Human Concepts. The qualitative dimension of social research.

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Abstract. Researching qualitatively involves knowing, recording, narrating and disseminating information about the socio-cultural expression of the behaviour and relationships of the protagonists of the fact or phenomenon under study, in its observable and interpretable qualities. In this article I summarise the main characteristics of qualitative research, and offer a research model focused on the study of those qualities in social action and communication expressed via language (in its conceptual meaning and in the sense of its discourse), indicating the key points of the qualitative method, the general phases of its development process, its main strategies and techniques, and the diffusion of knowledge obtained via the new instruments and networks of digital and global diffusion.

Keywords. Concepts, Qualities, Qualitative, Research, Language, Narration.

1. QUALITATIVE STRATEGIES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH.

We need to know what the causes and consequences are of what we do and what we say in our coexistence with others. We want to know the origin and impact of the social problems that affect or may affect us. We have to understand what has happened and is happening in everyday life and in the world that surrounds us. We

must communicate to the community that which is discovered and that which must be deciphered; we do this by understanding, observing and recording the social and cultural, written and visual, real and symbolic language of human beings in relationships, on the basis of the qualities which give sense and meaning to their actions: human concepts as social and cultural reality.

1.1. *The qualitative dimension.*

The qualitative method in Social Sciences is an essential scientific instrument in order to address these demands in a globalised world. A set of methods and socio-cultural research strategies, (linguistic-semiotic basis), which studies, evaluates and interprets social facts or phenomena, beyond or in a complementary manner to the quantitative dimension; and does so, from the study of human interaction and communication (in their words and in their actions) by means of a set of techniques of data collection, analysis and interpretation. But in the 21st century, new and digital social media and social networks changes the way individuals and large organizations communicate, life and human relations, and for that reason, the present and the future qualitative research:

➢ It gathers, empirically and systematically, the information necessary for research from the language present in behaviour (from conduct to cognition) and in the relationships of the protagonists (in their creations and communications) of the fact selected for research (micro or macro-socially).

➢ It studies, describes and understands this information based upon what is said by the protagonists of the fact via the word (in communication) and via action (in material and symbolic creations) in the social and cultural scenario in which they live and about which they think, or "*timing History, spacing Concepts*" (Koselleck, 2002).

➢ And it synthesises and interprets this fact through the possible objectivity of its meaning (human concepts) and the subjective sense thereof (human discourses), always in relation to a historical (spatial-temporal) and mental (socio-cultural) context.

The demands of community life, expressed individually or collectively (problems or conflicts, needs or demands, claims or dreams) to learn or to survive, need to investigate what is expressed, and how, by the actions and relations that provoke or can resolve them. This requires qualitative research of social reality in its natural context, just as it occurs (and is narrated), seeking to obtain and interpret information with regard to phenomena according to the meaning and sense they have for the people involved; via field or documentary work, in the areas of study of each of the Social Sciences in a general manner (sociology, social work), in

interdisciplinary (education, anthropology, economy) or auxiliary fashion (nursing, law, psychology).

And in this methodology the qualitative researcher reports with objectivity, clarity and precision both on his own observations of the social world (in accordance with his intentions or values), and on the experiences of others (with whom he lives or with whom he works as an expert). He explains, or attempts to explain, the origin, development and effects of the social facts selected and of the real subjects who participate in them, who provide information about their experiences, opinions or values, in short about the "qualities" of the reality in which they live and we live, of the specific experiences that are significant for a community, a family and a person. In this way the researcher employs a variety of materials which reflect the socio-cultural language (life stories, personal experiences, interview and observations, historical texts and symbols, sounds and images) shown by the real and perceived experience of people and groups in their thoughts and actions, in their relations and problematic situations. As Max Weber pointed out:

> "Thought is not restricted to the limits of science. However, it should not represent itself as science unless it is either 1) the analysis of facts (including abstraction and all empirically verifiable syntheses and hypotheses) or 2)analytical ethics" (Baumgarten, 1964: 399).

