

## Qualitative Research in Italy

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ive research

**Abstract:** Qualitative research in Italy has gone through hard times. On the one hand it has long been hampered by the hegemony of Crocean idealism. On the other hand survey researchers have also undervalued it. Despite, this from the 1980s qualitative research gained an important role in Italian sociology and at the end of the 1990s it conquered a space in Italian methodology, still ruled by the survey approach. At the beginning of the new millennium qualitative methodology has become institutionalized in teaching programs and courses of methodology. The article reconstructs, step by step, a history of qualitative research and methodology in Italy.

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1 The present paper is a totally collaborative effort by the two authors, whose names appear in alphabetical order. If, however, for academic reasons individual responsibility is to be assigned, Attila BRUNI wrote Sections 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11; Giampietro GOBO wrote Sections 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The two authors wrote the conclusions jointly.

## 1. Introduction

Qualitative research has a long tradition in Italy. Its origins date back to the late 1940s and early 1950s when it consisted mainly of ethnology and folklore research. Yet its birth was troubled and its subsequent development encountered a variety of obstacles, principal among which was the dominance first of philosophical idealism, and then of quantitative research. The aim of this article is to retrace the various phases in the history of Italian quantitative research and to map its ramifications. [1]

## 2. The Secular and Paradoxical Prejudice Against Empirical Research

Qualitative research in Italy has gone through hard times. Unlike in the USA, where it was favored by the pragmatism of philosophers such as Charles SANDERS PIERCE (1839-1914), William JAMES (1842-1910) and John DEWEY (1859-1952), and the UK where it was profoundly affected by the empiricism of Sir Francis BACON (1561-1626), in Italy, empirical research was long neglected owing to the hegemony of Crocean idealism. A Hegelian scholar, Benedetto CROCE (1866-1952) denied that science could produce knowledge, because science in his view were constituted by schemas elaborated by human minds for practical purposes only. According to CROCE, only philosophy (not science) was able to produce knowledge. He consequently distinguished the pure concepts discovered by philosophy from the pseudo-concepts crafted by science. [2]

Throughout first half of the twentieth century, this philosophical and anti-positivist position predominated in Italy and thus obstructed the advent of an empirical sociology. Today, it is still the case that the most important Italian sociologists, those with international reputations [e.g. Francesco ALBERONI, Alessandro CAVALLI, Franco FERRAROTTI, Alessandro PIZZORNO, Alberto MELUCCI, Gianfranco POGGI], are social theorists. Something similar happened in Germany, where Hegelian idealism profoundly affected development of the theoretical sociology represented by MARX, ENGELS, ADORNO, HORKHEIMER, BENJAMIN, MARCUSE, HABERMAS, LUHMANN, and so on. [3]

After the Second World War, philosophical idealism collapsed in Italy, and positivism, already well established in the nineteenth century (for instance, through the studies of the criminologist Cesare LOMBROSO), once again predominated. Survey methodology acquired authority in sociology and its methods and techniques slowly colonized empirical research. Qualitative research was thus marginalized for a second time. [4]

Survey methodologists now accused qualitative researchers of being romanticist, idealistic and too theoretical, and of lacking rigor. The paradox, though, was that qualitative research was considered overly empirical by Crocean Idealism and overly philosophical by quantitative researchers. [5]

This second rejection was even more severe. Unlike earlier, when the rejection derived from philosophy, and therefore from an external discipline, this one arose

within the social sciences—almost as if it were part of a contest to conquer scientific space, to obtain cultural legitimacy, and to corner resources furnished by institutions, foundations and ministries. [6]

### **3. The Birth of Qualitative Research: The 1950s**

The first qualitative method to be used in Italy was ethnography. It was developed between the late 1940s and early 1950s by two ethnologists in particular—the Neapolitan Ernesto DE MARTINO (1908-1965) and the Roman Vittorio LANTERNARI—although one should also mention other outstanding researchers, most notably the Sicilians Giuseppe PITRÈ and his pupil Giuseppe COCCHIARA, who both made major methodological contributions to the analysis of popular traditions. [7]

