

## Queering canons. Methodological heteronormativities and queer *inquietudes*

Desestabilizando cánones. Heteronormatividad metodológica e inquietudes queer

**Cirus Rinaldi \***  
University of Palermo, Italy  
cirus.rinaldi@unipa.it

### Abstrac

The aim of this study is to present a series of epistemological and methodological reflections on the use of qualitative research methods in the study of non-normative sexualities. Particular emphasis will be highlighting the needs to reconsider *queerly* sociological oriented methods and methodology, paying attention to researcher's *ambiguous* role, her body and emotions in the permanent reflexive research process and in encounters with the (co)-researched.

**Word key:** Queer; Methodology; Qualitative Research; Body; Emotions.

### Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es presentar una serie de reflexiones epistemológicas y metodológicas sobre el uso de métodos de investigación cualitativa en el estudio de las sexualidades no-normatizadas. Se prestará especial atención a las necesidades de reconsiderar los métodos y metodologías queer, sociológicamente orientadas, prestando atención al papel ambiguo de los investigadores con sus cuerpos y emociones en el proceso de permanente reflexividad en la investigación y en los encuentros con el (co)-investigado.

**Palabras Clave:** Queer; Metodología; Investigación Cualitativa; Cuerpo; Emociones.

\* Senior Lecturer of Sociology of Law, Deviance and Social change, Department of Culture and Society, University of Palermo, Italy.

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*The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered...as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment of going beyond them*

M. Foucault (1984), *The Foucault Reader*, P.Rabinow (ed.). New York: Pantheon, P.50

### Non-normative sexuality: from normalizing genealogy to the pluralization of sexualities

Sociological studies on (non-normative) sexuality have had difficulty establishing themselves in academia (particularly in Italy), for reasons relating to the specificity of the object of study, internal limitations in the discipline and more generally a hostile political and cultural climate. However, a limited number of researchers and (a greater number of) young scholars (those that I call "hidden") deal with these themes in their research, or try to do so, but who risk being marginalized because choices in academia hinge on the opinions of stakeholders who are often not familiar with the themes, theories and research perspectives relating to sexuality, and who risk their work being removed from an essential wider intellectual and scientific debate. It is impossible to consider here the various political and cultural impediments, and mention only that, at least in Italy, sociologies of gender and sexuality have struggled to establish themselves as "specific sociologies",<sup>1</sup> given that much research has been redirected, more or less legitimately (or due to prudence or prudery), towards sociology of the family, health, or deviance, preventing the discipline from becoming autonomous; though I believe, perhaps be-

ing provocative, that it is actually an autonomous status which prevents disciplines and sectors from sustaining a mutual dialogue and benefiting from their interconnections.

As a result, sometimes paradoxically, there is a tendency to study sexualities as taboos, to render them "exotic", and to focus research on all the phenomena which are different from "normal" sexual practices and the expectations of society, institutions and academia, reproducing theories limited by sometimes sexist choices and, among the most worrying aspects, absorbing the aporia regarding forming theories on a subject which is only studied if it is "deviant".

As I have claimed elsewhere, I believe this genealogy has significantly influenced the development of sociological studies of gender and sexuality, given the monopoly of various other disciplines and other "expert knowledge" which has restricted their autonomy and contributed, moreover, for various (historical, analytical and conceptual, and even methodological) reasons to the proliferation of repressive and "normalizing" discourses. Classical sociological works (and particularly studies on crime and deviance) are filled with references to sexual deviance and sexuality as a sphere of transgression and potential perversion: some theories have always, more or less explicitly, suggested a pathology, whether to limit its disintegrating effects or to adapt or accommodate it, or lastly, to sanction it with a view to integration, ultimately to "normalize" it in order to get rid of it.

The advent of homosexual movements demanding civil rights, especially in the sixties, contributed to the initiation of homosexuality into public debate. This new presence called into question interpretative models of homosexuality with a biological or psychiatric basis and provided alternative social representations and models to the taxonomic but none-

1 The section for sociology of gender was set up in the Italian Association of Sociology only in 2012; note that the classification is rather limiting, sociology of gender and not of genders and sexualities.

theless inclusive and normalizing ones developed by Kinsey (Kinsey, 1948, 1953). Homosexual and feminist liberation movements fostered the “normalization” of homoerotic desire, criticizing outright heterosexual institutions (above all marriage and family). Much of the sociological research of the seventies tended to consider the homosexual male as an object of discrimination, to be found among the petty thieves and prostitutes and in spots for cruising and impersonal sex, rendering it “exotic” and the antithesis of the respectable heterosexual citizen (Seidman, 1997). At the beginning of the eighties, new scholars looked at homosexuality from feminist and critical theory perspectives, but failed to expand the debate on the social construction of heterosexuality and the cognitive regime imposed by the dichotomy heterosexuality/homosexuality (Murray, 1979; Plummer, 1975; Warren, 1974).

