Back-talk Focus Groups as a Follow-Up Tool in Qualitative Migration Research: The Missing Link?

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Abstract: This paper reflects upon a specific, but rarely used, methodological tool we term *back-talk focus group*, which consists in drawing together research participants to discuss research findings.

After three years of research on Muslim youth in Italy we will show the importance of creating space for a further research stage called "back-talk". The paper will argue that focus group is a very useful tool to make a powerful back-talk for three main reasons. First it stimulates the *reflexivity* of the researcher by allowing to generate *new data*. Second, it *empowers* participants by allowing them greater role in the research process and more reflexive practices in civil society. Third, it ensures *responsible dissemination* of potentially sensitive issues to a potentially diverse and highly politicised audience.

Following a general discussion of how back-talk focus group could contribute to create a research culture more reflexive and more social responsible, the paper will review the empirical case of a back-talk focus group of young Italian Muslims and will show their *dissents*, *agreements* and *suggestions* emerged through the discussion of the research results. We will conclude by reflecting on the main strengths of back-talk focus group and we will also note some limitations of this "missing link" in qualitative migration research.

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1. Making the Case for "Back-talk": A Tool for Creating a Genuinely Reflexive and Social Responsible Research Culture

According to DENZIN and LINCOLN (2000), we are in the "seventh moment" of the social sciences' history. This time asks social scientists to connect qualitative research to the struggles for a free democratic society. The issues of *voice* (how authors express themselves within a scientific text, for instance within an ethnography)[1] and *reflexivity* (the process of reflecting critically on the self as

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1   CLIFFORD (1997, p.36) suggested to avoid the rhetoric which "keeps the distance" and builds the objectivity of the text using stylistic means which substitute the "voice" of the author (for instance not using the first person "'I'") with the impersonal voice of the science. Even though some scholars made a "post-modern" fashion out of it, the challenge is to "specify the

researcher) become primary trying to "decolonise" the discourse of the "other".
The "other" is always interpreted through the eyes and cultural standards of the
researcher, but what is at stake is the possibility to make the stakeholders
(especially if they belong to minority groups) an integral part of the knowledge-
generation process and to re-discuss the interpretative categories of the
researcher. It is "a call for conversation, negotiated interpretations, texts in which
multiple interpretations flourish, in which challenges are integrated to the
manuscript" (FINE, WEISS, WESEEN & WONG, 2000, p.127). This work can
take place in a follow up focus group, as "back-talk" with some participants. The
"back-talk" could be defined as the participants' interpretations on the
researcher's interpretations (CARDANO, 1997, p.65). This is not a validation
process, but an investigation of "second order" (LANZARA cited in RANCI, 1998,
p.53), a means to "meta-communicate" the research (RANCI, 1998, p.52). [1]

Why choosing the focus group method? "It is believed that the group situation
may reduce the influence of the researcher on the research subjects by tilting the
balance of power towards the group. Because focus groups emphasise the
collective rather than the individual, they foster free expressions of ideas,
encouraging members of the groups to speak up" (MADRIZ, 2000, p.838). The
possibility to discuss critically the research with the participants generates new
data (SILVERMANN, 2002, p.293) and it could open new questions and new
fieldworks. [2]

The categories used by the researcher in the analysis are questioned by social
actors capable of supplying observations relevant to the same interpretive
function of the researcher. "The present world is a more and more reflexive world.
This means that the 'natives' note down what scholars say about them and
sometimes contest" (HANNERZ, 2002, p.71). [3]

If we consider the research as a relationship (GERGEN & GERGEN, 2000,
p.1042), the potential for using focus group as a "back-talk" is to give the
researcher the chance to be "responsible" (MELUCCI, 1998; LECCARDI, 1999)
and think about the implications/consequences of his/her interpretations in social
actors' every day life. The reflexivity of the researcher is needed to challenge dom-
inant interpretative frameworks and open symbolic spaces for social change. [4]

2. Making Back-talk Work: Engaging Muslim Youth in a Post-research Focus Group

Making back-talk work is really useful when the object of investigation has a
controversial history because of the ethnocentrism (the attitude to consider the
culture of the scholars like the "centre" of the world and to evaluate other cultures
without any self-critical competence to analyse the cultural categories used) and
the power relations which marked the fieldworks (especially during the colonial
period). This is the case of the study of Islam and Muslim people, as E. SAID
(1991) showed clearly. He asked himself if in order to understand a specific

discourses" as much as possible (who speaks? when and where? to whom? in what historical-
political context? etc.).