Perhaps the most famous of Italian anthropologists, DE MARTINO is also well known internationally for his studies of religious phenomena and magical beliefs among both the lower and the educated classes in the Italian South (funeral lamentation, the casting of spells and hexes, possession by the devil, exorcism). During the 1950s DE MARTINO undertook a variety of ethnographic field trips, traveling in 1952 to Tricarico (Matera), and between 1953 and 1957 to Lucania, where he observed funeral laments. In 1957 he conducted research on faith healers and then spent the summer of 1959 in the Salento observing "tarantism," the dancing mania induced by the bite of the tarantula, a spider common in the countryside. DE MARTINO used a variety of techniques: what he called "stenographic material" (observation notes), "phonographic recording" and, when he had enough funds, "cinematographic documentation" (video recording). He also used the services of professional photographers (among them Arturo ZAVATTINI, Franco PINNA, and Ando GILARDI, who later became well-known in their own right). Convinced that the "real document is what the folklorist is able to surprise in flagrante," DE MARTINO was also a pioneer of visual anthropology. [8]

LANTERNARI studied both the contemporary religious phenomena of industrial society, like messianism and apocalypticism, and minority religious movements in the Italian colonies. Influenced by DE MARTINO, he also studied the symbolism of orgies (involving food, sex, song, dance). [9]

Albeit with significant theoretical differences, these researchers (as well as numerous others not mentioned here for reasons of space) were driven by the anthropological endeavor to understand the "other" and the different, participating in rituals and ceremonies and living with the natives in order to learn their codes and investigate their culture, symbols and beliefs. [10]

The second half of the 1950s, in contrast, saw the advent of sociological qualitative research based on in-depth interviews, oral histories, life-histories, the analysis of documents (letters, diaries, etc.), and direct observation. These methods were sometimes used singly, and sometimes jointly (on occasion also with quantitative techniques) adopting the model set out by Robert and Helen LYND in *Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* (1937). The LYNDs'

research, a pioneering attempt to study an "average" American community and to develop a social anthropology of contemporary life, aroused great interest in Italy and gave rise to a type of research known as "community studies," among which of particular note were the works by BANFIELD (1958), an American who in 1954 moved with his wife to Basilicata, and by PIZZORNO (1960) on the industrial development of a small town (Rescaldina) in the district of Milan. [11]

Also belonging to this period, and again conducted as a part of community studies, was the research carried out by ANFOSSI, TALAMO, and INDOVINA (1959) on an area of Sicily. This is perhaps the study produced at the time in which the methodological apparatus was most developed and explicit, for it comprised direct observation and "informal" contacts with the population; the administration of 200 questionnaires; the conduct of 50 in-depth interviews; analysis of "objective" data about the town (cartographic and photographic documentation); the collection and classification of the main local newspapers. [12]

#### **4. The (Quantitative) Prejudice Against Qualitative Research: The 1960s**

Whilst the 1950s can be considered the years of the birth of sociological research (quantitative and qualitative) in Italy, the 1960s were those of its first institutionalization (JEDLOWSKI & LECCARDI 2003). On the one hand, community studies continued (CARBONARO & LUMACHI 1962); on the other, analysis of urban reality increasingly interwove with study of changes in everyday life in the burgeoning Italian metropolises and, in particular, of youth. Not by chance, these were the years of mass exodus from the countryside and the impact of large numbers of young people upon the new urban landscapes (JEDLOWSKI & LECCARDI 2003). Various sociological studies documented that impact (ALASIA & MONTALDI 1960; BAGLIONI 1962; FOFI 1964; GUIDICINI 1964), concentrating mainly on changes in consumption and in generational identity. [13]

Italian sociology of the time developed largely through the reception of, and confrontation with, Anglo-American functionalist sociology. The latter (perhaps in reaction against attacks by qualitative researchers who vehemently criticized the survey-based research model) helped create mounting prejudice against qualitative research by alleging that it was non-scientific. [14]

Quantitative researchers had some truth on their side. Since the 1930s quantitative methodologists had sought to improve both data collection (questionnaire items, measurement scales, replies, the behavior of the interviewer, etc.) and data analysis. But methodological reflection on qualitative research was scant and/or uncoded by the most authoritative researchers of the time, such as Everett C. HUGHES, Herbert BLUMER, or even GOFFMAN (PLATT 1996). It was not until the end of the 1960s that a systematic text on the qualitative method appeared (GLASER & STRAUSS 1967). This was a text which the authors themselves said that they had written for political reasons: that is, to give methodological support to those of their students submitting research projects to funding bodies which preferred the survey method. GLASER and

STRAUSS's fine book notwithstanding, the prejudice against qualitative research became widespread in academic received wisdom and—bred in an international context and especially prevalent in the Anglo-American world—it had repercussions in Italy during the years that followed. [15]

