



Grounded theory and ethnography in the study of transit-mobilities of refugees in border zones. Challenges from fieldworks (Italy/Greece) with people fleeing Syria

Teoría fundamentada y etnografía en el estudio de las movilidades en tránsito de los refugiados en las fronteras. Retos del trabajo de campo (Italia/Grecia) con las personas que huyen de Siria

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Abstract

In the frame of the current so-called *refugee crisis* in Southern European countries, and bringing empirical references from previous research, concerning the right to asylum in the border zones and the transit mobility of refugees from Southern European countries to the North, the article explores three methodological challenges that qualitative research encounters, such as grounded theory and ethnography, applied to the study of refugees' transit mobilities, can produce. Firstly, the so-called ethical dilemma that the observation of and interaction with seaborne refugees, who are in many cases still traumatized by the journey at sea, can produce; secondly, the difficulties of carrying out a 'long-term observation' of people in transit, who are often in a 'grey zone' between legality and illegality, and do not have the 'time' or the intention to build relationships; thirdly, the uncomfortable role of the ethnographer as a 'detached observer' in such a context and the need to renegotiate his/her identity. The analysis is framed within a brief reflection on the interdependence between grounded theory and ethnography, which is a key issue in the contemporary scientific debate concerning qualitative research.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, asylum, transit-mobilities, Southern EU border zones

Resumen

En el contexto de la denominada crisis de los refugiados en los países de la Europa del Sur, así como teniendo en cuenta resultados empíricos de investigaciones anteriores en relación al derecho de asilo en zonas fronterizas y movilidades en tránsito de los refugiados desde los países de la Europa del sur hacia el norte, este artículo explora tres retos metodológicos en la investigación cualitativa, relativa a la *grounded theory* y la etnografía, aplicada a la producción de movilidades en tránsito de los refugiados y su producción. En primer lugar, relativa al llamado dilema ético en la observación y en la interacción con los refugiados que llegan vía marítima, que con frecuencia se encuentran traumatizados por el viaje, en segundo lugar, a las dificultades de una observación a largo plazo de las personas en tránsito, que se ubican con frecuencia en una ‘zona gris’ entre la legalidad y la ilegalidad, y que no hallan el ‘tiempo’ ni la intención de construir relaciones, y en tercer lugar, el peliagudo rol del etnógrafo como observador despegado del contexto de la investigación y de la necesidad de renegociar su identidad. El análisis de este artículo refleja la interdependencia entre la Teoría Fundamentada y la etnografía, el cual resulta ser un tema clave en el debate científico contemporáneo relativa a la investigación cualitativa.

Palabras Clave: refugiados sirios, asilo, movilidades en tránsito, zonas fronterizas de Europa del Sur

1. Introduction: refugee transit-mobilities in the Southern EU border zones in times of crisis

For many decades academic interest in social research concerning refugees has been progressively increasing. While the first investigations date back to the post-Second World War period, the contemporary relevance of refugee-related issues is perhaps unprecedented. The socio-political context in which this interest is growing is the so-called *refugee crisis*, namely the huge increase of people who are, worldwide, forced to leave their country of origin and who attempt to reach a ‘safe country’. This *crisis*, whose root causes are deeply connected with the socio-political changes in the Middle East and North Africa region but also in Sub-Saharan Africa or the Horn of Africa post-2011, needs to be interpreted in light of European migration policies. These policies are de-facto aimed at strengthening the EU border control and reducing the legal possibilities of access to Europe for third country nationals as much as possible. Thus, while on the one hand we observe the growing relevance of border patrol operations and the multiplication of military as opposed to humanitarian missions at Southern European borders; on the other hand, the image of the refugee crisis takes shape and materialises in EU citizens’ minds. For thousands of people there is no other choice but to illegally cross borders to reach a safe country and their presence, real or perceived, at EU borders, waiting for the right opportunity, is an essential factor in the Western perception of crisis.

