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"I can't talk about this with you!". A reflexive and interdisciplinary mixed methods' approach to adolescents' sexuality

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to introduce some features of the methodology used in the doctoral research I conducted from 2008 to 2011. Its goal was to describe gender/sexual identity construction among adolescents. As some other sensitive sociological research fields such as sexuality or education in disadvantaged contexts, my research field brought up some communication and methodological challenges that could be overcome only through an interdisciplinary mixed strategy, based primarily on flexible qualitative research techniques. The research path was based on: a quantitative and qualitative methodological approach; an online and offline research field; a syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis model. In particular, I gathered 20 in-depth interviews, conducted some focus groups and built a web ethnography. In this context, for example, virtual communities' anonymity allowed adolescents to express themselves freely. Thanks to this research approach, I achieved two results. First of all, I deconstructed and reconstructed both the dynamic process that brings to a gender/sexual identity construction and various aspects of adolescents' sexuality. Then, I have been able to compare the different techniques used for the research conducting an epistemological reflection on the techniques, on the different kind of collectable data and on the different socio-cultural contexts in which those techniques could be applied.

Keywords: Sexuality, Adolescence, Mixed Methods, Gender, Interdisciplinarity

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Cite as:

Porrovecchio, A. (2017). "I can't talk about this with you!". A reflexive and interdisciplinary mixed methods' approach to adolescents' sexuality. *European Journal of Educational and Social Sciences, 2 (1),* 28 – 41.
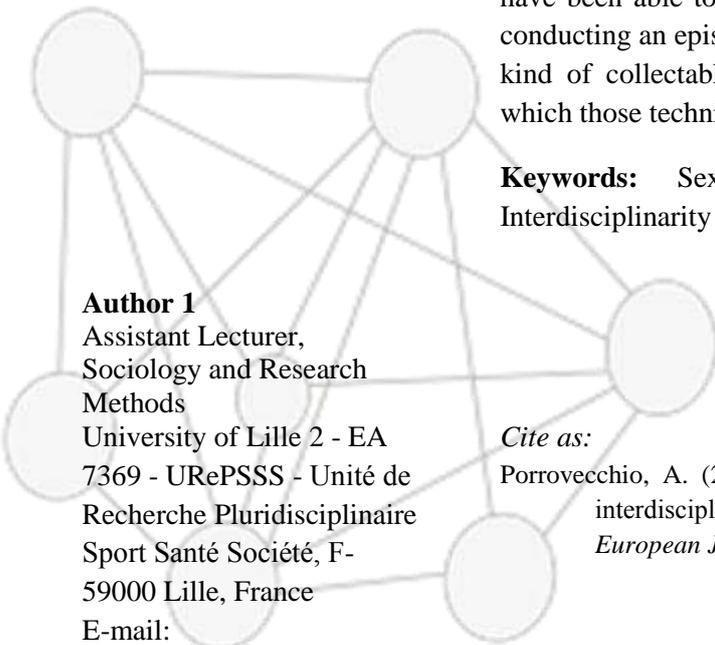
INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to introduce some theoretical and methodological issues emerged in the course of my PhD research[1]. Its main goal was to describe gender/sexual identity construction among adolescents. In 12 months of fieldwork (2009-2010) I have been around fifty adolescents, who were from 15 to 24 years old, and I analyzed thousands of web pages, including forums and blogs. After my PhD, I published a book in Italian focusing on some aspects of this research (Porrovecchio, 2012a), a couple of papers and book chapters (for example 2013a and 2013b) and I started to focus on some aspects that were particularly critical: the ethical and methodological aspects of adolescents' sex research were among the most important[2] (Fidolini & Porrovecchio, 2015).