The AIDS crisis and its public portrayal discredited the rehabilitation of the figure of the homosexual, especially where neoconservative governments were emerging. As Seidman suggests, this led to a renewal of gay and lesbian demands, whereby radical movements which also involved homosexual ethnic minorities and sex rebels, called for a critical approach which would seek, among other things, wider cultural and institutional change. The so-called queer approach developed within this context. At the beginning of the nineties a series of studies heavily influenced by French post-structuralism, deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially in literary and social criticism, assumed a radical constructivist position with primarily cultural and political effects (Butler, 1990; de Lauretis, 1991; Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993). Though movements developing theory and politics did exist (such as “ACT UP”, “Queer nation” e “Outrage”), most of the new theoretical stances brought together under the term *Queer theory* remained linked to an academic movement, or rather, as Stein and Plummer affirm, to an elitist academic movement which prospered, at least initially, in the most prestigious cultural institutions in the United States (Stein e Plummer, 1994).

Notwithstanding, queer theory involves analysis of all those dimensions of gender, sex and sexuality which can't be investigated within the margins of the category of “normality” and which lie, in fact, beyond social *typicalities*, casting doubt on them because of their conflicting, contradictory, indefinite nature; in summary all of those states of desire which *exceed*

our capacity to name them (Edelman, 1995; my italics, author's note). Specifically, in redefining the relationship between the researcher, the subject/object of the research and the obligations of the research, scholars referencing the queer consider it essential to analyse the effects of knowledge resulting from the construction of the cognitive device represented by the homosexuality/heterosexuality dichotomy (Sedgwick, tra.it. 2011; Seidman, 1997; Browne and Nash, 2010; Phellas, 2012).

### A queer methodology?

Looking more specifically at sociology, some scholars maintain that queer theory vacillates between two primary uses: as an umbrella term to indicate the entirety of LGBT studies, and as an approach whose theoretical sensitivity appeals to transgression and a state of permanent rebellion (Seidman, 1994). In its epistemological premises (who owe much not only to Foucault but also to the rhizome philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari), queer theory is a deconstructive approach perennially directed at re-thinking social categories (specifically gender, sexes and sexualities), as devices of knowledge, following a process which, though on one hand calls into question any kind of definition or code, on the other hand is unable to synthesize. This obviously creates some difficulties if research is directed towards empirical analysis, and does not wish to succumb to what Seidman defines as «textual idealism» (Seidman, 1993).

There are those in the sociological debate, like Keith Plummer, who recognize the radical deconstructive scope of all the conventional categories of gender and sex, the healthy questioning of orthodoxies, but who correctly reproach the fact that, beyond the breaking of “borders”, queer theorists have constructed barriers, they have their *gurus*, their converts and their canonical texts (Plummer, 2005); while they have sanctioned the queer perspective in academia, they have often rendered it inaccessible from the outside, limiting acceptance of it (Stein e Plummer, 1994 p. 184 sub nota 10). But how is it possible to imagine a fruitful dialogue between sociology and queer theory? Is queer theory a theory? Is it possible to conceive of a “queer sociology”, or to understand how this would be possible? In what ways is queer theory unsatisfactory for sociological discourse, and in what ways does it profitably challenge sociological

orthodoxy? Specifically, what are the characteristics of ethnography inspired by the queer? Put very simply, Plummer notes, there is not much that can really be “considered as new or surprising”, other than the interest of social research in reflexivity: rather, queer theory has supposedly “borrowed, repeated, reformulated” that which qualitative research has always affirmed, and therefore there has been no theoretical progress (how can a research project which legitimizes itself, often in a self-referential way, as anti-theoretic, amount to a theory?); it is more a politico-cultural kind of interest in gender, in heteronormativity and sexualities (Plummer, 2005).

These aspects are in no way secondary but have to be implemented within a sociological research program which takes into account the instability and the arbitrary nature of the categories which it uses, the cognitive regimes determined by these very categories (the regime homosexuality/heterosexuality), the conceptual inadequacy of the identity construction (whether it's homo or hetero) as a static, ahistoric, non-relational dimension and of the effects produced by any “scientific” program.

Queer sociology could find a purpose in the need for analyses to be further contextualized (Stein e Plummer, 1994) and, vice versa, if sociological research were to incorporate queer theory it would involve a profound examination of its own orthodoxies. A “textual” analysis does not take into account the fact that, if the subjectivities are structured in terms of semiotics, such a rhetorical configuration nevertheless “takes shape” through processes of social embodiment, within which the body is both the subject and object of “body-reflexive practices”, as Connell defines them. This assumption is of great importance, because it suggests that while the bodies taking part in terms of representations, metaphors, rhetorical figures, paroxysms or parodies of social and historical processes do not “stop being bodies”, their materiality continues to be important, the capacity to generate, nurse, give and receive pleasure (Connell, 1987).