The foreseeability of these forced migration flows, even if granted by the hugely funded policies of ‘risk analysis’ is quite absent from the political and academic debates. The concept of the refugee crisis takes shape through implicit and explicit attributions of unpredictability and changeability of events or phenomena and its unmanageability with ordinary means and traditional legal tools. Since 2011, this migration crisis also started to concern the EU internal borders, ceasing to be an exclusive problem solely of its external ones. Migrants’ will to ‘choose the country where to live’ broadly calls into question the Dublin Regulation, as one of the Schengen Area’s cornerstones. Since then, intra-EU transit mobilities have become more and more visible; some key internal borders, such as Ventimiglia, the Brennero, but also the borders between Greece and Macedonia or Hungary and Austria, have been progressively reactivated, in order to stop the unwanted mobilities of refugees.

The increasing attention on those phenomena, which put refugees at the very core of much social research, confirms the importance of a methodological and ethical reflection. If on the one hand, dealing with emergent issues underlines the need for more appropriate and flexible research methods, on the other hand, dealing with vulnerable social groups requires sensitivity, empathy, consciousness and the use of adequate techniques, in order to avoid any sort of 'damage'.

This article attempts to explore some of the main challenges that border ethnography (Vila, 2003) in the study of transit mobilities of refugees can produce. The idea to develop a reflection on these methodological challenges evolved in the context of a wider research, which aimed to explore the limits and borders of the right to asylum in the Mediterranean Sea, by focusing on the case of Syrian refugees in Southern Europe. It is developed through three main research axes: i) the reconfiguration of Mediterranean migration routes by sea; ii) the variations in the right of asylum in the border zones; iii) the agency of refugees and the processes of negotiation with significant social and political actors, and the paths of empowerment and resistance that they put in place during their migration throughout the borders, in order to affirm a 'right to choose where to live'.

A previous research, which constituted the empirical base of this methodological reflection, is inserted into a socio-political context which is characterised by: i) six years of war in Syria, which had a relevant impact in terms of war-related mobilities to the MENA region and Europe; ii) the refugee crisis in Europe, generated by the huge influx of refugees and Southern European countries' difficulties in managing the reception of seaborne migrants; iii) the increase of transit mobilities of refugees (mainly Syrian and Eritrean) from the Southern European countries to Central and Northern Europe, which is challenging the limitations imposed by the Dublin Regulation¹. The research has been conducted using a multi-layered methodology. Qualitative and quantitative approaches have been combined in order to grasp the macro and micro complexity of the research

¹ It identifies the first country of arrival into the EU as the responsible one to process the asylum application (under the Geneva Convention) of someone from a non-EU country or a stateless person. Such EU Regulation means that once a migrant applies for asylum, official records are taken including fingerprints. In order to consider asylum, officials take into consideration family links, previous possession of visa or residence in a member state and whether an applicant has entered the EU in a regular or irregular way.

issues. I mainly conducted border ethnography in three significant spaces, in-depth interviews with relevant actors (refugees, activists and public officers), analysis of audio-visual documents (pictures and videos made by refugees during their travels), socio-legal research, applied to EHCR judgements and Dublin Sentences, and analysis of public discourse/missing discourses. The empirical research is conducted looking at three case studies, namely Lesvos, Sicily and Melilla, as significant places on the Southern European border, characterised by a multidimensional configuration due to their nature as spaces of arrival, transit and departure.

The research project takes shape through the combination of the two key approaches in the qualitative research: grounded theory and ethnography. Several scholars have already pointed out the blurred relations and uncertain borders between those methods, and while, on the one hand, they stressed rigid oppositions between them, in terms of both procedures and goals (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011); on the other hand, they pointed out, in some way, their complementarity and the possibility of each one contributing to improve the other through processes of combination (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001).

The article explores three main methodological challenges that these approaches applied to the study of transit mobilities can produce. Firstly, the so-called *ethical dilemma* that the observation of seaborne refugees, who are in many cases still traumatised by the journey at sea, can produce. Secondly, the difficulties of carrying out a long-term observation of people in transit, who are often in a grey zone between legality and illegality, and do not have the ‘time’ or the intention to build relationships; thirdly, the uncomfortable role of the ethnographer as a ‘detached observer’ in such a context that calls for a sort of renegotiation of their identity.

Before proceeding with the exploration of these challenges, it is important to locate the research in the theoretical debate concerning qualitative research methods and, in particular, the complex relationship between grounded theory and ethnography.