### **5. The Ostracism of Qualitative Methods by University Courses on Methodology: The 1970s**

One of the main consequences of the stereotype of qualitative research as non-scientific was its ostracism by university methodology courses. This ostracism assumed a particular form in Italy, because of the training received by Italian sociologists. The first faculty of sociology was opened only in 1962 (at the University of Trento), and lecturers in sociology and methodological subjects had received their training in other disciplines like arts, philosophy, law, economics and statistics. In particular, those with backgrounds in economics and statistics taught courses in methodology, while graduates in the humanities taught theoretical subjects. This gave rise to a natural and structural exclusion of anthropological methods from methodology courses, whose teachers encouraged doctoral students and graduates to develop their technical knowledge by undertaking periodic pilgrimages to the University of Essex (UK) or the Survey Research Center of Ann Arbor (Michigan), temples of behaviorism and meccas for several generations of Italian methodologists. Moreover, the methodology textbooks then available in Italian, and consequently adopted for courses, were written by American and Anglo-Saxon authors and mostly concerned with statistical methods (HYMAN 1955 [It. Trans., 1967]; KAHN & CANNELL 1957 [It. Trans., 1968]; BLALOCK 1960, 1970 [It. Trans., 1969, 1976]; MADGE 1962 [It. Trans., 1966]). [16]

The bias was reinforced by the orientations of Italian psychology (overwhelmingly experimental or test-based, apart from the book edited by TRENTINI [1980], which accounts also for qualitative interviews) and by the weakness of anthropology, which was mainly philosophical in approach and whose proponents only exceptionally engaged in field research (like the already-mentioned Ernesto DE MARTINO and Vittorio LANTERNARI, and their respective schools). [17]

Although research techniques in community studies increasingly shifted towards the collection of oral histories (AMENDOLA 1976) and visual documentation (GUIDICINI & TENTORI 1972), the gap between methodology and qualitative research continued to widen. While courses on methodology almost exclusively concentrated on polling and testing methods and on experimental techniques, they were paralleled by an increasing amount of qualitative research—which, however, failed to find institutional outlets from a methodological point of view. [18]

To be noted in this regard is that Italian social movements of the 1970s brought the attention of sociologists back to everyday life and to the "qualitative" dimension of social relations (JEDLOWSKI & LECCARDI 2003). The students' movement—and even more so the women's movement—affirmed the public dimension of the private sphere and refocused the (critical) debate on issues

concerning identity building and the boundaries between public and private life, the subjectivity of experience and its social organization (BIMBI 1977; SORLINI 1977; BALBO 1978; PICCONE STELLA 1979). It was in these years, moreover, that Luca RICOLFI and Loredana SCIOLLA (1980) published their study on the political-cultural attitudes of students. Their research was conducted on the initiative of a group of non-academic and academic institutions, and it combined quantitative methods with qualitative ones (in-depth interviews, documentary analysis, group discussions in schools), interweaving the political, cultural and scientific dimensions. RICOLFI and SCIOLLA's study was published in 1980, and thus brings us to the 1980s. [19]

## **6. The Times they are A-Changing: The 1980s**

During the 1980s the predominant tendency was still to identify social research with surveys. Nevertheless, this was also the decade in which Italian sociology heightened its interest in qualitative sociology and research. A first sign of this development was the appearance of numerous translations into Italian of the classics of qualitative sociology (SCHUTZ, MEAD, GOFFMAN and GARFINKEL, as well as the revival and re-evaluation of SIMMEL), and in particular the translation (by Alessandro DAL LAGO) of two important books: J.A. HUGHES (1980 [It. Trans., 1982]) and SCHWARTZ and JACOBS (1979 [It. Trans., 1987]). After a number of years, re-reading the manner in which this latter text was presented to the Italian public furnishes insight into the climate of the debate at the time: "What is set out in the following pages is not a handbook of conventional sociology ...," warns DAL LAGO (1987) in the Introduction, almost as if to stress from the outset the "diversity" of qualitative sociology in Italy. [20]

