

Qualitative Social Research in Mexico

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Abstract: Grand interest about interpretative methodology has increased in the last decade. Medicine, Sociology and Social Psychology are disciplines with noticeable influence. Like other countries of Latin America, in Mexico all areas of scientific action are not professionalized completely. Qualitative Social Research in Mexico is changing from participatory observation and participatory action research to interpretative ethnography and Grounded Theory. Health and body, identity and space are themes of raised relevance and are studied with computer assisted analysis.

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1. Introduction

At the present time, the interest around qualitative methodologies is increasing in Mexico. Not counting the professional associations that gather researchers of this orientation, nor the specialized journals dedicated exclusively to the publication of works developed from this emergent paradigm, Mexican social scientists have been working on these topics. From previous decades, Cultural Anthropology, Urban Studies, Feminist Theory and practitioners of community work accumulated experiences that nowadays make the methodological reflection very rich. [1]

From diverse fields of knowledge, investigators have started to analyze people's daily experiences, aiming to overcome the gap created by the conventional empirical paradigm between science and common sense. This way, the narrative mode of thought has been enriching to the current forms of making social research. It is clear now that qualitative inquiry is a critical and interpretive analysis of the narratives of everyday people in the real world. [2]

All the social sciences have experienced unequal processes of development. Either at a national or international level. Considered from any possible standpoint, each one of social disciplines features a particular, be that we speak of Social Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Linguistics. Only with the purpose of illustrating, we could say that in Mexico, for example, the history of Qualitative Sociology is similar to that which has been described (KATO 1988) for the

Japanese case. Since in both countries qualitative tendency was assumed to have the same origins of reflection on the social process by means of analysis of the rich cultural inheritance that accumulated for centuries, and was also similar in the debate between Sociology and Marxism in the 60's. Although Sociology, a discipline born in Japan after the Meiji Revolution (1868) and in Mexico before the Revolution (1910), the two cases are different at the present time, especially in the relationship with the empirical or quantitative sociology. In Japan its presence is peripheral and in Mexico, on the contrary, it dominates the institutional panoramas, converting in peripheral to interpretive paradigm constituted by comprehensive tradition, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. [3]

Our Social Psychology is also very recent. It dates back to the 80's and the terms of the debate are still being defined between the objectivist and the interpretive paradigms. The first Department of Psychology was founded in the first half of the 70's, when the Department of Philosophy was separated in the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*. In those years, Psychology was defined in behaviorist backgrounds and Social Psychology was reduced to laboratory research on basic processes of minimum group. Until recently, investigators that practice the interpretive paradigm formed by symbolic interactionism and phenomenological and constructionist traditions, are gaining ground. [4]

The history of Anthropology and Linguistics is related, in most cases, to more or less wide and profound social movements. In spite of the fascinating history of each one of the Mexican social disciplines, this paper will focus on displaying current advances in the domain of qualitative methodologies taking a selected group of theoretical and field works that throw light on the characteristics of the work done by Mexican social scientists in this subject matter. In order to do so, we will show data that were carried out in the last ten years. [5]

We think that theoretical homogeneity of the 70's was based on diverse interpretations of Marxism, as well as in the Sociology of Development and in the Theory of Dependence. In the 80's, Mexican Sociology (GIROLA & OLVERA 1994) was characterized by the crisis of old theories and a frenetic search for possibilities of empirical investigation which are more related to empirical problems. "Theoretical pluralism" and a set of disenchantment characterized those years. That one of the routes, which opened up after the disenchantment with traditional tools is Qualitative Research, is, in fact, central thesis of the present essay. It has been carried out during the whole decade of the 90's. In agreement with CRESWELL (1998), the biographical, phenomenological, Grounded Theory, case study and ethnographic traditions compose Qualitative Research. [6]

This paper will concentrate on three dimensions: health, social identity and computer assisted analysis. [7]

2. Health

It is in this area where, in spite of the non-existence of a Mexican tradition of Medical Sociology, one finds a gradual development and an increasingly enormous interest in the topics peculiar to qualitative analysis. Our surprise was great when, deepening on Grounded Theory, we found the pioneers working with medics and nurses. Nearing the experience of pain, illness and death had not been sociologically relevant objects for us. Now, research in Public Health has formed strengthened interdisciplinary teams consisting of medics, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists. [8]

