journal *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* on subjectivity and reflexivity in social research over ten years ago also emphasized that the imperative to

¹ I would recall here, in particular, the experiences and reflections shared at the IX RAM Anthropology Meeting of Mercosur (Montevideo, 30 November - 4 December 2015) within the GT Migration and Gender perspective: Gender regimes, coloniality and intersectionality, coordinated by Beatriz Padilla, Gláucia de Oliveira Assis, Susana Sassone. A preceding, shared research experience in the Dominican Republic probably encouraged an identification in the reflections on the relationship with the “other” shared on that occasion by Carmen Gregorio Gil. The feminist scholar, “living” her own ethnography, questioned the neutrality and objectivity of scientific knowledge, and emphasized the value of a knowledge that comes through the physicality of the researcher, who perceives reality through her/his space-temporale position in the world, senses, in short, her/his “body”.

² It is the Qualitative methodologies in the social sciences Conference (Rome, 10-11 March 2016) organized under the patronage of the Italian Association of Sociology (AIS), Section Sociology of AIS Religion and the University of Roma Tre. During the event, many scholars expressed quandaries with respect to the chosen title. Among others, Maria I. Maciotti underlined how she would prefer the terms “approach” or “orientation” to those of “methodology”. Rita Bichi, coordinator of the Methodology Section of the Italian Association of Sociology (AIS), stated, among the issues debated within AIS, even recently, the necessity of a common understanding of terms such as those of “methodology”, “method”, “techniques”, highlighting the difficulty in finding a shared and universally recognized definitions for the methods and techniques of qualitative research.

exclude the subjectivity of the researcher is currently “secured by the ways in which research projects are evaluated and funded, and it touches our hearts, minds and bodies in a very basic way” (Mruck & Breuer, 2003).

The meeting undoubtedly encouraged, not only a practice, but the need for a more careful reflection on the issue, object of debate among different ontological, epistemological and axiological visions of social sciences. Reflexivity has been subject to multiple interpretations and analysis and, in the sociological practice, we can distinguish different definitions that correspond to different problems in the research work. In recent decades it has gradually been recognized as a key strategy in the process of knowledge production.

In particular, in the early seventies, Alvin Gouldner, with his call for a “reflexive sociology”, affirmed the centrality of the sociologist’s knowledge of oneself and one’s position in the social worlds: “to know others - Gouldner argues - he [the sociologist] cannot simply study them, but must also listen to and confront himself” (1970: 493). Awareness of self, therefore, is the other side of the coin of social knowledge. Pierre Bourdieu also considered the whole intellectual field and scientific structure and call for a reflexive practice of sociology to expose the hidden forms of symbolic power and demystify sociology as a social practice saturated power (2001). As pointed out by Marco Santoro (2015), that of Bourdieu is neither a narcissistic reflexivity of the ethnographer who confesses himself returning from the field nor a moral concern on his private experiences. Nor a simple awareness of his/her social location (i.e., class, race, gender, etc.), nor a postmodern reflection on the relative objectivity of knowledge (rather the opposite - recalls Santoro) or the impossibility of a social science. It is an “epistemic reflexivity” which results in the invitation to “objectify” the “subject of objectification”, in an effort to both think about the subject of research with that one to think of himself/herself as a scholar with a history and a location that is never merely individual but determined by the social world in which exercises as an “academic scientist”.

With the so-called “literary turn”, reflexivity becomes a central theoretical and practical concern also in anthropology. It will inspire writing strategies which, among other things, challenge the conventional distinction between subjective and objective styles and aim to give back the voices of the subjects who participated in the research (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Crapanzano, 1980; Dwyer, 1982; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Rabinow, 1977).

We find critique of ethnographic authority and the promotion of the “polyphonic” texts alongside the complaint of their gendered construction and the critic of the women invisibility - both in academia as researchers and in ethnographic contexts like social actors - in the same feminist anthropology. Since the Seventies, it will be said the personal is political but also theoretical (Okely, 1975): “there is a need - Okely

writes - for ore explicit recognition of fieldwork as personal experience instead of sacrificing it to a false notion of scientific objectivity” (1996:27). Feminist anthropology supports the idea of the ethnographer as a “vulnerable observer” (Behar, 1996; Behar & Gordon, 1992) with an invitation to make explicit the emotional and affective involvement of the researcher with the subject studied; it comes to break the taboo of asexual field practice (Wekker, 2006).³

In this paper, I move from the many suggestions coming from the field to propose the idea of reflexivity as a “process”. This process starts from a certain epistemological approach according to which research is a shared space, shaped by both: the researcher and the researched. By their personal and professional, social and cultural, characteristics, their biographies, by their ideological and political positions, by their emotional responses, and the choices and decisions made during the research process. It is a process that can continue - not without difficulty - with a reflection on the way in which the subjectivity of the researcher influences the research process, in the awareness that, in the absence of such reflection, the research results may appear as a characteristic of the “object” or “existing realities”. A succeeding stage of a reflective process may foster the sharing of ways that can be used to highlight and investigate subjectivity reflectively.