In my case, on the one hand, I was constantly inspired by the broad range of theoretical literature on migration issues (as required by the ethnographical approach, and highly inadvisable according to the grounded theory), on the other hand, I realised that certain renowned theoretical concepts were sometimes not able to account for the emergent phenomena that I was exploring. In that sense, it was useful to combine ethnography with grounded theory as suggested by Charmaz and Mitchell (2001), organising data from the fieldwork in a more systematic way, in order to give them

theoretical relevance.

Therefore, after a brief reflection about the possible interdependence and complementarity of grounded theory and ethnography, the article proceeds through an exploration of those issues by providing examples from fieldworks in Italy (Sicily) and in Greece (Lesvos), which constitute the empirical basis of this reflection.

2. Paths of interdependence of grounded theory and ethnography in this study

The complex relation between grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and ethnography (Marcus, 1986) has been at the core of many essays concerning qualitative research methods. According to Charmaz and Mitchell: ‘grounded theory methods consist of flexible strategies for collecting and analysing data that can help ethnographers to conduct efficient fieldwork and create astute analyses. No more, no less’ (2001: 160). Nevertheless, the so-called ‘marriage between grounded theory and ethnography’ (Pettigrew, 2000: 1) raises some critical issues that are worthy of being problematized, and calls for a clarification of the blurred boundaries between those methods (Aldiabat & Le Navanec, 2011).

According to Atkinson (1992), the word ‘ethnography’ literally means the writing of culture. Moreover, following Barnes (1996), the aim of this type of research is to see the world through the eyes of the members of the culture being examined, and to document the social interactions among them (Pettigrew, 2000). The definition I like most is perhaps that of Willis and Trondman (2000: 1), who depict ethnography as ‘a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly *in its own terms* the irreducibility of human experience’ Proceeding with the enumeration of the main differences and similarities between those methods exceeds the aim of this paper, which is most interested in the exploration of its interdependence paths. First of all, ethnography and grounded theory developed in the frame of a common philosophical orientation: symbolic interactionism, constructivism and pragmatism, which were the School of Chicago’s main theoretical references (Aldiabat & Le Navanec, 2011; Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001; Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Glaser, 1992; Prus, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The main point of connection between these

methods is probably the profound relationship with the field, and the election of observed groups as key informants in the process of understanding and interpreting reality. By giving relevance to the point of view of people belonging to the 'observed groups', interpreting reality through their eyes is a fundamental element of the approaches adopted by both ethnography and grounded theory. They are defined as privileged actors and principal experts in the observed field. Important similarities also concern the research tools employed in data collection, such as in-depth interviews, observation, and field notes. Having said that, procedures of data collection and analysis used in grounded theory and ethnography should not coincide: 'while the first logic of grounded theory entails going back to data and forward into analysis then returning to the field to gather further data and refine the emerging theoretical framework, ethnography suffered in the past from a rigid and artificial separation of data collection and analysis' (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001). This differentiation developed coherently with the initial different goals of each approach: while grounded theorists' goal is to build middle range theories, following the individuation of 'core categories' of the explored phenomena, and starting with a relational approach; traditional ethnographers do not include building a theory amongst their main goals, but rather providing a 'thick description' of a context, starting with a cultural approach. In other words, while in the grounded theory the relationships between actors themselves and between them and the society are at the very core of the analysis—i.e. the observation of people's behaviour (relational approach) here and now—ethnography pays more attention to the observed people's cultural background, which is considered fundamental in developing a determined behaviour (cultural approach). Nevertheless, these approaches can complement each other (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001). On the one hand, 'using grounded theory methods can streamline fieldwork and move ethnographic research toward theoretical interpretation'; on the other hand, attending to ethnographic research methods can 'prevent grounded theory studies from dissolving into quick and dirty qualitative research' (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001: 4).

During my research, following Charmaz and Mitchell's suggestion (2001), I attempted to step out from dualistic oppositions in order to draw some common ground and interdependent paths between those methods. The need to combine is due to the nature of the research objects: emergent phenomena and incessantly evolving issues. The continuous oscillation between data collection and analysis, which in the grounded theory is justified by the criteria of saturation of each explored issue, has already been

recognised as a good practice, in ethnographic research as well. Nevertheless, the thick description of events, people, behaviours, social contexts, relationships and interactions should constitute the essential solid base required in the process of interpretation and conceptualisation. Hence, if on the one hand, a ‘thick description’ of them and a long-term observation of explored issues is initially needed; on the other hand, a more defined and structured data organisation can help ethnographic research to ‘move toward theoretical development by raising description to abstract categories and theoretical explanation’.