political or social situation it was more important to see "if *x* and *y* are disadvantaged in some way" or "that they are Jews or Muslims" (SAID, 1991, p.324 and p.346). Obviously it wasn't a suggestion in order to forget about the complexity of human phenomenon, but a severe critique towards those scholars who "orientalised the other" and explained everything according to the religious or cultural belonging, eclipsing power relations. According to SAID (1991, p.319), those who studied Muslims considered the "texts" (often obsolete) and forgot the "people"; moreover, as they thought to describe the "other", they participated to the construction of the West and its hegemony. He wrote his book in 1978 and reading many publications appeared after 9/11 it seems to be sadly up-to-date: once more an ethnocentric collective imaginary sprang up in order to legitimise occupations and wars (about the role of the mass-media, see SAID 1997). [5]

As in many other countries, "islamophobia" precedes the tragic events of 9/11 but it was above all after this date that some opinion-makers and politicians have begun to depict Muslims who live in Italy as potentially dangerous[2] (SCIORTINO, 2002; RIVERA, 2002). This has meant that today there are two different dominant frameworks about Islam in Italy: one, that of "security", in which Muslims become either "presumed terrorists" or "moderate Muslims"; and another, namely "cultural", in which differences become glorified or more often feared and Muslims are given the role of the "radically other". [6]

Some youth have managed to make the best out of this bad situation and have tried to change this social pressure into an opportunity structure. While adult Islamic associations still adopted defensive logics (by opposing "us Muslims" to "them Italians"), a youth association called "Giovani Musulmani d'Italia" (G.M.I.) entered the public sphere to introduce a new more inclusive category, "Italian citizens of Islamic faith", and to shift the discussion regarding Muslims in Italy from the perspective of a safety or a cultural issue to that of an issue based on citizenship. [7]

The G.M.I. is an association composed of about 400 children of immigrants. The majority were born in Italy or were raised there since primary school. They are between 15 and 17, while their leaders are older, between 18 and 24. Girls are both more numerous and more active in the association. The majority of the G.M.I. are high school students, while leaders (both male and female) attend university, in scientific as well as social sciences departments. Parents are for the most part Moroccan, but there is also a significant component of Syrian origin among the parents of the more active members; other nationalities present in the association are Egyptian, Palestinian, Jordanian, Tunisian and Algerian. Fathers are for the most part factory workers, but there is also a significant number of doctors and entrepreneurs[3]. Mothers are for the most part housewives, but there

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2   See, for example, the long article by O. FALLACI appeared on Corriere della Sera (one of the main national newspapers) 29/9/01, entitled "La Rabbia e l'orgoglio" ("Rage and pride"), which later became a best-selling book. FALLACI won an award for her "cultural contribution" from the President of the Italian Republic in December 2005. Regarding political forces, Lega Nord is the main actor of anti-Islamic xenophobia (GUOLO, 2003, pp.58-80).

3   While Syrian parents are doctors, parents of Moroccan origin are mostly factory workers.

are also maidservants and cleaners, intercultural mediators, social workers and entrepreneurs. The largest local sections of the G.M.I. are those in Emilia Romagna; in Lombardy, where it has its headquarters in Milan; Piedmont; Trentino Alto-Adige; Tuscany and Umbria. The best organised young Muslims are in Northern Italy, while there are no local sections of the G.M.I. in many regions of Southern Italy. The social composition of the association mirrors in certain aspects the population of the children of immigration in Italy: they for example, as in the case of G.M.I., concentrate in Northern and Middle Italy, and the most common nationality of origin is Moroccan[4]. [8]

This association is interesting not because of its representativeness[5], but because this is currently the only Islamic youth association active in Italy, because it was born only 10 days after 9/11[6] and above all because it was able to give a voice to all the youth who are continually "called into question" as Muslims. They participated in various enterprises on inter-religious and intercultural dialogue on a local and national level, thereby gradually gaining remarkable visibility on the media in a relatively short amount of time. [9]

After three years of participant observation in the G.M.I., 50 in depth interviews with children of immigrants who were born or raised in Italy and three focus groups among young Muslims (both militant and not), I decided to present the main results of the research:

• Identification with Islam emerges through interaction and is only one of many forms of identification for this youth

• In their everyday life these youth "resist" to dominant frameworks through tactics and strategies (DE CERTEAU, 2001). In the first case, through the tactics, they "reverse the stigma" (SAYAD, 2002, p.339) and declare themselves "Muslims against violence and terrorism". This happens often interacting with journalists or with politicians. In the second case, through the strategies, they challenge the dominant interpretative frameworks and they practice a "citizenship from below", especially at a local level.