Again in the 1980s, a number of texts were published which, although theoretical (more than methodological) in their approach, brought symbolic interactionism (CIACCI 1983), ethnomethodology (GIGLIOLI & DAL LAGO 1983), and phenomenology (JEDLOWSKI 1986) to the attention of Italian sociologists. In parallel, a number of (qualitative) research studies were published which explicitly dealt with methodological issues and challenged the principle that the social sciences must necessarily produce generalized results. This was one of the effects engendered by the "long wave" of collective movements during the 1960s and 1970s, and by the studies that they stimulated. For example, the book edited by Alberto MELUCCI (1984) on social movements in the metropolitan area of Milan was a study that (to paraphrase its title) proposed "other codes" for social analysis, among them a major methodological shift to the use of qualitative methods. The same purpose was pursued by research coordinated by Alessandro CAVALLI (1985) on the biographical construction of youth identity and the relation between temporality and experience, a topic that became a central research concern for the community of Italian sociologists in the years that followed. Feminist research developed the concept of the "dual presence" (BALBO 1978) as a tool with which to investigate the everyday lives of women (CHIARETTI 1981; BIMBI 1985; ZANUSO 1987) while, from a methodological point of view, it concentrated on analysis of biographies and life-histories (FERRAROTTI 1981, 1983; SARACENO 1986)—this being a further area of

research in which a first wave of Italian methodological literature appeared (PASSERINI 1988, 1990; SIEBERT 1991; OLAGNERO & SARACENO 1993). [21]

Standing on the border between community studies and memory work was a study by Luisa PASSERINI (1984) (based on life-history analysis and in-depth interviews with key informants), which reconstructed the oral history of a working-class neighborhood in Turin. Also midway between community studies and anthropological analysis was work by Fortunata PISELLI (1984) based on participant observation of kinship networks in a Calabrian community. Despite this attention to qualitative sociology, qualitative research was not immune to heavy criticism. Between the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s influential Italian methodologists such as STATERA (1984, 1990, 1992) and LEONARDI (1991) "attacked" from time to time the "myth of qualitative research." This can be regarded as a symptom of the fact that the spreading of qualitative research was an undermining event for Italian methodology. [22]

## **7. Children of a Lesser God: The First Half of the 1990s**

At the beginning of the 1990s, qualitative research in Italy displayed a marked contradiction. On the one hand, for decades translations of the "classics" of interactionist sociology (SCHUTZ, BERGER and LUCKMANN, GOFFMAN, BECKER) and symbolic-interpretative anthropology (GEERTZ) were available, texts which had been of such inspiration to American and Anglo-Saxon qualitative methodologists; on the other hand, texts on qualitative methodology produced by Italian authors were still non-existent, except for some articles and essays on the life-history method—as already mentioned the only one able to produce a native Italian literature—although these authors did not regard themselves as methodologists (or were not recognized as such). Moreover, qualitative methodology was still substantially ignored by university course programs, despite the existence of strong demand for instruction in qualitative methods. But a new generation of sociologists had now taken over, and they set about eliminating the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy, which still acted as a rigid watershed among research methods. [23]

Illuminating in this regard is the amount of space devoted to qualitative research by the principal handbooks on social research methodology written by Italian and foreign sociologists and used on courses in social methodology and research (GILLI 1971; ROSSI, MORI & TRINCHERO 1975; BAILEY 1978 [It. Trans. 1985]; GUALA 1991, 1993; NIERO 1995). Qualitative methods were usually accorded only marginal treatment, or else they were outlined in an (initial) section on the premises of social research, then compared with the techniques of quantitative research, and finally described as useful but ancillary tools: that is, a set of techniques for use in research phases preliminary to the survey (for construction of the questionnaire) or in the final phases (to deepen or validate the results from the survey). Substantially, the suspicion of mainstream sociology towards qualitative methodologies was, and to some extent, still is due to its strongly neo-positivist stance. Qualitative methodologies were criticized on the following grounds: because research techniques were not distinguished with sufficient

analytical/conceptual rigor; because research was recursive rather than sequential; and because its results were not ready for generalization because they had been obtained from only a small number of cases (GOBO 2004). The subtext of these criticisms was still the assumption that the standards of social research were set by quantitative criteria of validity and that qualitative ones should be compared against them using the same criteria. [24]

Although Italian sociologists by now had produced a considerable body of methodological inquiry, qualitative research continued to be the "child of a lesser god" intrinsically (and irremediably) imperfect when compared to the survey method. Until the mid-1990s, to conduct qualitative studies in Italy was therefore to deal with matters regarded as not genuinely scientific; to produce results which, though interesting, were of only local relevance; to converse with a predominantly foreign audience; to operate within restricted settings midway between the scientific and the political (the workers' movement, the students' movement, environmentalist movements, etc.); and to work on themes and concepts not yet accredited by the national scientific community, so that qualitative researchers had to contrive some sort of "justification" for their methods. [25]