This paper goes through and “lives” (Gregorio Gil, 2014) some empirical research experiences. They reveal how some of the characteristics and researcher’s experience may influence the start of a reflective process alongside the single research. One of these is the researcher’s outsider character which is shared by the investigations to which I refer. A “reflexive process” on subjectivity can involve and/or hopefully involve the entire experience of the researcher, going beyond the borders of a single research. In the process, unexpected elements of subjectivity can come into play; in other cases the meaning attributed to them can change in time or can have a role different from what had been expected. Some elements, objects of epistemological analyses, as imposed by a reflexive approach, can become objects of attention also on the phenomenological level.

Young white foreigner with short hair and Italian accent

Men, even scientists are led in some measure by personal aspirations and inclinations: quite often they are influenced by the interest groups to which they belong.

Norbert Elias, *Involvement and Detachment*

In June 2008, on my first trip to the Dominican Republic, I started my field research on prostitution of minors and sex tourism in the country. This research was to be

³ For a comprehensive analysis of the contributions of the feminist reflection to the epistemological problems of anthropology, see, among others, to Carmen Gregorio Gil works (2006; 2014).

my doctoral fieldwork. In the first chapter of the thesis entitled “The Natural History of Research”, I progressed from my biography and my interests let others know of my personal motivations, beyond the scientific relevance, that had encouraged this study. From the very start I shared my positioning on the issue together with some “ethical” questions raised while doing my empirical research. One of these led to the legitimacy of investigation on problems apparently distant, even on a territorial level. This issue was raised since the very start of my Dominican stay in the course of a not always easy relationship with some interlocutors who I had expected to be supportive in gaining access to fieldwork. Why not study your own children - Italian children? Or, why not study sex tourists and with them the responsibilities of the world they come from? My formation and my seasoned interest helped me address these questions as well as approach a territory and a problem apparently far-fetched, invoking my responsibilities and my research interest. Still I remained an outsider (Merton, 1972). Outsider in as much as “young white female foreigner with short hair and Italian accent”? Probably outsider above all in as much as an “out” of context research of an investigation which in the same period was being done in the country (see Hasbún).

The exhortation to pay particular attention during my research to respecting “boy, girl and adolescents” was earnest.

In addition to the concern for “their” children, to my ingenuous surprise, another crept in – that of the local tourism industry and soon enough the term “sex tourism” became a taboo. Surely the circumstances did not favor communication with these actors. In informal meetings I discovered their displeasure on a feature article published before my arrival: an article in a well-known newspaper written by a female journalist, Italian, “who stayed in the country for 15 days and who after some interviews and a walk on the beaches of Boca Chica” strongly damaged the Dominican tourism image. The institutional feedback with which I would have come to terms with stimulated a reflection that would be mentioned in the final thesis on repression as a fundamental type of relation between power and knowledge, sex and prostitution. “Children – Michel Foucault provocatively suggests – are known not to have sex” (1976): a good reason to prohibit talking about it and to impose prudence and silence even in research. On the other hand, combining sex and the sale of sex even on a theoretical level is very difficult and even those who theorize sex – such as Judith Butler beside Foucault – substantially often ignore commercial sex of adults alongside that of minors. When the time came to return research results, the fear of the “young” researcher’s lack of skill and the complex confrontation with emotions felt throughout the empirical experience led me to concentrate all my analyses on the unexpected, multifaceted minors’ definition of the problem – prostitution (not, or not only, sexual exploitation), reducing to the minimum a more careful reflexive analysis