1.2. Language.

We always communicate, even if we refuse to do so; we always say something with our way of dressing and consuming, of constructing or destroying, of doing or undoing. The qualitative method responds, therefore, to this socio-cultural reality beyond quantitative data, including the values and beliefs of every citizen, of every community, of every moment when we say or do. Language is both a system of communication between individuals and a social phenomenon; the expression of the changing human concepts,

Everywhere, every day, everybody uses language, but a lot of those words are ephemeral. The next generation comes along, gets their own words, the old words disappear. Thus its fundamental objective is the description of those *qualities* which express our communication via social relations and the cultural content manifested linguistically (and extra-linguistically). To this end it seeks to describe those qualities on the basis of the *concepts* that arise from the community mentality in space and in time, and in the discourses where they are used or discarded, integrating them within a coherent and explanatory narration that succeeds in deciphering the causes and consequences of the phenomenon (Znaniecki, 1968); but "*word and idea are not born of scientific or logical thinking but of creative language,*

which means of innumerable languages-for this act of "conception" has taken place over and over again" (Huizinga, 1949: 28).

It is a case of testing or measuring, initially, the degree to which a certain quality is to be found in a specific event and how it is expressed individually and collectively. And in this way the aim is to understand what people express and how they communicate both in their relations and in the objects they create or influence, discovering as many qualities as possible to broaden the scope of the study (more plural, more complete), in its conception and its creation (McGee, 2003). Qualities are, therefore, the essence of this methodology, the distinguishing features of how they think and act, as are the behaviour and the relationships in society that language creates, reflects and disseminates, in harmonious or conflictive fashion (from conduct to communication):

1. Language shows us or reveals to us the particular qualities of a specific fact or social phenomenon (as cause or consequence).
2. The diverse linguistic manifestations are the reflection of the what and the how of personal or mass communication, from the concept which underpins it and from the discourse which contains it, in the word and the image: narrations, perceptions, images, and verbalization.
3. It always responds to the environment/context that determines or modifies it (from the anthropological to the sociological).
4. It may be addressed in its objective (the meaning) and subjective (the sense) dimension.
5. It is gathered, qualitatively, by means of narrative registers of the phenomena that are studied (such as categories, variables and qualitative indicators).
6. And one dimension that appears, in their socio-cultural impact, in processes of ideological/functional construction or destruction of social policy, from the Keynesian Welfare State (Titmuss, 1958) to the globalised welfare society.

A linguistic dimension that is materialised, thus, in the words and in the actions, always via the specific communication of every socio-cultural relationship. Communication as *"sine qua non of human life and social order"* which, on the basis of a series of community rules of social learning and the basic areas of study (syntactic, semantic and pragmatic), represents the observable mechanism of the relational and social function of human conduct and behaviour (from interaction to the message), as "*qualities*" to be studied in their normality and anormality, in their potentialities and in their individual and collective problems (Moreno & Glassner, 1989).

> *"The reaction which a social action actually provokes in the individual or group constituting its object never seems exactly the same to an outside observer as the*

subject expected to provoke. But, as has been shown before, this difference is ignored up to certain limits by the subject, who considers his tendency satisfied if the reaction actually obtained can be made to fit into the social situation as defined in advance, if it solves the practical social problem which he put in choosing the purpose of his action" (Znaniecki, 1925: 52-53).

1.3.   The qualities to discover.

The qualitative methodology responds, fully, to the paradigm with regard to the social dimension of the study of society. "*Socially constructed cultural objects*" become the key of social science, of an always humanist sociology. An objective, inductive and generalising science, inevitably cultural given its function of studying "*systems of social interaction*" (actions, relations, personalities and social roles) in their qualities or patterns of values and behavioural rules. And marked by a "*humanistic coefficient*" observable and recordable in personal documents, which mark or marked the social relation or "*organised and interdependent interaction between human beings*" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984: 30-40).

Qualities are, therefore, the socio-cultural characteristics that distinguish and define (differentiating or assimilating) people or things in the process of interpersonal relation, and which research finds expressed in the language of communication and action, in terms of observable conduct or recordable behaviour, being, for example:

❑ Acquired (learnt or imposed) or innate (biological or cultural).

❑ Subjective (perceived reality) or objective (concrete reality).

❑ Positive or negative (depending on functional or moral evaluation).

And in Research they are defined by Variables and Indicators via-à-vis attributes, properties or capacities, virtues or particularities, gifts or talents that can be observed and studied, recorded and analysed, explained and disseminated. Human qualities that can be socially defined in terms of:

❑ Essential Categories (Aristotle): 1) Substance, 2) Quantity, 3) Quality, 4) Relation, 5) Place, 6)Time, 7) Position, 8) Possesion, 9) Action, 10) Passion.