During my research, I embraced Randall Collins' theoretical approach (1982). Collins argued that *micro* and *macro* sociological categories shouldn't be considered as absolute, but poles of an ideal *continuum*. He explained that it is possible to use general criteria, such as time and space, to distinguish between *micro* an *macro*. Starting from this approach I identified a *meso* and a *micro* area as frame for my research's path. Therefore, my perspective on sexuality was comprehensive: I put some emphasis on *micro* and *meso* dimensions, trying to focus on everyday life's socio-cultural dynamics. Starting from the *micro* and *meso* dimensions, I looked at the *macro* ones, and *vice versa*.

This approach led me to build a research path based on an interdisciplinary mixed method strategy (Bergman, 2008), namely on the triple convergence of: quantitative and qualitative approach; online and offline research field; syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis model. In particular, I gathered 20 in-depth interviews, conducted some focus groups and a virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2005; Porrovecchio, 2012b), namely, as Hine (2000, p.65) argues, an "*ethnography in, of, and through the virtual*". This approach enabled me to give the adolescents I met in the field the opportunity to capture their speech (De Certeau, 1994), trying to bypass the adults' point of view.

Dealing with critical issues

In the field, I had to face a range of difficulties related to both content and communication level. In terms of content, I had to deal with sensitive issues that affected the behaviors, attitudes and values of the people I had to meet. Furthermore, the social phenomena I was facing were scientifically new, in the context of the Italian social research (Fidolini & Porrovecchio, 2015): there wasn't enough documentation and it was difficult to build up some good working hypothesis and appropriate research tools. In terms of communication, I faced some difficulties when I had to cross the barriers of "cultural

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[1] Its title was "*The construction of the body Self among adolescents. Adolescents' sexuality: imaginary, images, practices, stories*". It was held between 2008 and 2011 at the PhD School in Human and Social Sciences, University of Turin.

[2] And I crossed the results of my PhD research with some of my new research topics: martial arts practice (Porrovecchio 2015), risky behaviour and socio-spatial segregation (Porrovecchio et al., 2014a; Porrovecchio et al., 2014; Ladner et al., 2016), anomy (Porrovecchio et al., 2016).

diversity". I faced these difficulties for the first time when I was pre-testing my in-depth interviews and I asked for the permission to interview a 14 years old girl. Her father, a Sicilian policeman in his fifties, told me nervously: "My dear so-… sociologist… do you really think that I can leave my child alone - with you!? Talking about blowjobs? So, do you think I'm stupid?!".

The attitude of this man was a further demonstration of the fact that I couldn't use standardized and structured research tools, and I had to choose a flexible strategy with flexible tools. I had to explore the adolescent's imaginary. In order to do so, I explored three different kinds of cultural products: scientific literature and researches; journalistic inquiries; fiction, manuals, journals, popular essays, tv series, movies.

Starting from this preliminary documentation, I framed my research in a *descriptive-exploratory perspective*: my goal was to explore and describe the construction of the sexual body *Self*, in particular adolescents' construction practices, strategies, and imaginary. Therefore, I chose a research path based on the triple convergence of:

1. quantitative and qualitative methodological approach. As concerns the quantitative perspective, I referred mainly to some processed data from the latest research of the IARD group (cf. in particular Buzzi, Cavalli & De Lillo, 2007) and of the "Indagine sulla Sessualità degli Italiani" group (cf. in particular Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna & Garelli, 2010). I compared and completed these data with those collected during my research;

2. online (virtual ethnography, analysis of forums and blogs) and offline (in-depth interviews and focus groups) research field;

3. syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis model; on the first one we can ideally place the data gathered from the analysis of blogs and interviews, while on the second we can place those gathered from the analysis of forums and focus groups. Therefore, every single technique and research "field" provides a specific kind of data and information, that can be framed within one of the two axes.

This strategy focused basically on listening and reading rather than observing. As I already explained, its aim is to give teenagers the opportunity to "capture their speech" (De Certeau, 1994), trying to bypass the adults' point of view.