In order to clarify my point, I will provide an example. The migration studies theory is still yet to conceptualise the new kind of ‘transit mobilities’ that we are observing in Southern Europe. The concept of ‘secondary migration’ (Brekke & Brochmann, 2014) is present in the scientific debate, but it is not adequate in analysing the current situation. Therefore, I choose to use the concept of ‘second flight’ (Denaro, 2016), in order to differentiate this phenomenon from the first one. While the first one concerns people who have already applied for asylum in the first reception country, and often get protection, the latter occurs before the taking of fingerprints and the asylum claim (Denaro, 2016). The concept of ‘second flight’ is deeply rooted in the observation and has emerged from fieldworks. In that sense, I combined grounded theory with ethnography as methodological approaches, which are appropriate in order to grasp the complexity of emergent and continuously evolving phenomena and to help with the process of bottom-up theoretical conceptualisation.

3. Challenges from border ethnography applied to transit mobilities of refugees

The appropriateness of ethnography and grounded theory methods for exploring and analysing the complexity of border zones has already been recognised by several scholars (Galasińska, 2006; Heyman, 1994; Khosravi, 2010; Vila, 2003), giving rise to the concept of ‘border ethnography’ (Walker, 1997). Before examining the concept of border ethnography and its main challenges, it is necessary to clarify the multiple meanings of border zones, following the main insight provided by some scholars.

Ribas-Mateos’ work (2015) provides a very comprehensive overview on border zones’ main conceptualisation: they are ‘key sites’ in the construction of the world

today (Brenner, 1999: 3), where we can observe an intensification of political and even existential stakes that crystallise relations of domination and exploitation, subjection and subjectification, power and resistance (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013: 60). Moreover, according to Hall (2014), who quotes Agamben, a ‘border zone’ is ‘a place that is at once inside and outside, where distinctive forms of power shape life’ (p. 15). Border zones, I would add, are a privileged standpoint from which to observe and analyse transit mobilities and migrants’ agency, which are an interesting litmus test for the mechanisms of power distribution between actors, which are shaped through their relationships.

The realisation of border ethnography in the study of the ‘new’ transit mobilities of refugees, is an emergent field of research, which is in continuous evolution. Due to the normal delay in the processes of generating theory regarding the occurrence of the explored phenomena, new middle-range theories or flexible interpretative tools are continuously needed. Hence, the exploration of emergent phenomena is an interesting field in which to smartly combine grounded theory methods and ethnographic ones.

Starting from this complex theoretical framework, the article discusses some challenges, both theoretical and empirical, that arise in the frame of border ethnography applied to the study of transit mobilities, focusing on the case of Syrian refugees in Southern Europe. These challenges concern both the access to the fieldwork and the instauration of a ‘direct and sustained’ contact with agents (O’Reilly, 2012), i.e. the most delicate phases in ethnographic research.

The first challenge concerns what many scholars have already conceptualised as *ethical dilemma*, which the election of human beings as research objects and the observation of their behaviour can produce (De Laine, 2000; Fine, 1993; Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003; Kirsch, 1999; Lipson, 1994). This dilemma is often exacerbated by the disadvantaged, often dramatic, situations in which the social groups who are analysed are temporarily or permanently living. The example of seaborne refugees, after disembarkation in Southern Europe, is particularly meaningful: the traumatising experience that the lethal sea-crossings embody contributes to increasing the condition of vulnerability that forced migration produces.

The second challenge is related to the configuration of border zones as transit spaces, and to the practical difficulties in building relationships and doing in-depth interviews with people in transit. During 2013 and 2014, places where the authorities brought Syrian refugees after the rescue operations (first reception centres in Southern

Italy, border zones) did not coincide with what they had imagined as final destinations of their journey, thus they were still fleeing, in order to overcome the limitations imposed by the Dublin Regulation and to reach Northern Europe. If, on the one hand, ethnography seemed to be the most adequate method to grasp the evolving nature of mobilities and transit phenomena; on the other hand, the relation with 'the ground', which is the essence of the 'grounded theory', became very complex and multi-layered.