The researcher who is interested in considering non-normative sexualities cannot be seduced by textualist deviations which render the subjects simple, intelligible entities; they must look towards a new epistemological sensibility which also has implications for methodological procedures and mechanisms: categories are changeable and entail the management of knowledge. Greater qualitative

awareness enables the experiences of the subjects to be emphasized, they are no longer considered merely as objects of research but as co-researchers able to define, and therefore to highlight, the position of the researcher, who looms over like a disembodied, general, abstract, unemotional, asexual institutional entity. “Non-normative”, “atypical” or “non-conventional” behavior and subjectivities organize social space and relationships, they create relationships (sexual or otherwise), they define identity in space and time, they “organize themselves”. We must start to contemplate “body-centered identities, in order to attribute a “place” to the various sexual subjectivities within and between processes of embodiment, and the practices and forms of spacialization of identities (Halberstam, 2005, p. 5). Gender research, symbolic interactionism and the interaction between qualitative methods, biographical, ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004), along with humanistic critical projects (Plummer, 2001), are the most plausible ways, within a rigorous agenda, to use empathetic, reevaluation research strategies, to interpret, through a vision “from within”, the actions of subjects in their ability to behave in a meaningful way, able to consider their actions, which become meaningful units of analysis, always bound to the observations and the reflections of the researcher.

### Self-reflexive implications

But how does queer theory enable a different research procedure to be considered? Queer theory introduces, though in the context of contradiction and discontinuity, severe criticism of dominant models of scientific research both in terms of their research practices and the research policies which they use. From the point of view of the political practices of scientific text, it can be considered that queer theory enables the experience of the non-normative subjectivities to be understood in their social worlds and through their “categories”: this characteristic stems from the role that feminist methods and methodologies have played in repositioning, first of all, women as sexual individuals, both in terms of researchers and co-researchers, in analysis and research.

Therefore, queer theory questions scientific knowledge and its methods, which aim to identify and reproduce normal and normative bodies, genders and sexualities. Queer methodologies are political to the

extent that the emancipation of the non-normative subjectivities is based on the use of a new vocabulary through which they can express themselves. In fact, when the subject is represented as “deviant”, he is produced and reproduced and “questioned”, in an implicit form of surveillance, control and recognition (Althusser, 1995). Emancipation means using a vocabulary which can overcome (theoretical and ontological) restraints, to establish and express oneself beyond these limits: queer theory, like postcolonial theory, it pushes the researcher to move beyond these constraints, to challenge the theoretical and spatial scope of the interpretative categories, to challenge those categories and those spaces, to move away from the centre.

Queer analysis also entails some transformations in the research process and, specifically, demands change in the relationship between researchers and the object/subject of research. The experiential components are fostered and cannot be disregarded and, therefore, there is a significant element of *co-involvement* between the researcher and the object/subject of research, as repeatedly underlined by reflexive sociology and summarized in the methodology of symbolic interactionism and other constructivist approaches (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969).

Queer social research calls into question the traditional dimensions of objectivity and the separation of the experiential role of the researcher: the researcher’s personal characteristics (and a more explicit position in the different research phases) assume particular relevance precisely because they influence the whole process of knowledge development. All social actors (researchers included) have sexual, gendered and body experiences of the social world which cannot be concealed by their supposed neutrality in observing in a research process, even in its more orthodox versions, without undervaluing the role of both the research and the other subjects of the research.

A neutral and detached presentation of their data and analysis usually has the following effects: a) it keeps the reader in the dark in terms of what happens in the places and relationships which it is not possible to access; b) it does not benefit in any way the subjects of the research, as it does not involve them and does not create an egalitarian relationship with them; c) it does not measure itself against the criterion of the “functioning” of the theory (“does it

fit the data and subjects?” is a main concern of pragmatist perspective and research which encounters contextualizing queer’s claims).

The detachment idealized by the researcher and sociological research which has perhaps never been neutral (and is in fact a badly practiced orthodoxy, in some cases even a myth!) oblige the social and personal characteristics of the researcher to be hidden, and the interaction between researchers and subject is almost never reported or analyzed; for example, the reactions to the use of one method rather than another one. Queer theory, on the other hand, suggests immersing oneself and collecting data where there are non-normative subjects, in some cases in marginalized areas, but this process of involvement is of the utmost importance for the researcher’s training, because it subverts and calls into question his beliefs, as queerly phenomenology states (Schutz, 1967).

The sociological analysis of non-normative sexual configurations poses, as we have highlighted, intellectual and epistemological challenges which encourage methodology to be seen not only as a standardized set, or the fruit of the acquisition of a preordained specialized competence but rather as forms of activity, of reflection, which coincide with the practice of this sociological research. The process of reflection is sometimes very difficult, not only because there are no (and there could not be any) indications to follow but also because it is necessary, precisely because of the absence of standard operating guides, to question the standards of the discipline and the potential disciplinary effects.