FIELD ANALYSIS

Starting from the above described point of view, I am going to explain the main features, the potentialities and the limits of each technique I used during my research. First, I will introduce the techniques that I used exploring the online field (virtual ethnography, analyzing blogs and forums), and then those I used offline (in depth interviews and focus groups). At the end, I will frame these techniques within my mixed method strategy. This systematization is an oversimplification introduced for illustrative purposes. The reader should consider, for example, that blogs and forums' analysis are part of a wider and comprehensive virtual ethnography.

Blogs

Personal blogs were quite common among adolescents when I started my PhD research.. These kinds of web spaces are some psycho-technological environments (De Kerckhove, 1998) characterized by a strong identity value, a projection of digitized psychological processes through which the blogger constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs his identity. Crampton considers blogging as a sort of frank-speaking and "*Self*-writing" that is a "*form of resistance to normalization because they are where one works on oneself in a process of becoming*" (p.104, quoted in Mitra, 2010, p.164). Because of blog's nature, the blogger will hardly build a completely fictional identity. For this reason, blogs are full of identity traces that the social researcher can use to gather valuable information. Hence, personal blogs are one of the most recent forms of "*Self* writing" that can be carried out through the process of *Self*-reflection and personal development. I consider blogs, together with web-diaries, online autobiographies and social networks, as the processing space of identity as they fulfill some important functions, such as *Self* narration. The narrated *Self*, through which blogger represents himself, is potentially open to the gaze of the *Other* and may become a subject of study for the social researcher. There are many inner needs and motivations that lead to the creation of a blog and these reasons may also become the subject of a specific sociological research.

According to Murthy (2008), social network sites – I think that this is valid for every kind of "*Self*-narrative" web space – can be useful to social researchers in the following ways: they are *virtual gatekeepers* with chains of *friends* who are potential research respondents; they contain vast stores of multimedia material regarding even the most marginal social movements or groups; ethnographers can *invisibly* observe the social interactions of page members, gleaning a previously unavailable type of ethnographic data; pages can be created by social researchers with the explicit purpose of conducting research online. The structure of relationships on the social network sites is a useful research method itself; as Garton et al. (1999: 78) argue, content, direction, and strength of the relationships 'strands' a fruitful approach.

In order to reach the goals of my research, I levered on adolescents' need to expose their interiority more than in daily life, share their thoughts and seduce the *Other*. From this point of view, blogs can be seen as places where people can *shape their thoughts* and emotions and trace the boundaries of their existence. The sense of ownership towards their own virtual space is emphasized by the accuracy of the blogger in choosing the style and content to display. This way, the blogger marks the boundaries of a psychological place that reflects him as a person, a *Self*-portrait as real as possible, or an image created according to the representation of the *Self* that he wishes to provide to the *Other*.

I carried out the blogs' analysis assuming that some of their features refer to the personality, the biography and the linguistic skills of the person bringing them to life: it seems clear that some of the blog features reflect the identity of the blogger. Among the structure features of a blog, I analyzed: the content organization and the layout; the text format, and thus the text fragmentation inside the sections in which the blog is structured. The ways in

which the blogger works on the structure features of the blog are a significant metaphor of nowadays *Self* fragmentation. Among the non-layout features of the blog, I considered: the title, the presentation/*Self*-representation of the *Self* or of the blog by the author, which is some sort of ID card; the selection of the discussed topics; the comments posted by users and readers of the blog.

As far as the blogs' selection, I tried to select some platforms in Italian, mainly visited by people sociologically definable as "teenagers". The exploration and investigation of the blogs is one of the aspects that characterized my virtual ethnography, and has been carried out in parallel with the forums' analysis. In particular, I selected 12 blogs, 10 in Italian, Roman or Piedmontese dialect, and 2 in French. I used the French-speaking blogs to verify the existence of significant culturally determined changes compared to the Italian ones.