of the path that would have allowed me to reach it. In the meantime my being an outsider had taken a different meaning with other interlocutors among them various NGOs combating the problem as well as minors with experience in selling sex. The first steps taken in field work encouraged attention to avoid pressure in getting consent to interview minors. I would have met these minors in their natural environment – prostitution. Having to share this environment, mingling with the protagonists, determined a high emotional toll on the research. Young woman *gringa*: a continuous and strenuous positioning with respect to the objectives of my presence in the country was necessary. Moreover the areas I got into required complex relations and mutual trust. The boys often discreetly asked to be interviewed. Interviews followed a long experience of daily sharing, in some cases studded with subtle games of seduction. The possibility of reaching a relationship of mutual trust with the girls would have been, instead, a more complex issue due – among other things – to the precocious stigma and social condemnation of their experience. Meeting with them would have required the support of the organizations who introduced me to the field and the interviews often represented the point of departure and not the point of arrival. In all cases, my being an outsider seemed to offer a liberty of expression regardless of the strong and diffused social stigma. In this regard I remember Nairobi, young trans-sexual who when I first met her in 2008, called herself *trabajadora sexual* (sex worker). In 2009, upon my return to the Dominican Republic, she preferred to call herself *trabajadora social* (social worker) within the framework of the association she collaborates with, especially in public events. In spite of the complexity in sharing the experiences of selling sex, I had the feeling that the interviews often had a cathartic effect on minors I met. Many of them did not have access to places, albeit informal, of information and orientation, listening and relating that could help stimulate the reflexive attribution of meaning to their life experiences. The interviews seemed to activate a listening and self-listening process. A process which, at least in some cases, through the intervention of the organizations that made the empirical research possible, continued in time. The NGOs contacted responded with no particular resistance in the sharing of experiences on the issue being investigated. A response which, in some cases, became a support in gaining access to fieldwork often accompanied by complaint, the will to “show me how things are” and expectations of increasing one’s own social capital. Undoubtedly it was an “opening with conditions” that pushes back to the identity construction process of the researcher and to the relative acceptance within the reality being studied. On the other hand, as Mario Cardano says, “field work starts with a singular rite of status inversion: the observer becomes the object of observation of the ‘native’” (1997:58). This “study” invokes the willingness of the researcher to take a challenge and with it the real interest of the research, in some cases, the sharing of unforeseen moments of complexity that favored a relationship of respect and reciprocal trust.

During the research, other characteristics came into play and became important. One of these refer to my short hair, unusual in a country strongly anti-haitian where the desire to pushback African descent encourages long hair and straightened curls. My interlocutors often wondered – without asking a straight question – if I was a lay religious or a lesbian/bisexual. Or both! Certainly confusion was due to the fact that for some time I stayed with lay religious with whom I socialized in the same way I interacted with young Dominican lesbians and feminists. Probably for this reason, one of my important contacts, for a long time felt the need to share with me his ideas on the violated rights of Dominican homosexuals and when I asked him to accompany me to the *colmados*⁴ or *casas de citas* (brothels) he suggested that we go to the meeting points of homosexuals. Certainly, a few months after my arrival, this gave me a better insight on local male prostitution: the experiences of young Dominican *palomitos*, of *sanky panky* and *bugarrones* who frequent the local homosexual community.

Field notes

“What is the objective of the meeting? What else do you want here from us, woman?”. The ironic sigh accompanying the question of the technician did not help me feel welcome. That was in February 2016 and, since a long time, I had formulated a request to collaborate with the organization that manages one of the Portuguese shelters for trafficked persons.

The first contact attempts dated way back in 2013 while I was writing my research project for which I later requested financial support. Since then I tried to gain a better understanding of the problem and to get to know the actors involved in the country. I later continued trying my best to be familiar with the different organizations involved in the issue with the patience and prudence similar to that of the Little Prince of Saint’Exupery vis a vis the fox. I participated in various events and activities all over the country asking for nothing but the acceptance of my presence and for the possibility to listen and to learn. I had expected to be able to gradually and progressively negotiate the acceptance of my presence and of my work in research.

“You like to joke, don’t you?” – I responded to the technician.

The city of Porto is a three-hour train ride from Lisbon, where I started living for my research fieldwork: enough time for me to go through the anxiety, the waiting and the perplexities prior to the meeting with Raquel (fictitious name) and her two colleagues who sat together around a table.

⁴ Typical Dominican retail store. It also works as a meeting and fun place.