A third challenge concerns the relationship between researcher and observed groups: while traditional ethnography strongly recommends the detachment of the observer, in order to preserve the research's results from interpretations based on personal involvement, more recent critical ethnography proposes a new reading of the researcher as a 'co-performer' (Conquergood, 1991). What Goffman (1969) defined as 'careful presentation of self' is a fundamental requirement in gaining access to delicate fields such as border zones or transit spaces.

Before proceeding with the analysis of each challenge it is important to provide some insights concerning the transit spaces and border zones where my research has been conducted, because the configuration of these grounds and its socio-political contexts contribute to generating those challenges. Italy and Greece are two important destination countries of seaborne migration routes, from Libya/Egypt and Turkey respectively. The fieldworks that I use as empirical references in this analysis were carried out in the city of Catania and the island of Lesbos, which are configured as key sites in the reconfiguration of Mediterranean migration routes, which have been partly modified by the Syrian diaspora and by the socio-political changes that occurred following the 2011 Arab upheavals. Moreover, Greece and Italy share some commonalities, such as the persistent economic crisis and the diminishing welfare regime, which have repercussions in terms of the weakness of the reception system for refugees. Nevertheless, they are characterised by the mis-en-scene (staging) of what De Genova (2002, 2013) defined as the 'border spectacle' and by emergency-building processes (Campesi, 2011). Seaborne migration widely contributes to these phenomena that take shape through the daily presentation of masses of seaborne migrants in the mass media.

In that frame, Catania and Lesvos are two privileged standpoints for grasping the complexity of Italian and Greek reception policies regarding refugees. They are contemporaneously landing places and transit spaces, and this double pattern provides them with a complex nature and configures them as unstable grounds.

4. The ethical dilemma: addressing vulnerability and trauma

The first challenge, concerning the ethic dilemma, is generated by the addressing of vulnerability and trauma during the semi-participant observation and the in-depth interviews. Nevertheless, as S. underlines in the following lines, through refugees' narratives the researcher is only able to grasp a little part of the entire traumatic experience that the fleeing from war and then the seaborne migration produce.

Those who are not rich, who don't know how many months they will need to collect enough money to leave Syria, can only go to Europe by sea. And there, on that route, either they die, or they arrive, with a trauma that they will bring with them for almost the rest of their life. If I think about my case...my wife, my children, they are still completely traumatised by the sea. Now I have only told you about travel. How it was, how we ran into the water, how we were crammed on the boat, how we were dying and how we were saved. But it remains only a tale. Living it is always something entirely different [Interview with S., Syrian refugee from Dara'a, 18 June, Catania Train Station].

The discourse of trauma is very present in refugees' narratives. One of the most recurrent sentences is 'shufna el mawt bil bahar', which in English means 'we have seen death at sea'. The direct contact with death, or the very concrete risk of experiencing it, emerges in many linguistic expressions: 'qawareb el mawt', namely 'the boat of death'; or 'safar el mawt', namely the 'journey of death'. The condition of survivors, which is combined with the refugee condition of those who have already travelled from Syria to transit countries, such as Libya, is confirmed by the lethal sea crossing experience and bring with it a trauma-related vulnerability. 'The recognition of one's related vulnerability is an important epistemological requirement for empathetic and compassionate responses to the other' (Nussbaum 2001, cited in Hall 2012: 156). According to Nussbaum (2004) 'empathy is the imaginative reconstruction of other experience', which is in some way the essence of ethnographic research.

Moreover, migrants' narratives, including those which concern traumatic experiences, are at the very core of the analysis: firstly, as a tool of political subjectification (Fassin, 2008) and, secondly, as an 'opportunity or entry point to grasping the interplay between self and society' (Eastmond, 2007: 250), i.e. the acting and counteracting mechanisms that develop between management-migration policies and migrants. Those considerations still do not solve some of the main concerns of researchers: Is it possible to individuate a 'right moment' to start an interaction? Am I invading the observed people's privacy? Am I being respectful enough of their sufferance?