Or, perhaps more correctly and more modestly, to go back to the rules and read them again, with all the destabilizing and anti-disciplinary force which they (already) possess. As the historian H.I. Marrou claims, “the rigor of a scientific discipline requires from its scholars a certain *methodological apprehension*, a continuous urge to explore the mechanism of their progress, and finally a commitment to rethinking the problems resulting from the ‘theory of knowledge’ which that progress implies” (Marrou, 1962: 5).

The researcher, the role that I too usually play, aims fitfully to seek protection in methodologies made of formulas and schemes which, can not only jeopardize understanding of the phenomena, reduced to disembodied variables, but protect the researcher from

any self-reflexive analysis of their role, as a physical subject, in the choices of their object/subject.

It is worth going back to the origins of the discipline and recalling *queerly* Weber's lesson which states that

(...) essentially true methodology can only bring us reflective understanding of the means which have demonstrated their value in practice by raising them to the level of explicit consciousness; It is no more the precondition of fruitful intellectual work than the knowledge of anatomy is the precondition for "correct" walking. Indeed, just as the person who attempted to govern his mode of walking continuously by anatomical knowledge would be in danger of stumbling so the professional scholar who attempted to determine the aims of his own research extrinsically on the basis of methodological reflections would be in danger of falling into the same difficulties (Weber, 1949: 115).

Weber's reflections take us back to the centrality of the subject as an acquaintance and constructor of meanings who necessarily must reflect on the methodology as a practice applied each time according to cognitive objectives, a subject who is "involved" in a web of meanings which he helps to weave (Geertz, 1973), to perceive, to feel, to caress, to smell in his everyday life. The researcher is subject(ed), both in cognitive and physical terms, to the various demands of the reality which surrounds him and even in scientific judgment no presupposition or any pre-given element can be accepted as simply 'at hand' without need of any further explanation. On the contrary, when I act as a scientist, I subject to a detailed step-by-step analysis everything taken from the world of everyday life: my own judgments, the judgments of others which I have previously accepted without criticism, indeed everything that I have previously taken as a matter of belief or have even thought in a confused manner (Schutz, 1967: 22).

Schutz, as noted, urges reflection on the construction of social contexts in sociological research and the personal context of researchers, calling for analysis of the assumptions resulting from these contexts and the ways in which these assumptions influence the research process, whether it regards explicit

assertions or silence or downplaying: the main risk lies in taking for granted the observer and the observed (though, actually, are we so sure of who is observing who?), making them complicit in the standards and hegemony which conspires to repress of that which, actually, *must be said* (whether in terms of the universalization of homosexual as well as heterosexual orientations, of whiteness, masculinity, bodily prowess or social class).

It is probably one of the most complex matters regarding the ethical impulse of the researcher towards what I define as their *alteration*. The meeting between researcher and subjects is a story of alterations which starts with "their" bodies, smells, contact, sounds (Stoller, 1989), with the necessary awareness of being inside and outside, of being detached and involved, being aware that the field will never be sufficiently ours but that at the same time we are involved with it. But why alter? I consider this to be a fleeting term and I have certainly fallen victim to its fascination. I read and interpret the expression "alter" according to several different semantic meanings, and I am aware of sometimes stretching it. The word "alter" more or less implicitly expresses the transformation and the tension regarding change. Alter can also mean to "damage", to change the appearance, substance and function of something or someone. Paradoxically, it implies tension towards the other, which however is directed towards their transformation, their change and, why not, their falsification, damaging and worsening them. To alter them, as in its common understanding. We are afraid of altering ourselves. We lose our originality, our origins, our composure. To transform something or someone from its ordinary "normal" ways and attitude: to make it become something other than what it is (or what it appears to be). The term also implies a voluntary element, affecting reality. Once "altered", someone becomes someone else: he perceives himself in the change and it is possible that others notice the transformation. Changing, or voluntarily inserting heterogeneous components which can cast doubt on the origins of the composition means altering its characteristics, its correspondence. Resenting, altering. Unsettling. But also distorting, degenerating. Changing appearance, transforming. If I alter myself I probably have new "alternatives" of existence. Just by altering myself, I am able to understand the difference between me before and the change which I have *incorporated*. Sociology can contribute to the under-

standing of this process of social incorporation and relationships: I experience the way in which other experiences are produced. In phenomenological terms, if I start to question myself about my experience and my subjectivity within the research field, I have to understand on what terms I am present, whether I am reflected in or differ from the objects of my observations.