## **8. "And yet it moves": The Second Half of the 1990s**

The scenario changed substantially in the second half of the 1990s. The first development was the paradigmatic shift, which began with the linguistic turn in philosophy and then traversed all the social sciences. The various theories on "second modernity" or "reflexive modernization," together with the current of so-called post-modern studies, were incorporated into the Italian debate, engendering (to different extents and from different perspectives) an endeavor to supersede micro/macro and qualitative/quantitative distinctions and to restore the quotidian dimension to social action, with critical re-examination of such standard categories of social analysis as "family," "class" or "neighborhood" ("zombie categories," as BECK (2002) called them in his afterword). Moreover, the fact that qualitative sociology was recovered by leading contemporary sociologists like GIDDENS, BECK and BAUMANN (widely translated into Italian) gave it further accreditation in the eyes of the Italian scientific community, stimulating the latter's interest and furnishing it with new analytical tools. To be noted, however, is that these theories were concerned more with the theory of social action than with research methodology in the strict sense. Qualitative sociology acquired legitimacy in Italy from the renewed attention paid by some Italian sociologists to phenomenological, symbolic-interactionist and ethnomethodological concepts, but this was not accompanied by symmetrical reflection on the methods and techniques of research. [26]

A second point, connected to the first, concerns what MELUCCI (1998) called the "growing demand for quality" expressed by society (Italian, but not solely) in regard to the social sciences from the early 1990s onwards. Western societies seemed characterized by the contradictoriness of processes ongoing at the time: individualization and differentiation, consumption and self-production,



culturalization of nature and naturalization of culture (MELUCCI 1998). The complexity arising from these processes entailed acceptance of the multi-paradigmatic nature of science, and of the constant blurring of the conventional micro/macro, quantitative/qualitative, soft/hard dichotomies by the practical and everyday action of social actors. In this case, too, it should be noted that qualitative research was legitimated within a debate that was not strictly methodological, but which, because of its close concern with aspects of everyday life, was perhaps the sector of Italian sociology always of most interest to qualitative studies. A final consideration concerns developments within individual areas of Italian sociology brought about by certain sociologists (this time Italian). With no claim to exhaustiveness (and with reference only to the quantity of studies published), the principal developments were the following:

- The translation of the "classics" of qualitative sociology into Italian so that phenomenological and interactionist theory gained admittance into Italian handbooks on the history of sociological thought, and the thought of authors such as SIMMEL, SCHUTZ, MEAD, GOFFMAN and GARFINKEL became consolidated within Italian sociological theory;
- Within the sociology of organizations, the "discovery" of the cultural and symbolic features of organizational life induced some (Italian) sociologists to develop a processual approach to organization and to experiment with qualitative research techniques in organizational settings (GHERARDI & TURNER 1987/1999; GHERARDI 1991; GHERARDI & STRATI 1994; STRATI 1992, 1996).
- The sociology of communication and cultural processes "discovered" (also owing to the spread of the Internet) audiences and users, and applied qualitative methodologies in analysis of the use made of the new media and of cultural settings (MANCINI 1991; CASETTI 1995; TOTA 1997; PACCAGNELLA, 1997).
- In a hybrid zone lying between studies on new social movements (the Northern League) and migratory phenomena (which were manifest with all their complexity in Italy only during the 1990s), on the one hand, and urban sociology on the other, there arose a group of sociologists who reprised insights from the Chicago School, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology to forcefully affirm (with political intent) that researchers must "dirty their hands" with the phenomena studied and develop tools able to grasp their distinctive features (DAL LAGO 1990; APOLITO 1990; TORTI 1997). [27]

With the exception of some methodological appendices, none of these studies dealt overtly with methodological issues (nor could it have been otherwise, given that this was not their purpose). They managed to "pass off" qualitative research methodologies and techniques, not under false pretences, but substantially because of the outstanding analyses that they made possible. Here "passing" is the term used by GARFINKEL (1967) to denote the inventiveness and tenacity necessary to provide reasonable justifications for one's actions, and also the ability to position oneself in a discourse and to act competently. Qualitative methods and techniques were therefore "passed off" and positioned in the Italian

sociology of the 1990s under the pressure of forces in some way exogenous to a strictly methodological discourse. On the one hand, the effect was positive in so far as qualitative methodologies were accepted "naturalistically," almost as if they were now taken for granted in certain sectors of sociology. On the other, as happens with everything that is taken for granted, the lack of explicit thematization and discussion meant that the practice was not clarified, so that sociologists were left somewhat disarmed in methodological discussion. The most interesting feature of the first half of the 1990s is therefore that, despite the indifference (and sometimes the condescension) shown by Italian methodologists towards qualitative methods, they were nevertheless widely used by Italian researchers, following a boom in the application of techniques able to respond to the growing "demand for quality." Not coincidentally, in precisely those years the Methodology Section of the Associazione Italiana di Sociologia organized a conference with the emblematic title "The Challenge of Qualitative Methods" (proceedings in CIPOLLA & DE LILLO 1996). [28]