I had met my interlocutor for the first time eight months ago, the end of June 2015, at a convention. Raquel was cheerful, sunny. I noticed the adrenaline of the performance – at the meeting the technician was present as a speaker. Raquel had given me a note with her personal email and, in the following days, I contacted her for an interview. She was extremely busy and her commitments practically left no room for an appointment in mid-July during an event in Porto. The meeting would come about only late October but in the meantime I was able to interview Miriam (fictitious name), her colleague who was more involved in the shelter home for trafficked persons that was managed by their organization.

During the meeting with Miriam in mid-July (2015), I expressed my interest in understanding the experience, the point of view of trafficked persons and I asked for the collaboration of their organization in my research. The coordinator and the technician of the delegation appeared to be open to the idea but they invited me to formalize the request with a letter. I would have done so, emphasizing the research approach and our common concern regarding the biographies and the experiences of trafficked persons. I also broached the possibility of collaborating with them as a volunteer in the shelter home as well as the opportunity to personally discuss the construction of a research experience in light of the work of the organization.

I got their feedback only after a long time and repeated insistence.

In August 2015, I re-contacted Miriam, who told me that the organization needed to discuss the question internally and that in any case I would have had to wait for the return of the coordinator who was on vacation.

In end-September I re-contacted Miriam, inviting her to tell me any and all possible doubts, questions, offering my availability to discuss my request.

In mid-October, I tried to break the silence of the organization by contacting Raquel who would have confirmed the possibility of an interview focused on the experience of the team coordinated by her. This time I would have used her institutional contact, fixing an interview in late October. At the end of the interview Raquel expressed her appreciation of our encounter. “For me that was good! Sometimes it is just an interview but today we reflected together on many things and I thought of some things for the first time (...). You formulated questions that made me look into what I am doing, asking myself some questions and for the first time I arrived at new conclusions”. I reminded her of my request to collaborate with them and hopefully work together to best set a research experience that might address the problems and issues met by the organization itself. She gave me the same answer: my request had to be discussed with her colleagues whom I had tried to contact prior to our meeting, notifying them of my presence in Porto – at their headquarters- precisely to discuss my proposal. Three months after this interview I finally got the official response of the organization:

“We spoke with some of the ex-beneficiaries of the shelter. Beneficiaries now living independent lives in Portugal, but they are not interested in re-telling their stories as victims. They are victims going through rehabilitation nearing self-confidence but they do not feel like going back”. Then she added: “Will you be in Porto next week? We might be able to participate in the project in another way?”. Surprise. A sense of disorientation accompanies the communication of the organization. Their interest to get trafficked persons participate in my research appeared as a sudden acceleration after the silence that lasted for months. It was also in the absence of a joint reflection on this possibility. I perceived a contradiction between their readiness to collaborate and their obstinate silence in the preceding months. I had the suspicion that with respect to the feedback the organization gave in the past the only thing that changed was the tone. In my reply to the organization I expressed my surprise on the handling of my request regarding trafficked persons but I nevertheless was still interested in having a new meeting with them. This was in early November 2015 and they would have an answer only at the end of the month, when I was leaving for a conference in South America. In the exchange of emails there appeared a misunderstanding on the convenience of revealing my identity and my objectives to the trafficked persons. Our contacts resumed in January 2016 with my clarification: “I agree on the advisability of honesty and transparency in all our relations. I just wanted to say that should the organization be interested in sustaining the research we probably should first discuss the terms of collaboration, discuss each other’s expectations and how we could manage the issue prior to talking to the trafficked persons you are in contact with”. In my answer – probably with an assertiveness unusual to my interlocutors – I underlined the need for clarity on the handling of my request. Therefore, are they really interested in supporting my request (or others) involving the participation of the trafficked persons? Are they in a position to do this? What are their expectations and availability to share a useful reflection on the construction of a research experience with the trafficked persons? End January 2016: we fixed an appointment for the following month.

“Right. I remember!” responded Raquel when I reminded her of the agenda for the meeting.

Her colleague, Miriam, intervened. Since the first request of journalists and researchers - she explained - the decision to limit the number of persons accessing the shelter was made. No volunteers at the shelter – this is also a question of confidentiality, protection of the beneficiaries. They have gone through losses and sorrows. Then the organization decided limiting the number of persons accessing the shelter in order to spare trafficked persons of having to go through their stories again. A victim involved in a trial has to tell her story. Having to narrate their stories all over again is unsettling. If there are victims willing to tell their story, finding gratification in doing so, well this could

help others in the same situation. If and when somebody says “yes”, the organization will give you their number. But there are the majority who do not want to do this. “On the other hand – my interlocutor added – as experts, we give enough, a lot of information”.