The relationship which I create with the person with whom I am conducting research is fundamental to the process and the results of the research project: the relationship between the researcher and the research subject is an emerging and constituent property of the complex relationship between interaction, discourse and shared meanings: in short, it is a co-constituted account. The construction of the encounter between researcher and participant pushes me to understand how this encounter is an emerging production, which creates the possibility of new identity configurations, and exposes itself to new modes of existence; therefore my meeting with the other entails being “undone”, which leads to the emergence of properties of the interaction which cannot be categorized according to standard social research. Butler sees this relationship as necessary, like that which more coherently shows how we are social, a kind of dispossession and creative “undoing”:

*We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so when we speak about my sexuality or my gender, as we do (and as we must) we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another or, indeed, by virtue of another. It does not suffice to say that I am promoting a relational view of the self over an autonomous one, or trying to redescribe autonomy in terms of relationality. The term “relationality” sutures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe, a rupture that is constitutive of identity itself (Butler, 2004: 19; my emphasis).*

### ***Intimate alliances***

Following qualitative sociologist Lincoln and Denzin's most recent work (2000), the very last phase of qualitative research development, as been identified with a specific step which unites the past with the present and the future of qualitative research, making it simultaneously “minimal, existential, autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative and critical”. The author is visible in the texts and this is not a single phase but rather several simultaneous ones, “not one ‘voice’, but polyvocality; not one story, but many tales, dramas, pieces of fiction, fables, memories, histories, autobiographies, poems and other texts to inform our sense of lifeways, to extend our understandings of the Other, to provide us with the material for ‘cultural critique’” (Lincoln and Denzin, 2000: 1060).

Often, especially in certain contemporary studies, researchers situated themselves in the ethnographic text using specific writing techniques for the self. Obviously traditional instruments already in use were also employed (like field notes, a field journal and diaries), in such a way so as to take into account the experience of conducting the research, the feelings and emotions of the researcher. However, such instruments were almost a “secret”, “hidden”, “intimate” matter for the researcher and were kept separate from data from field notes. From the mid-seventies, however, the production of personal narratives, though still kept separate from real, proper analysis, became common, “to reinforce the ethnographer as split personality – the authorial monograph writer and the personal self” (Coffey, 2002: 318).

Critical approaches –especially postcolonial theory, feminist criticism and queer theory– generated hugely important criticism of the new role played by the portrayal of the self in ethnographic-autobiographical literature. They focused mainly on criticism directed towards the researcher as interpreter of the Other, as a privileged observer who risks subordinating the object of the observation and description. The reflections, therefore, move towards the relationship between authorship and audience: is the author really a detached and invisible subject? Does the production of a text imply power relations? Do the texts succeed in involving the “polyvocality of social life and the complexity of social forms, experiences and biographies” (Coffey, 2002: 322)? Pertinent questions such as these direct ethnographic research towards instruments which are capable of rendering the author's presence

in the text visible and creating a specific ethnographic genre (until then it was known as autobiographical ethnography, ethnobiography or personal ethnography; Reed-Danahay, 2001), capable of analyzing socio-cultural tension *through* and *in* the self. The autobiographical tension in contemporary ethnography retraces the “reflexive turn” present in social sciences over the last thirty years,<sup>2</sup> which in very general terms is the awareness of the self (the researcher) in that which can be defined fieldwork policy and in the processes of “situated” knowledge building (Haraway, 1998). Preparation for the research project, and the collection and interpretation of data are reflexive activities and practices through which meanings are produced rather than “discovered” (Mauthner et al., 1998). The reflexive tension, through feminist, post-colonial and queer theory, calls into question the assumption that the researcher, method and data are separate, and suggests that these are interconnected and interdependent dimensions. No method or technique can be considered as a neutral and decontextualized procedure which can be applied to any case, and the researcher cannot be considered an invisible actor without evaluative judgments, because they are carrying out the research as an “embodied” and situated subject, and it is through these characteristics (and various epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions) that they conduct their methods (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). As Denzin affirms, «representation [...] is always self-presentation [...] the Other’s presence is directly connected to the writer’s self-presence in the text» (1994: 503): thus, reflexivity, rather than being considered residual, excessive, an implicit or tacit dimension, is made explicit

2 It is impossible to relay here the vast theoretical debates on reflexivity in social sciences. Cfr. on general topics of debate and social theories Mead, G.H., *Mind, self and society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1934; Bourdieu, P., *Outline of a theory of practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977; Harré, R., *Personal being*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983; Giddens, A., *Modernity and self identity: self and society in the late modern age*, Polity, Cambridge, MA., 1991; for more strictly epistemological and methodological themes, see: Denzin, N.K., *Interpretive Biography*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA., 1989; van Manen, M., *Reseraching lived experience: human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1990; F. Steier (Ed.), *Research and reflexivity*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA., 1991; Gergen, K.J. and Gergen, M.M., *Towards reflexive methodologies*, in F. Steier (Ed.), *Research and reflexivity*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA., 1991, pp. 77-95; R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice*, Sage, Thosand Oaks, Cal., 1997; Alvesson, M and Skoldberg, K., *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research*, London, Sage, 2000; Plummer, K., *Documents of life 2. An invitation to a critical humanism*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, Ca., Sage, 2001.