❑ Major issues and questions about mankind (Kant): 1) What can I know? ... from a metaphysical perspective, 2) What should I do? ... from the moral perspective, 3) What can I expect? ... from the religious perspective, 4) What is mankind? ... from the anthropological perspective.

❑ The basic human essences (Freund): 1) political, 2) economic, 3) legal, 4) moral, 5) aesthetic, 6) religious.

2. THE FUNDAMENTALS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.

There are two initial fundamentals of all qualitative research: the Thesis or how to justify scientifically the study of the fact or phenomenon selected; and the Method or how to organise and develop the research process.

2.1. The qualitative thesis: Justification.

This is the starting point of all research: raise, legitimately, the "epistemological doubt". Substantiate the what and the why of the research, defining the seed of that initial idea which leads to the study, from prior reflection to the scientific determination of the latter. And always delimiting its spatial-temporal context (historical development), and establishing the theoretical framework (knowing the beliefs, values and contributions, corresponding to that context) and the theoretical reality (from the systematic bibliographic and documentary review).

2.1.1. The spatial-temporal context.

First of all the ides has to be situated in its context. Two key elements mark the beginning, and determine how to frame the research idea in accordance with the basic historical and geographic premises (Fernández Riquelme, 2018):

- *The historical reason:* time (chronological and mortal) and its impact upon the lives of people in society.
  1. Retrospective: the *experiences* of the past that we should recover ("*know the past as it really was*" in Ranke).
  2. Perpective: the *possibilities* of the present granted to us by the past (since, as Benedetto Croce observed, *"all history is, in reality, contemporary history"*).
  3. Prospective: the *expectations* in the future that determine what we do, and which are determined by experiences and possibilities (Koselleck) "*contained in the permanent present are, in interwoven fashion, the past and the future*".
- The *geographical space*: the context.
  1. The territorial factor (Ratzel): "*Man is shaped by the need to provide himself with food resources and is naturally influenced by the physical environment, which is climate, land, height, water sources etc.*"
  2. The demographic factor, from birth-rates to migratory flows (Malthus) in that "*perpetual struggle for space and food*".
  3. The political factor (Weber) in its "*traditional, charismatic or legal authority*".

2.1.2. The theoretical framework.

Secondly, it is imperative to ascertain the scientific basis that provides theoretical justification for any qualitative study, in detailed and systematic fashion. It tells us where we come from and where we are going. It directs the research from a point of view that is either continuist and of improvement or extension, or innovative and original (marking the differences between this and other studies).

And it does so by establishing the basic academic and intellectual coordinates, situating the research problem within a set of regulatory definitions and knowledge academically or professionally, and using or generating basic concepts that will be employed during the analysis and reliability in the choice of a certain methodology (from the measuring instruments to the process of data collection and the evaluation of the results).

- Mentalities.
  a. The set of values and beliefs of a moment and a place how each generation, each people, each country thinks and what it believes in (Weber in *The protestant ethic*).
  b. The ideas that make it possible to do and undo: the ideologies that mark our study (Ortega in *The Revolt of the Masses*).
- Main authors and movements.
  a. Authors who have worked on the subject and need to be quoted: from classic works that continue to be valid, to more recent studies, in order to substantiate the work.
  b. Main schools of thought and/or action to be taken into account, to frame our thesis.
  c. Prior experiences to learn from or to refute, to compare our purpose.
  d. Techniques and sources that can be used or should be questioned (Fernández Riquelme, 2018).

2.1.3. The state of the question.

And thirdly, it is essential to carry out a thorough and comprehensive (and academic) bibliographic review and of the media (and ideological) impact of the research idea.

> *"Such an historical concept, however, since it refers in its content to a phenomenon significant for its unique individuality, cannot be defined according to the formula genus proximunt, differentia specifica, but it must be gradually put together out of the individual parts which are taken from historical reality to make it up. Thus the final and definitive concept cannot stand at the beginning of the investigation, but must come at the end"* (Weber, 2013: 10-20).