Forums

There were some features of the forums that caught immediately my attention: I had the opportunity to get back to the roots of every discussion I was reading, because all the messages were stored and available to be read. I began to understand, as stated also by McLelland in his study on gay culture in Japan (2002, p.389), that studying the web is more similar to traditional ethnography than to text or discourse analysis, because the web is not fixed in the way that a printed text is. It represents a kind of journey.

Within the forum, the distributed cognition and collaborative construction of the process and of the communication environment affects the nature of the knowledge and the information generated by the virtual discussion groups. The threads are formed in the constant dialogue and involvement of community members inside some dynamics of construction, deconstruction and re-construction of the individual experience. The interaction between the members encourages creativity, debate and questioning of the respective positions. This complex process facilitates the expression of content that would have never emerged in other contexts. Furthermore, the sense of social communion that is built inside the forum becomes an highly motivating incentive to participate: members are involved on an emotional level, which generates an open state of mind and a great will to deepen their knowledge of complex and delicate issues. The communicational and relational web space, becomes extremely interesting for the social researcher.

The following discussion quote has a high relevance for the research; it was held in the forum of www.giovani.it, between two girls and a boy (SaintPaulist[3]). It started on May 22, 2007, with a survey specifically addressed to young girls: "Do you masturbate?". The same day, after 16 interactions, they wrote:

> *Eye6: I masturbate too... it's something I like, and it helps me to know my body better... if I don't have a boyfriend I do it almost every night before I fall asleep... if I have a guy, I do it less... Vibrators ... I've never tried... how is it?*
> *SaintPaulist: and apart from here on the forum, do you talk with your friends, or are you ashaaaamed??? […] I mean, here in this forum I can write things that I don't tell*

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[3] The nicknames have been changed.

my friends, so if you say that you masturbate only here on the forum, you don't tell it to everybody... do you understand?
Eye6: Ok ... Here on the forum I write things that I can't tell to my friends... also because they are very "chaste", they don't talk about these things. Maybe I need to confront myself with some boys and girls on topics related to sex etc.
Sweety989: With my friends we often talk about sex.......... but maybe I'm the only girl who lives her sexuality with serenity?
SaintPaulist: not the only one, but one of the few who admits it... as far as I know, you're to value for your sincerity...

This interaction seems to confirm what I just explained: it's easy to gossip, while the most intimate and personal topics are taboo, especially for girls. Eye6, a young girl, seems to say: we can talk about masturbation, sex etc. in everyday life, but only as long as we remain in the dimension of gossip; we don't talk about other sensitive and personal topics. Namely, we don't talk about all the topics you can find on the web, or through other media.

The fact that the forums are usually open to new participants renews and dynamizes the group's information and experiences. So, the interactions that emerge in forums, become some important melting pots for mixed reviews. The forums, just as the focus groups, can generate opinions and contents hardly accessible using other recognition strategies in which there is no comparison between different positions and points of view. For example, it has been almost impossible to gather any kind of information on deviant and/or transactional sexualities through offline research techniques. Instead, through the forums I had the opportunity to collect various types of data related to the sharing of pornographic pictures (Slater, 2002), to the "webcam girls" phenomenon and to gang rapes victims (Porrovecchio, 2011).

As I did with blogs, I initially tried to identify the Italian platforms and portals most used by those who can be defined "adolescents" from a sociological point of view. Among the various communities that I have examined, I selected some areas of discussion within platforms that I considered particularly significant for three reasons: the young age of visitors and the fact that users generally banned adults from the conversation; the discrete critical mass of sensitive issues, such as paedophilia, rape, abortion, contraceptive methods, transactional sexualities, physical, psychological and emotional maturity considered adequate to deal with certain kinds of experiences; issues related to ethics, values, morals etc.. The reference areas I have considered are those related to the sphere of juvenile sexuality and to the construction of the sexual body *Self*. Furthermore, I also referred to fashion, clothing, strategies of seduction, forum members' life stories, ethical and moral criticalities, and to the various sections called "SOS" or "Help" in which users vent their fears, or illustrate the problems related to the spheres of body, identity, gender, sexuality or affectivity.