and the entire intellectual and research process, the subjects of the research, the social spaces in which research knowledge is produced, like the spaces and places –personal, cultural, academic, historical– occupied by the researcher involved in the process of knowledge production, are considered with greater accuracy and awareness (Plummer, 2001). When the researcher uses specific methods and techniques and constructs theories, they are carrying out a process of knowledge production; the reflexive researcher tries to be more aware of the ways in which knowledge is acquired, organized, interpreted and how it can be relevant (Altheide and Johnson, 1994). The reflexive scholar learns the process of interpretation through which individuals construct their own actions and “To try and catch the interpretative process by remaining aloof as a so-called ‘objective’ observer and refusing to take the role of the action unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism – the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the action unit which uses it” (Blumer, 1969: 86). The emphasis on reflexivity in social research enables understanding of how meanings are the result of the interpretative negotiation occurring in the field between researchers and participating subjects as embodied subjects, both knowledge producers whose interactions (both in the field and in textual strategies) are filtered and constructed on the basis of gender, sexuality, nationality, race and ethnicity, social class, age, physical ability. My difference, meaning lived experience and embodied mind, exists because I have a reflexive awareness of it and only by incorporating a difference which has an experience *in* and *of* the world and social reality can I consider the way in which other incorporated experiences constitute world experience. These complex, polyphonic, multi-layered positions call into question and, certainly, render problematic the observation (who is observing whom? Are they both observing the other observing?) but they also present opportunities –even in ethnic terms– because they mean the researcher can avoid the risk of objectifying their subjects (a very real risk in quantative analysis), to deconstruct the researcher’s authority and to balance (as much as is possible) power differentials existing between researcher and participants. Reflexivity, as an analytical tool, enables me to be aware and to monitor myself during the research, and in more active and meta-analytical terms it allows me to analyze the relationships which I create with the participants, our “historicity”

and the constraints (and opportunities) of the gendered, sexualized, racialized, embodied self.

### Challenging masculine heteronormativities

What happens when a researcher with specific identity characteristics carries out qualitative research with other men who construct their own identity configurations according to exchanges and relationships based on homosexual desire, behavior and customs? What happens when they have to confront their research objects/subject with sensitive issues? The relationship between informer and research who share some characteristics must also be looked at. Firstly, our forms of knowledge are "gendered" and, although there are a number of methodological reflections and empirical studies especially on the role of the female researcher carrying out fieldwork,<sup>3</sup> reflections on the role of the male researcher who observes and analyzes the influence of his own gender (in fieldwork) are more recent and less common (Morgan, 1981; Connell, 1988; McKeganey e Bloor, 1991). It is therefore necessary to examine the male gender and understand what kinds of methodological repercussions it can have (McKeganey e Bloor, 1991): a) firstly, it is necessary to declare it, to make it manifest so as not to universalize, essentialize and render invisible the researcher; b) secondly, it is necessary to analyze masculinity in relational terms and, therefore, to analyze the relationship between the masculinity of the researcher and of the other males (intra-gender relations) and females (inter-gender relations), whether the subjects are present during fieldwork or wheth-

3 For a reconstruction see H. Roberts (ed.), *Doing feminist research*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981 and regarding fieldwork, the most recent and concise reference is B. Skeggs, *Feminist ethnography*, in P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, Cal., 2001, pp.426- 442. Cfr. anche P. Gold (ed.), *Women in the field: anthropological experiences*, Aldine, Chicago, 1970; L. Easterday et al. (1977), *The making of a female researcher: role problems in field work*, in «Urban Life», 6: 333-348; Carol A.B. Warren and Paul K. Rasmussen (1977), *Sex and gender in field research*, in «Urban Life», 6: 349-369; Joan Neff Gurney (1985), *Not one of the guys: the female researcher in a male-dominated setting*, in «Qualitative Sociology», 8(1): 42-62; Lois Presser (2005), *Negotiating power and narrative in research: implications for feminist methodology*, in «Signs», 30(4): 2067-2090; Gwen Sharp and Emily Kremer (2006), *The safety dance: confronting harassment, intimidation and violence in the field*, in «Sociological Methodology», 36: 317-327; J. Fields (2013), *Feminist ethnography: critique, conflict and ambivalent observance*, in «Journal of Contemporary Ethnography», 42(2): 492-500.

er reference is made to the imaginary of the gender (and, as a result to the symbolic reference which every social space has); c) thirdly, to understand how gender could be a dimension open to negotiation or how it can create hierarchies, in which it is difficult to imagine its negotiability (Warren, 1988); d) the fourth aspect concerns gender as an attributed status which can condition or limit fieldwork activities (McKeganey e Bloor, 1991); e) the fifth aspect concerns the kind of masculinity which is taken for granted, normalized "masculinity" and its relationship with other identity characteristics like race, age, physical dis/ability, sexual orientation.