A state of the question that consists of: a) registration and presentation of the background and the context of the problems in the research; b) development and synthesis of the of the main contributions to date; c) presentation of the outstanding issues vis-à-vis this idea and which takes the concrete form of two dimensions:

- The scientific basis.
  1. What is known about the subject?. The different contributions and lines of research in existence or on the way,
  2. What can we contribute to the issue?. Questions with regard to the capacity for originality and innovation.
  3. What should we do: academic motivation or social practice? Define the ultimate goal of the work in relation to previous contributions and experiences and the requirements of academic, intellectual or social references.
- The ideological basis.
  1. Who benefits from the research?
  2. Should we take sides?
  3. Social change or axiological neutrality?

2.2. The qualitative method: research.

Practise science, about mankind and for mankind. Research is a process, in social and human sciences, which speaks of what we have done and what we have said, of our present actions and how we transmit them, and about what we wish to do and leave as a reminder. Research to discover and be discovered, as members of a community of reference or belonging into which we were born or which we have chosen; and where the remembered past, the possible present and the future of which we dream are fused into human experience and the qualities that describe it socially (relation) and culturally (expression) with the passage of time.

2.2.1. Researching qualitatively.

The qualitative method involves investigating fragments or phenomena of reality (selected previously) in their socio-cultural "qualities" via the social language (from the local to the global) with which we communicate and interact. *Following the trail, the footprint* of what human beings say and do, since etymologically "investigate" comes from the Latin words *in* (in, towards) and *vestigium* (footprint, trail). So maybe "*investigating is seeing what everybody has seen, and thinking what no-one else has thought*", as Albert Szent-Györgyi stated (Moss, 1988).

- *Extending or obtaining new knowledge with regard to our actions and our words.*

- *Understanding human reality in its social facts*, which are always complex and polemic.
- *Working in the service of society,* providing sufficient and necessary knowledge to offer a solution to the theoretical or practical problems that arise.

At a general level, research is a diverse and plural process, depending on the object of study (basic, applied, analytical), its level (approximate, descriptive, explanatory or predictive), its sources (documentary or field), its temporal extension (synchronic or diachronic, longitudinal or transversal), its connection with other areas (interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary) or its type of analysis (quantitative, qualitative or mixed) (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

And at a qualitative level, this process seeks to discover, understand and explain the "qualities" manifested in human language as socio-cultural specificities through relation and communication. Quality, of Latin origin (*qualitas qualitatis*) with a double etymology:

- The circumstances or types, natural or acquired, which distinguish people, living organisms, things or phenomena.
- The properties and attributes of the person or thing, in their personality or quality.

The qualitative, socially, integrates both dimensions in the analysis of human behaviour in its inevitable relations, in personal perception or in its material creation, via documentation, observation and recording of its linguistic (and metalinguistic) manifestations in Variables and Indicators that:

- Determine the general and specific qualities of social facts in their features: *the characteristics of human behaviour* expressed directly or expressed by the researcher.
- Seek the internal and external connections of these qualities between various facts: their expressed or symbolised *relations*.

"*The expression qualitative methodology refers in its broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data: people's own words, spoken or written, and observable conduct*". However, researchers can inductively develop concepts and interpretations from the dates, and deductively gather information to evaluate models, hypotheses or preconceived theories (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984: 15-16).

One analyses, interprets and summarises people's words and actions, their conduct and the expression of the latter, from the *qualities* or human aspects of social life: vital concepts in their own context and discourses in their social impact. A humanist method conducted with strict procedures, which validate the possible interpretations of what people really say and do in the shared scenario of the social

fact, seeking analogies and differences vis-à-vis other scenarios and other past and present facts (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006).

2.2.2. The Object.

The fundamental objective of qualitative research is that of providing a methodology that makes it possible to understand, in an integral and complete way, the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of the people who live it (the human, cultural and social concepts). This is research focused on the subjects, within their own community or from the edges of the latter, as a process of inductive (though also deductive) enquiry where the researcher works with first-hand information or secondary sources seeking to answer questions about the meaning and sense of actions (Sieber, 1973).

> *"If any object can be found to which this term can be applied with any understandable meaning, it can only be an historical individual, i.e. a complex of elements associated in historical reality which we unite into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance"* (Weber, 2013: 20-30).

To understand what people say and do, via their cultural patterns and social relations; this is, then, the object of qualitative research. Precise knowledge of the qualitative reality of the social, macro or micro-social fact, objective and subjective, previously scientifically determined and theoretically justified, through the study of the social language (communication and interaction) of a moment and a place; qualitative research aims at comprehension and is sensitive to the effects that researchers themselves produce in the people that constitute the object of study:

- ✓ Qualitative research is directed towards the comprehension of human social and cultural creations and interactions, which occur in reality and of the mechanisms involved in these, *expressed linguistically* in their relational dimension.