I immediately associated this with the answer of another association that got rid of my request for research collaboration. “We share our experiences with no problem at all. In fact I am here with you now. However, as a principle, we cannot proffer the women nor their declarations, also in light of the values held by the institution”. She was referring to the values of abolitionist-feminists that identify trafficking with prostitution. In the two different situations, I would have tried to share my positioning in the research: the value of the centrality of the beneficiaries, their presence, and the opportunity of building a relationship with them. For the beneficiaries of the shelter, it is an important physical and emotional site that would have sustained the construction of this relationship.

This is a problem. It is unacceptable – my interlocutors explained.

The technicians told me that they could talk to a young trafficked man who might be interested in an interview. They described to me a person whose experience I had previously read. This person had been interviewed by the press, the radio and television. They would have given me his phone number after obtaining his availability. I was confused: hadn't they already asked “their victims” if they wanted to meet me? Was this the best way of meeting trafficked persons? Were my interlocutors playing for time? I expressed my doubts on the real interest and availability of the organization. Interest cannot be taken for granted and it is legitimate to refuse it. I felt all the frustration that accompanied their prolonged silence and the wearying wait. I felt all the tension of that meeting.

I finally met “their victim” in April 2016. The day of the Portuguese *revolução dos cravos* (Carnation revolution). The Italian liberation from the nazi-fascist occupation. The encounter came about through the support of the Portuguese Judiciary Police.

A game outside home

Sociology is definitely disturbing. It disturbs because it reveals. In this sense it is similar to other sciences. “Science reveals what is hidden”, said Gaston Bachelard. But in this case the “hidden” is of a particular nature. This is often a *secret* – and as in most family secrets there is reticence in revealing – and something more often repressed. For this reason, when the scientist is not satisfied with observing and ratifying the exterior but does his job as a researcher, the sociologist is seen as a spy.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology and Democracy*

After my research experience for my doctorate in the Dominican Republic, I participated in new investigations integrating research groups in the study of migrations, on the integration of refugees, on the story of women in Italy. All these investigations were done “at home”. End 2014 I relocated to Portugal to start a research on trafficking and sexual exploitation. Similar to the Dominican experience this research is individual and is done in an other country, away from home soil.

This was the experience that set a new attentive reflection on my subjectivity. The stimulus came from the great difficulty in access to the field. But also from the slow or outright lack of answer of the interlocutors contacted, from the limited or impossibility of doing research with the trafficked persons. I had to face numerous questions on my positioning, again because of my being an outsider. Outsider, above all, in as much as being a foreigner and not a Portuguese.

By and large the Dominican experience – in a country geographically, culturally and economically distant – did not bring about particular concern vis-à-vis my subjectivity. Besides, from the moment of the writing of a project territorially limited to Portugal, the presence of other foreign researchers was comforting. Many of them Italians. Even my self-definition of “foreign” was not to be taken for granted: the personal choice of doing research in Portugal was accompanied by the idea of moving, in as much as European, in a common space, European, and I did not see myself as a migrant, a brain drain, or an expat. All of these identity labels would come later, much later. And yet, some months after the start of the project in Portugal, important differences from the Dominican experiences started to crop up. The deafening silence of organizations working with trafficked persons or with sex workers was exceptionally interrupted by remarkably delayed feedback.

Undoubtedly my being a foreigner contributed to a difficulty in understanding local relations handling. It was hard to fathom whether this difficulty was due to my ineffective communications management or if the issue was perceived by other researchers, foreign or local.

The production of interviews, in Portugal, often took me far from the experience of critical reflection and, in some cases, even from the possibility of denounce represented by an interview, that had characterized my preceding encounters with the organizations involved in the issue. Interaction modalities were often guided by high level directives alongside the concern of my interlocutors to “look well” - especially those with longer experience in the field.

Clearly the interview settings, beside the daily interaction, revealed a perception of me as a foreigner – an Italian in front of whom a fine figure should be cut: demonstrating that Portugal is capable of addressing the problem just like other European countries, if not better. Probably a reaction to the “peripheral state” – a label that constantly hovers even in academia.