Probably a 'right moment' for approaching people does not exist, but what seems obvious is that people who have just landed after a possibly lethal journey and are still trying to pursue their travel toward Northern European countries through a sort of 'second flight' are not in the optimal conditions to be deeply interviewed. Having said that, going beyond these common-sense perceptions it is possible to elaborate some further considerations. As some of those interviewed pointed out, sharing narratives and experiences with someone else, regardless of whether it is with a friend or a stranger, can represent a way of giving meaning to the experience. Moreover, narration can facilitate a sort of placement of one's own life path, which includes the migration experience. These mechanisms of self-placement look fundamental, especially in light of some common feelings that forced migration combined with the condition of survivals may generate: the feeling of being 'lost' in an unknown context, the sensation of being 'non-protagonists', 'passive observers' of their own life, and 'victims of events'. The request to look back to the beginning of the migration path and the focus on the decision to leave, which interviews require, can be useful in confronting these feelings.

In that frame, a factor of discernment is the level of structuration of one's personality, and the kind of personal resources that each person has. While people with a higher level of self-construction can interpret the sharing of personal experiences as meaningful tools, others can be afraid to go back over their traumatic experiences. In other cases, people simply find that 'it is not the right moment' and have no intention of actually sharing their stories: they recognise feeling confused, stunned and lost. A final

factor which might be taken into account is the cultural background of interviewees. Sometimes Syrian refugees were willing to share their experiences, even when traumatic, and to speak about the horror they had escaped and about the atrocities and difficulties faced during their journeys. In many cases, these narratives are supported by audio-visual material that is provided to the researcher as support and proof of the tale. An interesting element of understanding has been provided by F.R., a Syrian journalist interviewed in Rome: he highlights a sort of ‘culture of documenting’, which led Syrian refugees to reproduce, during their journeys, the same practices of documenting that characterised the revolution of 2011 and the war context, where due to journalists’ lack of access to the ground, the documentation effort of private citizens became precious (Denaro, 2016).

Of course, the ethical dilemma cannot be solved through a list of prescriptions, but only deeply understood and attenuated by recognition and consciousness concerning the seaborne refugees’ traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, the development of discerning skills, which can simplify the recognition of those who want/do not want to share their experience, could be useful in such delicate research contexts.

5. An instable ground: long-term observation of refugees’ short stay

The ground, far from being a ‘void territory’, by definition, includes people who *act* in it, whose way of acting and whose relationships profoundly contribute to its configuration. Thus, when doing research on transit mobilities in border zones we observe a sort of detachment/fracture between context and actors: while the spatial context is fixed, its configuration evolves continuously, in parallel with the succession of new arrivals and the departure of people. This generates unstable grounds, where, and with which, it is not easy to build stable relations. The continuous movement of travelling people often does not allow for long periods of semi-participant observation of the same groups of people, and the amount of time required in order to deeply understand a ground is often lacking. Therefore, the descriptive work of ethnographers becomes more and more complex, such as taking photographs of running subjects, and the analytical effort must be able to disregard the possibility of observing a relatively fixed picture.

During 2014 and 2015 the presence of Syrian refugees in Catania and Lesbos varied in time between a minimum of one hour of permanence to a maximum of three weeks. In the case of Catania, on the one hand, local volunteers at the train station

provided assistance to the refugees in the purchase of train tickets and put a sort of first-reception service in place; on the other hand, many refugees got in direct contact with land smugglers, in order to continue travelling to Milan and the north of Europe. The semi-participant observation that I conducted in Catania Train Station was aimed at observing the phenomenon of transit, in which the relationship between Syrian refugees and local volunteers played an essential role. In the case of Lesbos, the observation concerned the port, the public gardens of the city, a makeshift camp in Kara Tepe, and the detention centre of Moria, which people attended to be registered by local police in order to continue their journey to the Macedonian border and through the Balkan route.

In both contexts, the main challenge has concerned the long-term observation of refugees' short-term stay. They were still fleeing, thus deeply concerned about the 'next steps to do', but the different application of Dublin Regulation in Italy and Greece produced extremely differentiated responses. While in Greece they were looking to be quickly registered in order to be able to go to Athens, in Italy they were trying to avoid the registration, in order to ask for asylum elsewhere.