- ✓ It stems from the *study of language (*oral and written, formal and informal, verbal and non- verbal, real or symbolic) and from the information it provides for the comprehension of macro or micro-social reality.

- ✓ It seeks to access that language via *discourse analysis*, of any *text* (in the broadest sense) produced by somebody in a situation of interpersonal communication or in a situation of symbolic material creation. In qualitative studies, informants (people and things) reveal to us their evaluation of the world by means of the Word (narrations, perceptions) and the Symbol (images, representations).

✓ It records and interprets, in short, what we are told, what is transmitted to us directly and indirectly, by linguistic expressions, in their sense and meaning, the protagonists of the social fact.

Its characteristics may be summarised as follows:

1. *It studies realities in their natural context:* its raison d'être is to know reality in its specific space (in the street and from the library), in its natural context (in the real and in the virtual world), from first-hand information from informants (in techniques like participant observation or interviews in situ), and from documentary studies focused on the themes and authors appropriate to the area under analysis. Which is why it seeks to understand its phenomenon of study in a usual sphere of action or expression, of doing and thinking (how people live, behave ad act; what they think and what their attitudes are, etc.).

2. *It is empirical:* it refutes the possibility of prior knowledge and states that the latter is obtained as a consequence of experience. Hence its orientation towards fieldwork, towards drinking from primary sources of information, directly questioning the creators of the phenomena that are studied and trying to influence informants as little as possible.

3. *It presents different strategies.* There are different ways of addressing qualitative research: a) *General method* (positivist epistemology): objective and single description of the social facts of human reality by means of genera laws; b) *Comprehensive interpretation* (hermeneutic epistemology): explain social reality via concepts which interrelate the rational and the spiritual; c) *Participatory action-research:* research to improve social reality through the participation of the people and collectives involved, via actions.

4. *It is inductive.* Broadly speaking, qualitative samples for obtaining information (from observation to ethnographic methods) take specific cases, these being representative of the social groups and of the collective positions within the facts or phenomena one wishes to investigate (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984: 56-62).

5. *And it is deductive.* But the qualitative researcher can also use deduction, the logical form of reasoning in which one goes from the universal to the particular or from the general to the specific (visible in documentary studies). Active reasoning capable of extracting an interpretative judgement with regard to a social fact beginning with a familiar general principle to arrive at an unknown particular principle to discover.

6. *It is interpretative.* The results of the research are the outcome of the analysis and the interpretation performed by the researcher and this

interpretation, as is always the case (with a novel, with a painting, with a film), is neither unique nor unequivocal but is open to various possible readings. Interpretation is not a simple value judgement or an ideological principle: it involves attempting to provide a logical and real, objective and plural explanation regarding the Causes and Consequences of the social fact

7. *Language is its substance.* Language (written and symbolic) is the raw material with which it works, and on the basis of this narrative one proceeds to analyse the contents displayed, seeking to grasp their meaning in order to be able to explain it. Capture, clarify and attribute meanings to the discourses collected throughout the research process, both individually (from each informant), and, above all, collectively (from the group of informants) is a task that forms a part of qualitative research.

8. *It requires explanatory capacity.* Qualitative work involves knowing what the protagonists of the social fact or phenomenon express and how they express themselves, knowing how to describe the results of the research by means of perfectly narrated and expounded (orally and visually) qualitative reports (using language appropriate to their destination), employing the digital or analogical means of communication necessary to this end.

9. *The qualitative researcher Works from a critical-rational position.* When adopting this methodology the researcher is aware that he forms part of society and therefore of the phenomena being investigated. He inevitably exercises some kind of influence upon informants and does so in order to find similarities rather than differences (comparing) and considers the facts studied to be a complex and constantly changing reality (with a history).

10. *But the researcher's work should be developed with an aspiration to neutrality (wertfreiheit).* Research, even if this is virtually impossible, should aspire to *axiological neutrality* ("*science free of values*" for Weber), to approach objectivity:

    - Knowing different points of view and considering the different possible interpretations, giving voice to the protagonists, understanding the circumstances.
    - Only via the quest for objectivity will the results and conclusions of the qualitative study pass the test of time, the test of human concepts.

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