• A part of this youth used the current discourses on Islam as a resource for participation. It seems to me that the risk of this strategy is to transform the difference in a "profession" and "politicise their entire life" (GOFFMAN, 2003, p.37). [10]

I invited the most motivated and active of the participants[7] in a post-research focus group to question my interpretations through the points of view emerging in

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4   Since the phenomenon of the stabilisation of immigration in Italy is relatively recent, the majority of "foreigners born in Italy" are much younger than G.M.I. members and they still attend nursery and primary schools.

5   The reality of young Muslims in Italy is surely much more diversified, one needs only think of the many different nationalities of origin which are not present in the association.

6   It was created from the ashes of previously existing Islamic youth associations (first the Islamic Youth group and, in 1999, AGESMI, and in 2000, "The Mediator"); with the exception of the latter all were dependent on the U.CO.I.I. (Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy), the main Islamic immigrant association and one of the organizations which requested a formal accord (*intesa*) with the Italian government (ELSHEIKH, 2001).

one critical discussion with social actors. My long collaboration with the participants of the focus group facilitated a free discussion[8]. [11]

I distinguished three different types of opinions which emerged from the focus group: dissents, agreements and suggestions. [12]

a. Dissents: "Tactics and strategies" were contested categories. In the opinion of the participants, there is an assumption that their acts of identifications have explicit goals. They dissent from the idea of a completely free rational actor. I explained my theoretical background, (DE CERTEAU, 2001) and the practices of interpretation embedded in the sufferings and hopes of the everyday life, and they appreciated this perspective. Even so, they think that the words "tactics and strategies" are misleading because we live in war time and someone can think that young Italians Muslims have "secret agendas". In other words, "tactics and strategies" could sound "dangerous". [13]

Another interpretation contested was related to my analysis of the "difference as a profession". I talked about the "market multiculturalism" (COLOMBO, 2002) and the use of cultural differences as a resource for individual social mobility. In the opinion of the participants, I was misinterpreting an important cultural work which is fundamental to create the conditions for "living together". I explained that I agree with the importance of the role of "Muslim intellectuals" and "Muslims social workers" in a context of ignorance on Islam, but I referred to those situations where there is the risk of reproducing the dominant framework where Muslims are the "radically other". [14]

My interpretation of their dissent on the terms "tactics/strategies" and of the definition of "difference as a profession" is that they wanted to avoid to be taken as "opportunists". It was like if they were saying to me (and to the audience of my article): "we believe in what we do". They were asking a recognition as "honest and committed people". [15]

b. *Agreements:* The group discussion showed some ideas shared between the researcher and the participants: for instance, the importance of the "resources of social actors" and the difficult interactions with mass-media. [16]

In the opinion of the participants too, socio-economic factors and family network play an important role to make difference an opportunity. They emphasised that cultural and religious difference is a stigma for many young people and only those who are the most active among the Young Italian Muslims are able to make Islamic identification an opportunity for participation. [17]

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7   The focus group took place at the end of January 2005 in the University of Padua. There were people of the G.M.I. association (4 men and 3 women, between 20 and 25 years).

8   The type of relationships between researcher and those studied are of primary importance: the how of the research practice is strictly linked to the what, the data (GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2000, p.488).

One issue of strong agreement refers to the mass-media. The participants said that the relationships with journalists are really problematic. For them it is possible only a "conditioned presence" in the newspaper or on television: they are asked to condemn "Islamic terrorism" but any other topic relevant to them is excluded, as in the case of their citizenship requests. On the other hand, in their opinion this public visibility is "a little victory", because they think that they live in a country with a serious lack of pluralism of information and in an "islamophobic time": so, to be designed as a "good Muslim" is "something". [18]

c. *Suggestions*: In the group discussion the gender dimension was relevant because the three young women present proposed me to enlarge my investigation to the "private sphere" while the four young men suggested to explore more the intergenerational conflicts within the mosques. [19]