The shorter the periods of stay, the more difficult it was to get in touch with people and conduct in-depth interviews.

6. The ethnographer's uncomfortable position: renegotiating identities

According to Hall (2014: 23):

'Ethnography is what Ortner (2006: 42-3) calls "an intellectual (and moral) positionality": it is a "constructive and interpretive mode" and a "bodily process in space and time" which aims to produce "understanding through richness, texture, and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement and (in the sense used by mathematicians) elegance". It looks at "concrete manifestations" (Inda 2005: 11) of power—how specific inclusions and exclusions materialise in specific practices and contexts, their effects and consequences, their embedding in the dense, humdrum everyday'.

The 'ethnographic knowledge' as well as being positioned in time and space, emerges from the distinct positionality of the researcher (Hall, 2014). 'The positioned

production of knowledge within long-term fieldwork and the relationships that are forged have ethical implications' (2014: 24).

The relation between positionality and ethics is a key issue in my analysis. In the context of my previous research, semi-participant observations and in-depth interviews have been conducted in the border zones and transit spaces of Italy and Greece. In total, I conducted 40 in-depth interviews (20 in each locality) with the refugees and 20 (10 in each locality) with people involved in this process (human rights activists, volunteers, members of associations, public officers). Conquergood's way of rethinking ethnography (1991) is particularly useful, because the nature of explored contexts requires a particular kind of involvement. Often I was obliged to re-interpret myself, and my work, in terms of co-performance, because the presence of a *detached observer* would be perceived as intrusive and out of place. Therefore, using my professional competence as a social worker, interpreter and legal assistant I collaborated with local volunteers and activists in first aid and reception tasks during the fieldwork. These experiences allowed me to be part of an informal network of researchers, volunteers and activists with different professional backgrounds, who are involved in the monitoring of the Mediterranean space, and in the support of Syrian refugees' migration, in terms of provision of first aid and advocacy in Italy and abroad.

In order to clarify my discourse, a brief exemplification, based on my fieldwork in Sicily, would be helpful. Even though, access to the fieldwork was very spontaneous and I felt welcome right from the beginning, the re-interpretation of myself as part of the context has not been so immediate. My initial aim was to not get involved in any kind of reception of refugees, but the reception was really informal and completely voluntary: the ratio of refugees to volunteers was 50:1 and at least one more person was needed. Everyday there were between 30–200 people, and there was a lot of work to do. My professional competences as a social worker and interpreter have been fundamental to the participant observation, and extremely helpful in solving the ethic dilemma, which a detached observation in such a dramatic context would have generated.

I accompany 30 of them. Three euros and 50 cents, 4 euros and 50 cents and...twenty, fifteen, eleven euros and so on. I translate the prices of bread, cheese, bread sticks, wet wipes, a kinder egg, coke, pieces of rotisserie, sweets. Is there water on the train? No, there isn't. And so we buy

5 bottles of water, three small ones, two big ones (Extract from the Notebook used during the fieldwork. Catania, 1 May 2014).

I bring another 50 of them to the mosque. We overpass the waterfront plaza, then Corso Vittorio, then the first square on the left, where there are palm trees.

I check that no one is left behind.

I think about research and interviews but there is no time. There are hundreds of people who need everything. During these chaotic moments they repeat this sentence to me like a mantra: ‘Ya Chiara, Wallahi shufna el mut bilbahar (Chiara, I swear, we saw the death at sea)’ (Extract from the Notebook used during the fieldwork. Catania, 1 May 2014).

As Agar (1980: 41) notes, people will always categorise or contextualise the ethnographer in a way that affects attitudes to him or her. In that sense I think that my profession, as a social worker, and my basic knowledge of the Arabic language was an important structuring factor in my acceptance, and helped me to build more significant relationships with all the actors.

This has been very important because, as in Hall’s case study in Locksdon (detention centre in UK), I can say that my knowledge of Catania Train Station and Lesbos refugee camps was ‘extracted from the social relations in which I was temporarily embroiled’ (2011: 25).