Slowly, in time, a reflexivity interplay among colleagues started to reveal that other researchers – foreigners and Portuguese – went through similar experiences of complicated access to the field in the investigation of diverse social problems. Difficulties not always or only timidly expressed as issues in the return of research results notwithstanding the diffuse and transversal experience. My nature as outsider appeared to contribute instead to a particular attention and to a reflexive analysis of my access to the field. Meantime, it was becoming clear that this characteristic had something to do with my being Italian, foreigner, although not limited to this. While following various events on the theme to familiarize myself I began to note the presence of at least two parallel worlds. On one side, all the actors – government organizations and NGOs – that form the portuguese “anti-trafficking system” on the other side the others. Among the latter group there are organizations that do not belong to the system built in the past years, in some cases due to their point of view about commercial sex. A case in point: the organizations that form the Network of Portuguese Sex Work, supporting the human, social and labor rights of sex workers. A wide grey area includes actors, officially involved in the anti-trafficking network built in recent years in the country but who are substantially outside, again due to their point of view about commercial sex and/or due to the weak sharing of the State system to combat trafficking crime. In particular, these are abolitionist organizations who argue that prostitution can be seen as a perpetuation of the traditional roles of power of men over women-victim and identify trafficking with prostitution. An element of tension, for these organizations, is represented by the power of police forces to formally identify trafficked persons and by the collaboration with police and judicial authorities as a condition for access to rights connected to the status of victim. What do we make of research? Even in this case, I could see the reproduction of two parallel worlds: that of researchers or group of researchers with experience of in commissioned research with objectives pre-defined by financing political institutions and the others, “independent” researchers. Again, a grey area includes young researchers coming from police institutions or public institutions with experience on the theme.

Soon enough I started to understand that my position as outsider, in as much as foreigner, Italian overlapped with a small group or an exclusive group of actors that form a Portuguese anti-trafficking system.

All this appeared to converge to my waiting “outside” – away from the existing shelters of trafficked persons in Portugal. While writing this paper, 16 months after the start of the research, my relations with the major organizations committed to the assistance of trafficked persons is characterized by complexity and in some cases by a substantial shutdown thereby preventing meaningful contact with the trafficked persons themselves.

Is this closure and denial ascribable to a lack of language proficiency, relational-diplomatic capacities of the researcher beyond and/or together with being an outsider? A careful review of literature on trafficking in Portugal, done in starting my study of the problem, underlined a fact: encounter with the trafficked persons is rare and quite exceptional. Encounter with the trafficked persons is never done within the shelter thus leaving outside home the entire research although, on an international level, encounters – in some cases criticized – are done exclusively or mainly inside shelter. Yet, this deafening silence of the victims (alongside that of associations committed to assist trafficked persons) gave me a sense of professional and personal inadequacy. The fact that even Portuguese research, conducted by insiders – in as much as Portuguese and/or within the anti-trafficking system – remain distant from the trafficked persons and shelters was not a consolation. The methodological approach that accompanied me in my research endeavor made it hard for me to forget my attempt to meet the victims, to interpret their “voice” and to narrate their life stories. The quality index of the type of work that I had planned should be the capacity to indicate the point of view of the actors studied themselves. The absence of their “voice” is unacceptable, almost scandalous, for the approaches which for so many years now affirm that knowledge is an inter-subjective conquest (Ferrarotti, 2011) and which strive to make texts more plural, polyphonic, open to other “voices”. How can one accept therefore such “intolerable” limitation represented by the impossibility to start durable informal dialogue, a dialogue – as foreseen by research practice? A reflexive approach suggesting that such dialogue cannot be seen as a negative moment in research and that encourages the interpretation of trafficking as an occasion for building a particular structure of social relations and dynamics of power between actors – namely, the “victims”, public institutions, police forces, experts and psychologists of organizations and research. A narration based on humanitarianism seems to be an occasion for the definition of a “hierarchy of otherness”, with different degrees of accessibility for ethnography, that questions “free relations, intimate and durable (...), free from the practices of surveillance and State control” hoped for by Clifford Geertz (1995, p. 130). The production of the “victim” of trafficking by criminal mechanisms and assistance, and the inclusive exclusion by institutional and humanitarian structures who assume the bodies, mold or submit these bodies to the whims of local and/or global powers of life control, and annul the political potentialities (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1976; Scheper-Hughes, 2000). All this, if on one hand, constitutes a barrier to research with trafficked persons, on the other hand constitutes today the principal nucleus of my work. Life saving and humanitarian control interface in an indistinct zone which is presently the study’s objective of my research. In other words, the very same “barriers” are actually objects of analyses, not only from the epistemological point of view, as the approach requires, but also from the phenomenological view point.

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