

Introduction

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It's a pleasure for me to introduce this special issue of the INSEP journal, focusing on methodological and ethical issues in the conduct a research on sexuality. The themes of ethics and methodology are critical to how we understand the conduct of sex and sexuality research, and this special issue represents a range of different perspectives and problematizes sex research from multiple point of views, which we hope will shed new light on long-standing debates.

In the early fifties, Clelland Ford and Frank Beach (1951) identified some barriers that researchers must overcome when they put their lens on sexuality. These barriers were summarized in the complexity of observing sexual conduct in societies in which sexuality was considered an intimate and private issue. At the time when they were conducting their research, there was a significant absence of experimental or empirical data, outside of medical and classical and nascent modern sexological studies (Bland and Doan, 1998). This situation constituted a “defect of origin” of human sex research, and strongly influenced the development of sociological research on sexuality (Weeks, 1985). This situation slowly changed from the 1970's with the increase of sociological studies of sexual practices and the recognition of the erotic dimension of social life in occidental academia.

Over the course of the nearly seven decades that separate us from Ford and Beach's study, there has been an explosion of research around sex and sexuality from an array of disciplines and conceptual approaches, but some barriers still persist. Arguably, occidental society has always considered – and still considers – sexuality as a frivolous, trivial and ordinary issue, especially in the Mediterranean area (Fidolini and Porrovecchio, 2015). Alternatively, it is a risky and dangerous area of study, with the suspicion that researchers have a prurient interest in in their topic (Seidman, Fischer and Meeks, eds, 2011). As social researchers, we should not underestimate the existence of strong moral and religious pressures and degrees of social, political and cultural regulation and control, which limit representations of sexuality outside of a romantic, novelty or pornographic lens. Sex and sexuality are still subject to some strong and ethical barriers that are elusive in their specificity, or subject to social stigma (Irvine, 2004). Furthermore, social studies on sexuality coexist with disciplines that highlight its biomedical and psychological components, creating in ‘commonsense’ understandings a sort of confusion regarding the most suitable scientific approach in dealing with certain aspects of sexuality (DeLamater and Shibley Hyde, 1998). *In fine*, at an empirical level, sexuality is still perceived as a personal and intimate matter (D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988), requiring some adaptation to the tools of research.

These barriers, at an empirical level, are constituted in a range of difficulties related to the content and communication of sexual themes and issues. In terms of

content, it is difficult to do research whenever the researcher has to deal with sensitive and intimate issues that affect personal behaviors, attitudes and values. Or whenever he/she has to face some scientifically new (and sensitive) social phenomena, on which there is no common understandings or adequate literature or data. It is difficult to build up effective working hypothesis and appropriate research tools. In terms of communication, the researcher can face some difficulties when he/she has to cross the barriers of people's intimate lives or account for cultural diversity in sexual values and attitudes in participants.

As a consequence, in some fields of research related to the sociology of sexuality, for example those focusing on sexual diversities, using standardized and structured methods is problematic. In addition, there is relatively little problematisation of the different yet most commonly used methodologies that are currently available and their ethical implications. It seems therefore important to analyse what has been achieved so far and what the future holds. This special issue of the INSEP journal is designed to mark out future directions for researchers interested in developing understandings of knowledge production in sex and sexuality studies, research methods and ethics.

In order to contribute to these streams of research and to open new horizons for further investigation, all the contributors of this special issue elaborate experiences of ethical criticalities and empirical approaches to research. Some of the studies deal with qualitative and/or quantitative strategies, as well as with mixed method approaches, and/or have had to face ethical or methodological challenges, emergant areas of study issues, or reflect on practice. Their solutions and/or their ethical criticalities emerged in combining innovative approaches with critical reflections. I look forward to see how this special issue will travel and what methodological and ethical research strategies it will inspire.

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