I conducted a content analysis on the discussions that I gathered. In particular, I made an analysis of discursive strategies and implications, considering both the explicit meanings and the implied ones at the same time. This analysis helped me to identify some recurrent themes and then to build some macro-categories of analysis, within which I have included the

individual threads collected. Later, the macro-categories helped me to form, along with the information coming from blogs, the basic material I needed for interviews and focus groups.

The collection of documents from the forums is potentially infinite because the field is constantly changing and implementing itself (Steinmetz, 2012). For this reason, I concluded my research on these platforms relying on the principle of saturation (Morse, 1995): I have considered as an indicator of quantitative sufficiency of the collected material, the lack of new topics or information compared to the previously gathered material. When no new discussion seemed to be able to add anything to what I had already analysed, it felt useless to go further: the contribution of other threads would have been null.

In-depth interviews

One of my first ideas was to analyse the process of sexual body-*Self* construction only through the analysis of adolescents' *Self*-representation within online communities, especially in blogs and forums. I thought that, if I asked young people to report their sexual biography, I would get some more rationalized and normalized narratives. I thought that virtual ethnography would provide me a glimpse of the "moment of truth". But following a first exploratory analysis of virtual communities, it seemed clear that some topics were not properly covered: missing issues were primarily related to the discovery and socialization of sexuality and to the relationship with the social context community users belonged to (primary and secondary groups, social environment etc.).

Furthermore, the platforms analysed provided two specific kinds of data. In the blogs I found some narratives of Selves built on momentary thrills of the author. These were more or less linear descriptions – based on posts frequency – of a few events in the life of bloggers. These descriptions offered some limited information about the context and the process of personal growth and socialization of the author. Forums were characterized by rather chaotic interactions related to very specific topics. Again, the contextual data was rather limited.

I had at my disposal a very important amount of data, but it consisted in examples of situations and events partially out of context: in my research I was missing the size of the procedural changes that characterize adolescence. I had at my disposal the paradigm of adolescence, namely the various ways in which a specific phenomenon of adolescence could manifest. So I had to find a suitable syntagm, that is an ideal way to show the manner in which any given phenomena could interact with others: I had to gather in-depth interviews to collect sexual biographies, so that I could investigate qualitatively some of the problems I was dealing with: that is why I decided to gather in-depth interviews with a very flexible moderation guide. I interviewed 10 boys (2 of which declared to be homosexuals) and 10 girls (1 of which declared to be homosexual), who had between 16 and 24, and came from heterogeneous social and cultural contexts. During the first meeting, I explained the purpose of my research, making interviewees aware of the way I would gather the interview, for example telling length and some kind of questions etc.. In this phase I felt a hard resistance from most of the minors' parents, who did not want their son/daughter to talk about sex issues (as the one I quoted on the first pages of this paper). I conducted the interviews at the mere presence of the interviewer and the interviewee, in some relatively isolated places, recording

everything with a digital camera placed in an hidden corner. The interviewees were aware that there was going to be a camera, but seemed to forget it after a few minutes. In the phase of analysis, the recordings were fundamental, because they allowed me to analyse some non-verbal aspects of the interaction.

The total duration of the interviews ranged, depending on the circumstances, between 38 and 90 minutes and the interaction was conducted with the help of a "guide": I needed a written reference to address in a comprehensive way the issues and themes I considered most critical. The structure of the interview, then, was quite flexible: it consisted in a sort of "diary" from which the interviewee began telling the story of his/her *Self*. To reach this aim, in the first part of the interview, the interviewee told the story of his/her life. The purpose of this first part was to gather quite comprehensive narratives and to enter deeply into the procedural and evolutionary dimension of the construction of sexual body *Self*. The interviewees already had a generic idea of the subject of my research, so they framed their story on the macro-area of gender and sexuality. In the following parts of the interview, however, I tried to explore and deepen the analysis dimensions that had not been investigated in previous research phases (blogs and forums).