## **9. The Institutionalization of Qualitative Methods in Italy**

There is one fact concerning the production in Italy of academic texts on qualitative that seems (unfortunately) incontrovertible: until 1997, the only thoroughgoing text in Italian on qualitative methodology was the translation of SCHWARTZ and JACOBS' *Qualitative Sociology* (1979 [It. Trans., 1987]). The practical effects of this situation are obvious: qualitative research continued to be shrouded by the aura of mystery mentioned at the outset, and the lack of textbooks in Italian made it difficult to include qualitative methods on university course programs. [29]

The second half of the 1990s saw a new phenomenon: the publication by Italian authors of texts on qualitative methodology. Some of these texts concentrated on specific methodologies and research techniques (PICCARDO & BENOZZO 1996; MONTESPERELLI 1997; GUIDICINI & TENTORI 1997); others revised the epistemological bases of qualitative methodology (NERESINI 1997). Together they furnished Italian sociology with a framework much more systematic and mature than appears from the publishing silence of those years. Whilst the already-mentioned "Verso una sociologia riflessiva," edited by Alberto MELUCCI (1998), provided sociologists with solid epistemological support by directing their attention to certain salient concepts in contemporary qualitative sociology (for example, the importance of the linguistic dimension, and of reflexivity in the production of accounts and of sociological theory itself), it is probably the publication of "La ricerca qualitative" edited by Luca RICOLFI (1997) that marked a true watershed from an institutional point of view. RICOLFI's book surveyed and illustrated the practical application of some of the main methods and techniques of qualitative research: ethnography (CARDANO 1997), grounded theory (STRATI 1997), objective hermeneutics (LECCARDI 1997), as well as different software for the analysis of qualitative data (BOLASCO 1997; CIPRIANI 1997). Almost as if to set a symbolic seal on the change, after SCHWARTZ and JACOBS' book had been on sale in Italy for ten years, it was no longer reprinted after 1997, and qualitative sociology was accorded full recognition by handbooks

on the methodology and techniques of social research (GUALA 1991, 2000; BRUSCHI 1993, 1999; NIERO 1995; DELLI ZOTTI 1997; CORBETTA 1999), though with different emphases, and with different amounts of space devoted to it. [30]

### **10. The New Millennium: The World in Question, the Gaze Trained on the Social and the Talibans of Ethnography**

Since 2000, qualitative research in Italy has acquired increasingly concrete and clear-cut features. Studies have been published on the ethnographic method (GOBO 2001) and on the techniques of qualitative research (CARDANO 2003), together with qualitative research handbooks "imported" from the Anglo-Saxon countries (SILVERMAN 2000 [It. Trans., 2002]). Although the scenario is highly varied, it is possible to identify three macro-areas of research: theoretical-epistemological, theoretical-applied, and methodological-applied. [31]

As regards the first of these areas, that of theoretical-epistemological inquiry, there is now a substantial body of work by sociologists concerned to bring "the world into question" (JEDLOWSKI 2002)—to quote the title of the first handbook on the history of sociological thought to adopt a declaredly phenomenological stance. Experience, time, common sense, everyday life, discourse and language, oral memory and narrative: these are some of the concepts investigated by sociologists interested in the theoretical and epistemological roots of qualitative research. This macro-area has also seen the proliferation of translations (and/or reprints) of the classics of phenomenological and interactionist sociology, as well as interest in the ethnomethodological theory of action (MUZZETTO 1997; CRESPI 1999). [32]