7. Conclusions: how to deal with ‘grey zones’?

In the frame of the current so-called *refugee crisis* in Southern European countries, and bringing empirical references from my previous research, concerning the right to asylum in the border zones and the transit mobility of refugees from Southern European countries to the North, the article explored three methodological challenges that qualitative research approaches, such as grounded theory and ethnography, applied to the study of transit mobilities of refugees can produce. Firstly, the so-called ethical dilemma, which is related to the observation of and interaction with seaborne refugees, who are in many cases still traumatised by the journey at sea; secondly, the difficulties

of carrying out a ‘long-term observation’ of people in transit, who are often in a grey zone between legality and illegality, and do not have the ‘time’ or the intention to build relationships; thirdly, the uncomfortable role of the ethnographer as a ‘detached observer’ in such a context and the need to renegotiate their identity.

The analysis of each challenge: firstly, in order to give strength to the ethnographic observation, and to not preclude the possibility of building a theory; secondly, in order to give more depth and accurateness to the grounded theory approach. In Charmaz’s words, ‘GT methods preserve an open-ended approach to studying the empirical world yet add rigor to ethnographic research by building systematic checks into both data collection and analysis’ (2006: 23).

The ‘grey zone’ is a very useful concept, which is able to contribute in the understanding of processes aimed at overcoming rigid dualities: detached observer/co-performer; researcher/volunteer; legal/illegal and so on.

As Auyero has argued in relation to Levi’s writings (1988), the ‘grey zone’ stands forth a zone of ambiguity that severely challenges pervasive polarities such as we/they, friend/enemy and good/evil – what Levi refers to as the ‘Manichean tendency’ which shuns half-tints and complexities [...] prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels – we and they’ (Levi, quoted in Auyero, 2007: 32, quoted in Demant Frederiksen and Harboe Knudsen, 2015: 1).

In the introductory chapter of *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe*, Demant Frederiksen and Harboe Knudsen (2015) enumerate multiple ways of understanding of the concept of a ‘grey zone’. Grey zones are conceptualised as ‘physical spaces’, but also as a ‘conceptual tool that warn us against rigid or even misleading dichotomies, an empirical object and an analytic lens that draws our attention toward a murky area where normative boundaries dissolve’ (Auyero, 2007: 32). These references help to clarify the main aim of my analysis, namely to highlight the need to go beyond dualistic oppositions and rigid categorisations, both from a methodological and interpretative point of view.

Research contexts, such as Southern European border zones during the so-called refugee crisis are essentially ‘grey zones’, and contribute to the creation of other similar conceptual and real spaces. Most of the actors’ condition was a grey zone. Refugees were often in legal limbo, status-less, sometimes due to their will to overcome the

restrictions imposed by the Dublin Regulation and continue their travel, sometimes because of the inadequateness of the reception system and the impossibility to access the asylum procedure. Their status-lessness or, in other words, their ambiguous socio-legal condition of being contemporary insiders and outsiders regarding the law, had a domino effect on the volunteers' condition, which was a grey zone too. The provision of help for people in transit was a scarcely defined activity from a legal point of view. The legal persecution of some activists and volunteers engaged with refugees, even if unfounded and interpretable in the frame of new European 'policies of criminalisation', with a deterrent function, is a clear indicator of this 'greyness'. Nevertheless, people engaged in the management of the refugee crisis—from the police authorities to the social workers employed in the reception system, from NGOs members to the local authorities—were in a grey zone. They were involved into the implementation of extraordinary policies, such as the policy of 'leaving them go', which I have called elsewhere a 'closed eyes policy' (Denaro, 2015a, 2015b, 2016).

Finally, my identity as a researcher, which was taking shape through my positionality, was also a grey zone. I was never only a researcher, nor only a social worker or a volunteer; my identity was very flexible and constantly shifting in order to facilitate the access to the field and my permanence in it. Moments of mute observation alternated with moments in which close relationships were constructed. Co-performance was an essential condition to access 'grey contexts' and a privileged standpoint to observe and analyse them.

In conclusion, what maybe emerged from my analysis is the need to grasp the multidimensionality of each research object and context; they often become tangled up in internal contradictory instances. Researchers need to identify and explore this complexity and to deal with it, even if that implies a destabilisation of roles, violations of traditional methodological rules, the criss-cross of professional competences and a deep negotiation of personal and professional self and identity.

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