Qualitative Research Program in Health is a permanent seminar that organizes diverse actions, from University Center of Sciences of the Health, of *Universidad de Guadalajara*, in order to strengthen projects and to establish bonds among national scientists. In fact, the Program is headquarters for the [International Institute for Qualitative Methodology](#), of University of Alberta, Canada and at the present time produces diverse popularized works. The research projects that are developed in this Center comprise of topics from "Aging" and "Sociocultural Aspects of the Reproductive Health" to "Experience of the Chronic Suffering in the Daily Life" and "Social Representations of Health." In this interesting field of investigation, projects related to social identity and health's practices are highlighted (MERCADO & ROBLES 1998), and those that are focused to study illness in particular (e.g. diabetes) in connection with the familiar, neighborhood and social milieus (MERCADO 1996). [9]

But there are also projects that, without being linked to this Qualitative Research Program in Health, have already established diverse results from their respective institutions: *Instituto Mexicano de Psiquiatría* and *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana*. They research experiences in specific populations, for example, those linked to pregnancy among adolescents (ATKIN et al. 1996; EHRENFELD 1999), and others analyze the social perception, categorization and attribution in groups of risk, as in the case of youths that inhale solvents (LARA et al. 1998). [10]

Colegio de México, a prestigious Center of Social Science, has also developed the program "Reproductive Health and Society" whose investigation fruits constitute one of the most solid documentary sources of inquiry on the topic (SZASZ & LERNER 1996). Since the works gathered here undertake central aspects of qualitative analysis and show some concrete research on the ethnology of body, the meaning of virginity from a social constructionist perspective and the study of process health-illness in the indigenous town *huichol*, through Grounded Theory. This institution is also proceeding in an exhaustive analysis of a knowledge area—health of the adolescence, that compares conventional paradigm with the emergent qualitative strategies (STERN & MEDINA 2000). [11]

In Mexico there is a lot of investigation in the field of Health. Maybe not enough, certainly, but the examples mentioned are a sample of the type of questions that interest qualitative researchers. That doesn't imply that there is no investigation of

patients with HIV, or of patients with terminal cancer, or with any other suffering, epidemic studies, or studies about hospital rehabilitation. There is a lot of investigation, but their place inside characteristic interpretive paradigm of qualitative research is only partial and incomplete. Far more, it is desirable to have interpretations and research results similar to those formulated by MARTINEZ-SALGADO (1999a) in the sphere of intimacy and privacy when studying the social perception of problems of health in a poor population. In other words, no more theories about poverty, but rather the poor's theories about themselves is interesting; no more theories about the health of the poor but their own explanations of themselves and their bodies. [12]

3. Social Identity

Coming from the ethnographic tradition, there is an immense quantity of research on rituals, religion, traditions, cultures and memoirs that make up today Cultural Mexican Anthropology. And here, researchers as Oscar LEWIS, Erich FROMM, Guillermo Bonfil BATALLA, Enrique Flores CANO and Néstor García CANCLINI form our analytic background. However, here also I want to highlight some recent works. In the domain of the globalization (VALENZUELA 1998), analysis on social identity, multiculturalism, symbolic universe and racism has developed. Especially, a qualitative approach to Mexican migrants in USA—more of 22 million Hispanics, mainly in California and Texas, of which the great majority is Chicano—studying the experience of being in-between two cultural experiences. Continuing this way, their previous works on juvenile cultures (VALENZUELA 1988) integrated by means of biographical and ethnographic focuses when studying collective identities and symbolic territories. [13]

With similar trajectory on the study of collective identities and juvenile cultures (REGUILLO 1991), although almost in the area of social communication, is the brilliant recovery work about the collective experience of disaster caused by the explosion of gas in Guadalajara in 1992 (REGUILLO 1996), achieved from a socioethnographical perspective. A renowned Mexican writer has said (MONSIVAIS 1999, p.10), in regards to this young female researcher, that: "(Reguillo) speaks, observes, accepts to speak and to be observed, and from the dialogue and mixture of experiences take off that more she cares. The unique approaches to real plurality. The exhibition of a society to which made complex the life of their inhabitants. Society to which the political facts want to simplify and to triviality". [14]

In Mexico, a mixed group of communication researchers, sociologists and anthropologists has formed around a critical perspective of the culture of contemporary research. Its most recent work (GALINDO 1998) has as an objective the presentation of the main aspects of qualitative research, ranging from survey and qualitative interview, discussion groups, discourse analysis, historical research, oral history and history of life, ethnography, participatory action research and an ethnomethodological focus for visual semantic analysis. At the present time, linked to Theories of Complexity, this group has already devel-

oped proposals (GALINDO 1990, 1994) based on ethnography, in order to solve problems in the relationship between micro and macrosocial dimensions. [15]