"Un Certo Sguardo. Introduzione all'Etnografia Sociale" [A Certain Outlook, Introduction to Social Ethnography] is the title of a book by Alessandro DAL LAGO and Rocco DE BIASI (2002) which is theoretical-applied in the sense that it draws on the tradition of sociological ethnography (since the Chicago School) and furnishes a series of examples of ethnography (by Italian sociologists) applied in various fields of inquiry. These fields are spaces of action shaped by social practices: football hooliganism (DE BIASI 2002), taking up a criminal career (DINO 2002; DAL LAGO & QUADRELLI 2002), judicial practices (QUASSOLI 2002), and identity-building through media consumption (BONI 2002). The book is also theoretical-applied with regard to the terms used by the contributors to make explicit reference to the critical outlook on social phenomena, which sociology must/can develop using ethnography (and qualitative techniques in general) as a methodology particularly suited to such a critical and political approach. [33]

"Talibans of ethnography" was the epithet ironically (and affectionately) used by Giuseppe BONAZZI (2001, p.327) to refer to a group of Italian sociologists in his

afterword to a special issue of the "Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia."<sup>2</sup> The publication of this special issue had important symbolic, as well a scientific value: the Rassegna is the first (both in importance and historically) journal of sociology in Italy, and it stands for Italian sociology's "official" strands of research and lines of inquiry. Consequently, the decision to devote an entire issue (2/2001) to "La Ricerca Sociale 'Scalza': l'Etnografia come Metodo e come Esperienza" ("Barefoot" Social Research: Ethnography as Method and Experience) testifies that ethnography had achieved definitive legitimacy in the Italian sociological community. The issue covered all the main aspects of ethnography—theory (COLOMBO 2001), method (CARDANO 2001) and practice (GHERARDI & NICOLINI 2001)—and then focused on reflexivity (MARZANO 2001) and the dilemmas of the relation between the observer and his/her field of observation (NAVARINI 2001). The label "Talibans of ethnography" therefore applied to sociologists who, although they conducted research in different settings, shared a certain "orthodoxy" in regard to method and/or in a determination to undermine the foundations of quantitative research (depending on which term of the metaphor one wishes to put emphasis on). [34]

The images of the "world in question," the "gaze trained on the social" and "the Talibans of ethnography" are, like all macro-categories, useful in furnishing an overview of the debate but they cannot convey its composite and heterogeneous nature. The next section provides a more detailed account. [35]

## **11. The Current State of Qualitative Research: The Most Widely Used Methods and Their Sectors of Application**

If one judges by the titles of sociologists' publication<sup>3</sup>, there seems to be boundless enthusiasm for ethnography in Italy (TOTA 1997; COLOMBO 1998; PALIDDA 2000; GOBO 2001; DAL LAGO & DE BIASI 2002; BRUNI 2003; BONI 2004). But just as in the USA, there is often only a weak connection between methodology and research techniques, and at present in Italy ethnography is largely an umbrella-term embracing diverse forms of qualitative research: it consequently represents an open arena of experimentation and discussion. [36]

It would be hasty to conclude that Italian qualitative research in its entirety falls within the methodological-conceptual category of ethnography. The end of the 1990s saw a large number of works on qualitative methods. Silvia GHERARDI and Antonio STRATI produced numerous research studies on grounded theory (GHERARDI & TURNER 1987/1999; GHERARDI 1990; STRATI 1997) and cognitive mapping (GHERARDI & STRATI 1994), these being flanked by specific studies in conversational analysis (FELE 1990, 1991, 1999; MARCARINO 1997), face-to-face communication (GOBO 1997), and analyses of narratives and

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2 For the sake of precision, and also anecdotal interest, BONAZZI's article came out before September 11, and the epithet referred to the destruction by the Talibans (for reasons of religious orthodoxy) of statues of Buddha.

3 And therefore not considering works by anthropologists, psychologists and historians, who also make much use of the term "ethnography".

discourse (JEDLOWSKI 2000; BICHI 2000, 2002; POGGIO 2004; GHERARDI & POGGIO 2003). [37]

Research techniques, too, now extend well beyond the participant observation of classical ethnography. In recent years, some Italian sociologists have produced specific studies on "shadowing" a subject during his/her daily routine (SCLAVI 1994; BRUNI, GHERARDI & POGGIO 2000, 2004; BRUNI 2005a); on the so-called "interview with the double," where the interviewer is asked to instruct the interviewee as if s/he were his/her double (GHERARDI 1990, 1995; BRUNI & GHERARDI 2001); on self-ethnography or narrative ethnography (BRUNI & GHERARDI 2002); and even on "imaginary participant observation" (STRATI 1999, 2003), where the researcher uses aesthetics and empathy to engage with the field. [38]