The young women said that they were interested in knowing more about the conflicts inside the families and they call for a new research on the marriage choices of young Muslims girls. They shift the discussion on the "sexophobia" of the previous generation, especially of those parents who are associated in some Islamic organisations. [20]

The young men talked about the communicative problems with the adult Islamic leaders and explained their reasons to go out of the mosques (today the local sections of the Young Italian Muslims of Northern Italy organise their weekly meetings thanks to the Democrats of the Left Party who give them a free space). [21]

At the end of the group discussion (which lasted two hours: thirty minutes of my presentation of the results and one hour and half of discussion of the participants) there was an "optimistic climate", full of proposals. For instance: the participants asked me to be involved in my next research project as consultants; and they invited me to go to their next national meeting and to present the results of the doctoral research … and also the new data of the "back-talk" focus group! [22]

3. The Potential Power of Back-talk (and Limitations): Some Examples from the Field

The back-talk focus group with Muslim youth stimulated the reflexivity of the researcher offering "dissents, agreements and suggestions", which are *new data*, not a validation of the results of the research. There is no need to seek a "consensus" if the contested categories still "make sense" for the researcher: what is at stake is the possibility to add the voice of the participants to the researcher's interpretations and to open the text to multiple interpretations. For instance, I keep using the "tactics and strategies" categories because I think that they help to analyse different ways to participate to public space, but I specify that these categories may risk to legitimise the dominant safety framework. Thus, I add to my interpretation the request of the participants to present themselves in a citizenship framework. [23]

Moreover, the back-talk focus group was an opportunity also for the participants to go further with their reflexivity. The G.M.I. association entered the Italian public sphere to face "islamophobia" and to emancipate from "how they are viewed". Their struggle is difficult because of the political context ("global war on terrorism"), of the limits in the pluralism of the Italian mass-media system and because of the social position of these children of immigrants. The back-talk focus group empowered participants.

> "We lack of the tools to be real protagonist actors and not only object of people's speeches (…). Maybe times are not ripe and they will never be if we always remain in a weak position, suspected by everybody and always with a defensive attitude (…). During the talk I realized how to go on! It is no more enough to declare our innocence and goodness in public (…). Let's try to speak about rights, not only about Muslims! Let's try to be a generational force, let's not remain in a cultural cage … If we were more self-confident, we would have the strength to be a social movement. We could organize a public demonstration in front of Home Office and ask for the citizenship right for all the children of immigrants (…). These young Muslims are above all children of immigrants and it would be easier to gather them talking about rights (…). I think that many youth will join us … We must create a broad movement of youth (…)" (K., 20 years old, who was President of the association in the years 2003-2004). [24]

The group discussion contributed to the construction of an agenda to fight discriminations and to break defensive and exclusivist logics. The participants searched new strategies and began thinking that it is time to go beyond the request of a cultural/religious recognition and to fight for their rights together with other young people. [25]

On the other hand, this is an exploratory investigation about the potential of the back-talk focus group and it is needed to recognise some limitations. In the focus group here presented I spoke with motivated people, an "elite" of youth well educated (and four of the participants are students of social sciences!). How to enlarge the discussion? Each text has its audience and the presentation of the data must change if the people are younger and with a low level of education. How communicating to a larger public of young Muslims? [26]

It is clear that this is a preliminary reflection and that other back-talk focus groups with different participants are desirables. This work explored the practise of a responsible dissemination of potentially sensitive issues to a potentially diverse and highly politicised audience. Is the back-talk focus group the "missing link" in qualitative migration research? [27]

The "seventh moment" of the social sciences' history asks social scientists to connect qualitative research to the struggles for a free democratic society and the goal of a social research becomes a communicative process (rather than an accumulation of products). Back-talk focus group is a rarely used methodological tool, but it might be really useful to develop what the Italian anthropologists DE

MARTINO and then LANTERNARI called a "critical ethnocentrism"[9]: it is impossible for a scholar not to be "ethnocentric" but one can be more critical about his/her cultural background, about the historical-political context and about the pragmatic implications of the categories used. According to GADAMER (1994), it is needed to make explicit our prejudices and to articulate them in the encounter with the "other". [28]

The back-talk focus group with Muslim youth allowed to reflect on dominant frameworks about Muslims in Italy, to increase the reflexivity of the researcher and to empower social actors who are currently stigmatised and are at risk of social exclusion. [29]

Acknowledgements

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9   See FABIETTI and REMOTTI 1997, p.274.

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