To avoid the universalization of identity categories and the use of preconceived ideas, it is necessary first and foremost to develop reflexive awareness of the power structures in which we find ourselves embroiled in the field, as Agustìn affirms

(...) since sex is felt to form a crucial part of western identities, it will be natural for some people to feel uncomfortable with sexual research [...]. In that case, researchers need to be prepared to confront their own preconceived ideas, their own 'outsider' status and the structures of power they inevitable participate in. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher will be an essential element of the work, a continual questioning of where moral reactions come from and a humble attempt to leave them aside (Agustìn, 2005: 627).

It is necessary to introduce one's own subjectivity to understand not just how we edit the data but the way in which we position ourselves to observe it... The subjectivity of the researcher, their choices, their positioning within standard research, as has been shown, seem to be unfathomable dimensions. Mills, in the critical foundation of sociology warns that

In assuming the third role, the social scientist does not see himself as some autonomous being standing 'outside society/ In common with most other people, he does feel that he stands outside the major history-making decisions of this period; at the same time he knows that he is among those who take many of the consequences of these deci-

sions. That is one major reason why to the extent that he is aware of what he is doing, he becomes an explicitly political man. No one is 'outside society'; the question is where each stands within it (Wright Mills, 1959: 184).

But how could sexuality be studied as something which exists "objectively", as "something", a "fact" which is independent from personal experience? Sexuality is certainly an institution, but a pervasive one, and academia's (heterosexual and sexist) demand based on "objectivity" coincides with their imposition of a single source of (heterosexual) legitimization which presents a certain kind of subject as the "only" subject who can legitimately produce knowledge. Because of this, probably, non-normative sexualities within research agendas are considered affected, a show, niche subjects, highly specialized, eccentric, subjective, and, consequently, unscientific. However, as Plummer points out, sexuality is a subject that can be explored particularly if self-awareness becomes a collective exploration rather than an individual and private undertaking. "The author is somehow located as a member of a class, a gendered group, a generational group, an outcast group. Indeed, these stories can transcend the traditional isolated 'individual' of classic autobiography [...] to create a more collective awareness of others" (Plummer, 2001: 90).

One of the main risks, then, is to give these voices and bodies expression according to specific, acceptable, standardized forms, at the risk of losing their apprehension, their destabilizing capacity, to undo, oppressively, the identity of the other, or to make them into docile narratives, changing their characteristics, running the risk of codifying them in hegemonic and dominant codes (Plummer, 2001), according to which, as Patricia Hill Collins affirms «Oppressed groups are frequently placed in a situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant group» (Collins, 1990: xiii cit. in Plummer, 2001). It has already frequently been shown how difficult it is to question certain factors which are taken for granted (gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, race, social class) to examine and criticize them: classic texts, including some of the most classic ethnographies, such as that of William Foote Whyte, re-

veal how difficult it is to take into account masculinity, for example (even though Street Corner Society is a symbolic and material space of masculinity), resulting in more or less explicit forms of sexism.<sup>4</sup>

Identifying my own masculinity within ethnographic text and using methodological devices which focus on embodiment and emotions gives me the chance to challenge the representation of "rational man" and the "macho ethics" of male researchers who "discover", "conquer", who are "systematic" or "rigorous", playing the role of the inexpressiveness and emotionlessness (Kanter, 1977).

It is not simply a matter of questioning an ideological representation which has become the standard, that of the rigorous male researcher, but also of understanding how distant and detached writing and the question of objectivity are to be found in the criteria of the social structure of academic writing (Becker, 1986; DeVault, 1999). The interweaving of self-narration and autobiographical reflections and their "coming out" - allow me to use this term - can be used to criticize this chauvinistic and sexist version of research, precisely because a

In this dominant "masculine" tradition, the acquisition of knowledge via empathic and related forms of connection is deemed not only illegitimate and unreliable, but also dangerous and forbidden. By contrast, the subjectivist version of interpersonal connection and knowledge appears to give voice to these silent and silenced aspects of experience, aspects that have often been discredited and identified with females (Kirschner, 1987: 27).