Focus groups

I completed the empirical part of my research conducting two focus groups, to investigate some aspects related to the adolescent imaginary. The first focus was entirely made up of boys, and the second one of girls[4]. This kind of qualitative research method may have different variations: in general, it can be described as a surveying technique based on a discussion among a small group of people. It's conducted in the presence of one or more moderators and focused on a topic that the researcher wants to deepen. *The purpose of a focus group is the analysis of the relational dimension in the formation of opinions*.

The fact that focus groups were the latest surveying techniques that I used led me to design and build them starting from the information emerged (or remained obscure) in the previous phases. My aim was to bring out some inter-subjective representations and to build a "mind map" of the adolescent imaginary related to sexuality, sex and the perception of sexual body *Self*. In regard to the mainly exploratory aim of focus groups, I thought it would have been appropriate to choose a "friendly" operative strategy: I set myself at the same level of the participants, sitting down with them around an oval table, changing position only when I had to launch some clips or to offer something to drink. On the opposite side of the table I placed a laptop from which I showed some clips. With the webcam on I had the opportunity to record also the non-verbal reactions of the participants. Placing myself in a situation of "equality" I tried to revive and examine some issues, trying to make everyone speak. At the same time I tried to enforce my role with some restraint. I managed the interactions that took place in the focus groups, reformulating some issues that emerged and trying to keep a reference that could leave me the opportunity to deepen some topics. I built a paper guide starting from some basic questions: my goal was to explore some issues raised in the earlier

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[4]   The men's focus group was attended by 6 boys, aged between 15 and 25, and lasted 1 hour and 38 minutes. The female's one was attended by 5 girls, aged between 20 and 26, and lasted 1 hour and 33 minutes.

stages of the research. According to these aspects I made an important work of reconnaissance, selection and preparation of materials to be distributed to the participants, which led to the choice of some clips and phrases that could raise a debate, even in a provocative way. I concluded the focus groups only when the participants seemed obviously tired. In this phase of the research I was supported by an assistant who helped me in various steps of the conduction: in the process of organization; through a work of compilation and analysis of some documents related to the issues raised: on the analysis of non-verbal communication; during the post-operative analysis; in the production of research reports.

DISCUSSION: POTENTIALITIES AND LIMITS OF VIRTUAL RESEARCH

Now it's possible to draw some conclusions on the potentialities and limits of the techniques I used. In this paragraph I will focus on the research I conducted online: the virtual ethnography is a very important step of my research. The distinctive feature of blogs and forums analysis is the field in which interactions take place: the web. It is important to stress the fact that blogs, forums and virtual communities are not the only spaces in which it is possible to perform a virtual ethnography: some studies, for example, use location-based social networking (LBSN) applications, such as Grindr by YMSM (Winchester, 2010; Winchester, Troy & Bauermeister, 2012).

The web offered me several opportunities. First of all, the possibility to create virtual spaces of communication and interaction in which I shared texts, documents, softwares, clips and other tools: so I had the opportunity to reduce costs in terms of travels, movements (of people and documents), hospitality, construction of tools and research materials, recordings, direct acquisition and cleaning of collected data. Moreover, through the web I have been able to reach people difficult to contact in other ways, and I had the opportunity to *discuss sensitive issues*: for example, some aspects of sexuality considered deviant or morally reprehensible (Monaghan, 2005), as transactional (Tabet, 2005; Porrovecchio, 2011) or extreme sex. The fact that the web tends to make the communication processes relatively independent from space and time constraints allowed me to bypass some of the barriers that separated me from the subjects of my survey: particularly wide or hardly accessible geographic areas; hard to reach or contact people; "closed" or dangerous places; social and cultural distances. *This feature became even more important when I dealt with some issues perceived as personal, embarrassing or morally reprehensible*. In this regard, Di Fraia explains that "*the tests administered through computers allow to obtain levels of content openness and depth superior to those administered through traditional paper questionnaires*" (Di Fraia, 2004, p.18-19): it seems that through the web the social researcher can perform a deeper and wider analysis.