More generally, a substantial body of studies have dealt with qualitative research design (GOBO 1998), the dissemination of results and styles of writing in empirical research (COLOMBO 1998; TOTA 1998, 2001), and reflexivity in qualitative research, especially ethnographic—a topic of increasing currency in the Italian debate (GOBO 1993; MARZANO 1999, 2001; CARDANO 2001; BRUNI, GHERARDI & POGGIO 2004a). [39]

Examination of the various disciplinary areas also shows that qualitative research is flourishing. Sectors of Italian sociology now<sup>4</sup> thriving in this sense are the sociology of organizations (STRATI 2000, 2003; BRUNI 2000, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; BRUNI & GHERARDI 2001; POGGIO 2000, 2002; GHERARDI & NICOLINI 2001; BRUNI, GHERARDI & POGGIO 2000, 2004a; GHERARDI & STRATI 2004); the sociology of communication (FELE 1999; PAOLETTI & FELE 2001), telematic networks (PACCAGNELLA 2002) and of mass media (BONI 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c); as well as what we may call "new urban sociology" (DAL LAGO 1990; COLOMBO 1998; COLOMBO & NAVARINI 1999; DAL LAGO 1999; PALIDDA 2000; DAL LAGO & QUADRELLI 2003; GAZZOLA 2001a, 2001b, 2003; PITTAMIGLIO & POGGIO 2003; SEMI 2004; DECIMO 2005). But qualitative research in Italy now deals with most of the phenomena of interest to sociology: consumption (SASSATELLI 2000; BONI 2002), cultural worlds (SANTORO 2005), technologies and expert systems (BRUNI 2004; NICOLINI 2004a; BRUNI, GHERARDI & PAROLIN 2004), even health care (NICOLINI 2004b; MARZANO 2005) and professional worlds (ZAPPULLI 2001; QUASSOLI 2002; SACCHETTO 2002). Finally, gender studies continues, not only in the narrative and biographical approach (OLAGNERO 2002; CORRADI 2004) but also in the observation of (interactive and discursive) gender practices (BRUNI & GHERARDI 2001, 2002; GHERARDI & POGGIO 2003; BRUNI, GHERARDI & POGGIO 2004a, 2004b). [40]

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4 By "now" we refer to the period 1999-2005.

## 12. Conclusions

The article has traced various stages in the history of qualitative research in Italy, and it has sought to plot a map of the studies produced and the research undertaken. The term "map" is particularly appropriate. As the preceding section has shown, a survey of recent research by Italian qualitative sociologists yields a picture of prolific, and at the same time composite, activity. The picture changes according to the classification criterion used (e.g. the most widely used methods or research techniques or sectors of application). It is likely that this results from the long tradition of qualitative research in Italy, but also from its belated institutionalization. As we have tried to show, for various reasons (the Italian scientific community's initial prejudice against applied research, especially if qualitative; the strong influence of Anglo-American functionalism; the scant availability of texts and studies on qualitative methodology; the exclusion of qualitative approaches from university courses on methodology), the diffusion (and institutionalization) of qualitative methods and techniques first came about in specific sectors and fields of sociological inquiry and was only subsequently buttressed by original methodological studies. This almost "naturalistic" reception of qualitative methods by Italian sociology meant that although qualitative methods and techniques were widely used in research, they often did not receive equal attention in terms of methodological discussion. This produced what is perhaps one of the most distinctive features (and anomalies) of current qualitative research in Italy: its insinuation like a virus into the diverse sectors of sociology and conquest of space by contagion. [41]

The inspection of the most recent period reveals numerous signs that the situation is changing: the recognition of qualitative research tout-court by handbooks on the methods and techniques of social research; the superseding by sociology (international and Italian) of the micro/macro dichotomy; the production by Italian authors of methodological studies; the "marriage" between the computer and qualitative research: all these developments give evidence of the greater attention and closer formalization given to qualitative methodologies and techniques in Italy. We would also stress that the ongoing reform of the Italian university system (which, amongst things, has bred a plethora of degree programs and courses) has given visibility to qualitative methods, to which independent courses on social research methodology are now devoted. [42]

The next stage in the emancipation and affirmation of Italian qualitative methodology may be its internationalization, by which we mean an endeavor to bring the originality of Italian qualitative research to the attention of a public beyond national confines. It is too early to say if and when this will happen, but the process would have two benefits: it would reduce the inferiority complex of Italian sociologists and methodologists vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxon countries, and would help the latter to emerge from a centuries-long provincialism. [43]

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