By making the emotional relationship between researcher and researched explicit, therefore, one can go beyond the position justifying a "hidden ethnography", all the concealed controversial data of the researcher who is afraid of being discredited (Blackman, 2007), with the aim of understanding in more detail how studies are conducted and how theory is constructed. Emotions can become an analytical tool, capable not only of renewing research and its "standardized" ideas in epistemological terms, but when they

<sup>4</sup> See D. Morgan, *Men, Masculinity and the process of sociological enquiry*, in Helen Roberts (ed.), *Doing feminist research*, Routledge, Thousand Oaks, Cal., 1981, pp. 83-113

are both a social process and a social product they become crucial dimensions to understand interactively how social factors are deployed in processual terms (Hochschild, 1983). Moreover, fieldwork (and more generally psycho-social theory and in neuroscience) shows that thought and emotions are strongly correlated, and neglecting this relationship means significantly neglecting the interactive dynamics in the field (Mills and Kleinman, 1988; Kleinman and Copp, 1983). These aspects are further highlighted by studies on sociology of the body and embodiment which show how emotional bodies and mindful bodies are connected and inseparable, emotions, “flesh” is intertwined with cognitive and symbolic processes (Shilling, 1993; Shilling and Mellor, 1996; Bendelow and Williams, 1998; Waskul and Vannini, 2006). The researcher too must therefore deal not just with the emotional dimension, understood as both a determiner and social product of the fieldwork, but also with the emotion work and the emotion-management strategies he needs to be aware of and he needs to develop once in the field and during his interactions with the participants: ultimately, it is a matter of considering the reflexivity and emotions in view of the application of what Doucet e Mauthner call “epistemological accountability” (Doucet and Mauthner, 2002), the idea that the researcher accounts are accountable to the readers, since “we argue that research which relies on the interpretation of subjects accounts can only make sense with a high degree of reflexivity and awareness about the epistemological, theoretical and ontological conceptions of subjects and subjectivities that bear on our research practices and analytic processes” (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003: 424) The emotional dimension, therefore, can be subjected to criteria of validity and epistemological relevance (Jaggar, 1989) in the research process, just as it adheres to ethical criteria, because as Edwards affirms, research on sensitive topics makes the observer ‘self aware’ and at the same time ‘other aware’, throughout the emotional and intimate time of interactions (Edwards, 1993).

This process of embodied knowledge permits us to learn and discover also through our senses, our movements, our bodies as a “whole being in a total practice” (Okely, 1992: 15) and to move towards a “carnal sociology” in which the researcher “submits to the fire of action in situ”, a sociology not just of the body as an object (“sociology of the body”) but rather which considers the body as an instrument of inquiry and knowledge (Wacquant, 2004).

## Conclusion

The aim is to understand, from an epistemological point of view, what it means to construct an ethnographic text, becoming aware of one’s position as a “white”, able-bodied, salaried, homosexual subject. How do these observational filters, resulting from my cultural background, determine my relationship with the subjects I am observing? In what way do my identity characteristics, with all their cultural scope, “normalize” the subjects being observed? Is there a risk of involving, inevitably, normativities, even if only in the text? (Rooke, 2010)? What kind of influence does the relationship between the knowing subject and the known subject, reflexivity and inter-subjectivity have? Given the *ambiguous* position of the researcher, how should the structuring (and normalizing) effects of heteronormativity and homonormativity be considered?

One of the implications, and perhaps the most risky, is the awareness (yet to be acquired) that we researchers are responsible, together with other institutional subjects, for spreading “acceptable” representations which can be shared, which institutions, policy, services, social workers, nurses, doctors, politicians, psychologists draw on to conclude that only some types of subjects deserve those interventions, services and policies.

Starting to pose questions in queer terms means examining one’s position, clarifying this position in the research process and understanding to what extent observation, as a sexual subject, influences and is influenced by the subjects of research. The analysis of this aspect which Bourdieu, in the case of the interview, defines as a process of creation of a transformative space (Bourdieu, 1993), leads us to reflect on how we are in flux, even in a relationship (that of research) which presumes to “diagnose” what is happening.

This conscious reflexivity leads the researcher not to separate theory and practice, but rather to realize to what extent the theories correspond to social practices. A reflexivity which, as we have indicated, must be a “call for accountability and responsibility in research”, “not a property of the self», «not for self-formation and self-promotion” (Skeggs, 2002: 369). A situated theory, as would derive from the queer fascination, creates awareness of the existence of a centre which would impose unity and hierarchy, prompts us

to consider the subjects as a multiplicity interconnected with other multiplicities, and to verify how analysis of the “unusual” and the “transgressive” makes us understand the conspiracy of normality.

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**Citado.** RINALDI, Cirus (2015) “Queering canons. Methodological heteronormativities and queer inquietudes” en Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre Cuerpos, Emociones y Sociedad - RELACES, N°18. Año 7. Agosto-Noviembre 2015. Córdoba. ISSN: 18528759. pp. 83-94. Disponible en: <http://www.relaces.com.ar/index.php/relaces/article/view/403>.

**Plazos.** Recibido: 02/05/2015. Aceptado: 19/07/2015.