Di Fraia identifies one of the main limitations of online research methodologies, transverse to the different techniques: the "digital divide", namely the low and inhomogeneous penetration of web usage in different places, and consequently the lack of possibility to use the web to get results generalizable to the entire population. Other limits, common to all the techniques of online social research, are represented by: the impossibility to determine for sure the identity of respondents; the lack of control over the context in which

the survey takes place (Mitra, 2010). These criticalities are caused in part by the fact that online communication is "mediated" by a system involving people who don't necessarily live in the same area. The shared interaction context is the interface, which influences (or encourages) heavily the communication strategies and the emerging forms of relationship.

Another important issue is the one of *individual identity* (Hakken, 1999; Hine, 2000; Di Fraia, 2004). Madge and O'Connor (2002), for example, in their study on e-mums, note that one of the main problems of the web-based studies is that it's impossible to verify the identity of participants. This topic can be approached from different points of view. For example, we can reason on the possibility to present ourselves with fictitious identities, by changing from time to time nickname, or by swapping gender, sex, age or other socio-cultural characteristics. But I think this is a criticality that affects in a limited way compared to the overall aspect of the research. Although a nickname doesn't provide any certain indication on the identity of the individual, however, from a purely sociological point of view, there is no doubt that the choice of a nickname rather than another is an act contributing to the construction of the subject's identity. Through nicknames people decide to communicate some specific features of their *Self* and, at the same time, they delete some characteristics (sex, age, geographical origin, etc.) that they do not consider relevant to the interaction. In fact, nicknames tend to communicate some elements considered truly distinctive of the (desired?) identity.

The possibility to maintain anonymity encourages *Self*-expression, especially in sensitive communicative contexts, or when the researcher deals with topics perceived as personal, embarrassing, or morally reprehensible: the opportunity to hide his personal data allows the subject to *distance from his "problem"* and to be able to *objectify it in a context different from face to face relationships* of everyday life. So if it's undeniable that subjects' identity is somehow "obscured" as for personal data and socio-cultural variables, it's also true that, from a sociological perspective, a strong identity dimension emerges, performed at an individual level, basing on the coherence of the dimensions that arise during interaction and, at a social level, on the possible affiliation of the subject to one of the countless communities on the web. Therefore, the individual acts in the web with a depth - or superficiality - quite similar to the one of everyday life. Consequently, the reliability of the information that an individual's behaviour can provide, its credibility and its availability for the aims of the research shall be evaluated on the basis of the consistency and the mid-term stability of opinions, feelings, culture and passions that he expressed and acted on the net.

For instance, the following quote at first embarrassed me, since I was not able to frame it (the author claimed to be 12 years old): *"good morning to everybody...I need some clarifications, and I hope you can help me!!!during the intercourse, do you ever feel wet???please explain me!!!"* (SweetPussy in http://forum.amando.it/). This quote could have been particularly significant for my research, but I discovered that in some other posts SweetPussy talked about extreme sex, or claimed to be virgin. *In fine*, I found out that she (or he?) was also a flamer. Therefore, SweetPussy's behaviour, opinions and attitudes were not stable in the mid-term: SweetPussy was not what he/she claimed to be.
A last and particularly interesting aspect of the web for social research is its faculty to encourage the creation of interactions and relationship environments between individuals

who, despite of having the same interests, would never be able to meet in the real world. The most important areas in which these forms of communication emerge, are virtual communities and social networks. Virtual communities, in particular, are essentially spaces of freedom of expression created for discussion, exchange of opinions and interests, interaction and expression of *Self*. These kinds of interactive spaces allow to emphasize a form of involvement of individuals based on the ability to: get in touch with people with similar interests; share social, cultural and symbolic capital; use the knowledge available within the community. Last of all, in virtual communities the members put in place a sort of constant collaborative construction of knowledge and communication environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Now we can look back at the basic pattern shown in the first paragraph, according to which the research develops through a path travelling along paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis. In the paradigmatic axis we can find the data generated from the forums' analysis and the focus groups, while in the second one there are those emerging from blogs and in-depth interviews. Every single research technique provided a specific kind of data and information that can be placed into one of the two axis' reference area. Considering that my research is concluded, I can estimate the real contribution, the efficiency and the efficacy of every single technique or strategy.

On the syntagmatic axis I included blogs and in-depth interviews. Each blog provided a description of some moments of the blogger's life. At the same time, however, the blogs offer a fairly limited overview of the individual's existential context and personal growth and socialization process. The only case in which these dimensions emerged consistently and significantly was the one of a young blogger from Rome, which however consist in a sort of exception as the girl distinguished herself by a great passion for writing. Therefore, this kind of virtual space has been useful to deepen my knowledge on the areas of bloggers' relationships within primary and secondary groups (family, school, peer group) and with the real, ideal or platonic partners, of bloggers' *Self*-assertion, of bloggers' reflection on their Selves, and of bloggers' fears. In-depth interviews, revealed to be particularly useful for what concerns the process of construction of the body *Self* among adolescents. With the first in-depth interviews I implemented an initial and ideal model of *Self* construction, previously elaborated on the basis of academic literature.

On the paradigmatic axis I put focus groups and forums' analysis. Through the focus groups I wanted to construct a sort of "mental map" of the adolescents' imaginary related to sexuality, affectivity and to the perception of sexual body-*Self*. I also wanted to reveal the ethic, and moral dimension of some more specific personal experiences. Focus groups allowed me to deepen some aspects hardly analysable using other techniques: some authors tend to associate the use of focus groups to the analysis of forums (Di Fraia, 2004), but it would not have been possible to deal with some topics without the conduction work that canalizes the attention of the group to well-defined issues, and without the analysis provided by the assistant.

Finally, forums provided a great amount of interactions relating to specific arguments, independently from user's existential context. These platforms provide a potentially infinite amount of data and information relating to any kind of topics (except some related to sexual socialization). These data and information must be selected with caution and wisdom. In my research, forums became a complementary tool compared to in-depth interviews: any subject covered in the interviews could be related with a large number of alternative plausible explanations and insights available in forums, which allowed me to close the procedural picture of the body *Self* construction among adolescents, the original goal of my research. Moreover through the analysis of interactions happening in these platforms, I had the possibility to explore some borderline areas of sexuality: so forums have been the main point of reference when I dealt with the issues of transactional sex, violence, fetishism, homosexuality and extreme sex.

Each method, each technique, each field and each operative strategy offers to the researcher opportunities that can be exploited and involve limits that must be managed. *My experience shows how these two elements depend from a series of factors*: the funding; the aim of the research; the field; the characteristics of the research's theme; the characteristics of the analysis unit; the context. Regarding the specific case of the web meant as a field, as a context in which the research takes place, or as an object of analysis, its potentiality is still underestimated, mainly because of its elevated entropy. So, at a distance of more than ten years, the words of Franco Carlini are still useful. He stated that: "*in any case, the materials left on the Web* […] *become an extraordinary witness of the present. They are a field of survey,* [and if anyone complains] *for the excessive rubbish that lies in the web, he should imagine for a moment to be an archaeologist, it doesn't matter if ancient or modern. Then he would realize that rubbish, trash and garbage are valuable assets (we should say cultural assets) and that finding a nice deposit of urban waste is a blessing for the archaeologist, who will extract the information about daily life that the statues and mosaics almost never tell*" (Carlini, 1999, pp.172-174). Well, if there is some garbage on the net, then perhaps we should analyze it very carefully, "*as a concrete and daily witness of our time, worthy of interest of human curiosity and also of study*" (Carlini, 1999, p.174).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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