In area of biographical research, anthologies do not only contain key texts (ACEVES 1993) of Paul THOMPSON, Daniel BERTAUX, Régine ROBIN, Françoise MORIN among other authors that deal with theoretical, methodological aspects and techniques, e.g. those of oral history, such as field guides for summarizing testimonies and oral traditions in rural populations from Mexico (ACEVES 1992); but rather the relationships and limits between experience and narration have also been explored (LINDON 1999a) in that the autobiographical narratives are placed in the horizon of collective memory, ethical and aesthetic motivations and socialization processes. Studying the existent bonds between history of life and social movements (SALTALAMACCHIA et al. 1983) was one of the first elements that in the years of "theoretical pluralism" generated research topics. Recent study suggests that, realized from interpretive perspectives (MASSOLO 1992), the participation of women must be studied in urban movements. [16]

From sociodemographical perspectives are also those studies structured through a recovery of psychoanalytical interpretations to study to people in their daily activities in regards to healthcare (MARTINEZ-SALGADO 1996). Besides those that formulate approaches to subjective elements that shape the relationship between population and environment from qualitative methodological proposals with microsocial orientation (MARTINEZ-SALGADO 1999b). [17]

Highlighting social identity, an analytic pattern proposed by AGUILAR, CISNEROS and URTEAGA (1998) means to study, by employing strategic qualitative sampling, the processes of appropriation of spaces, forms of structuring of daily life and bonds between space and collective identities in popular housing areas for workers (Infonavit). And also, in this line of reflection, the systematic investigation to depth in daily lives in a context of social inequality, carried out in depressed areas of the periphery of Mexico City (LINDON 1999b), stands out. [18]

Lastly, although still in an incipient level, is research that is achieved in the realm of community intervention, from a perspective that articulates qualitative strategies of inquiry about cognitive maps and Geographic Information Systems (REID et al. 1998). Here the proposal leads to representation of social processes as points, lines and polygons in social maps, assisted with geographic software (IDRISI, ER Mapper, MapInfo and others) and Global Positioning System. Now we can pass to our following point. [19]

4. Computer Assisted Analysis

In Mexico we do not have an analysis, as it was recently carried out in Argentina (RODRIGUEZ 1998). In this national analysis, the participation of Argentinean investigators in mailing lists designed to promote discussion groups for those who perform research methodology attended by computer in social sciences is evaluated. In Mexico, we are certain of growing interest and gradual incorporation of research groups into the dynamics of conceptual critic associated with qualitative tradition. In fact, the participation of Spanish speakers in these lists (overall from Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico) has been growing and, certainly, consultation to World Wide Web facilitates the access to information, scientific reports, books, and so on. For example, let us think of The Qualitative Research Web Ring Home Page located in <http://kerlins.net/bobbi/research/qualresearch/> that is, among others, one of the most outstanding places for these topics. [20]

In several investigations accomplished in Mexico, use of Ethnograph—created by John SEIDEL (1998) is reported. Ethnograph was, from their first appearance in 1988, the first software that got our attention. In Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, campus Iztapalapa, diverse projects of research are developed—about narrative identities, political debates and place identity that make use of NUDIST-4. On the teaching level, in Undergraduate Courses in Social Psychology, NUDIST-4 is our tool when we have in depth interviews, focal groups, ethnographies and case studies. Particularly, it has been productive (CISNEROS 1999) in evaluating the possibility of analysis in fuzzy sets, to study the uncertainty of ordinary language. Diverse sources (ALEXA & ZUELL 1999, BAARY 1998, STRÜBING 1995, KELLE 1995, FIELDING & LEE 1993, MILES & WEITZMAN 1995) have been our guide in deciding what software to use. We are now beginning to plan research projects with Atlas. Personally I have participated in mailing lists such as atlas-ti@listserv.gmd.de, qual-software@mailbase.ac.uk, mailing-list@qsr.com.au. [21]

Qualitative analysis assisted by computer is in Mexico, at the moment, patrimony of a reduced number of social scientists. We take the responsibility of its use and we teach good forms of taking advantage of its resources. In fact, communication is more flowing and more effective with researchers coming from disciplines linked to Administration, Planning and Prospective. In my case, this has been particularly with biologists interested in forest resources, who had already incorporated another software type, for example, GIS/GPS, Expert Choice, Inspiration or Decision Explorer in their projects. [22]

In short, in this domain the obstacles that Mexican researchers should conquer are particularly natural to the interface man-computer, such as distrust of new technologies and the most elemental questions: "Who does the hermeneutic circle make? The Software or me?" As everyone who is involved in the usage of these tools knows, that distrust and that class of questions are totally out of place. Modern methods of qualitative analysis allow us to manage, to describe and to explore complex data from the human world and at the same time they

allow us to create and to prove new ideas and new theories, and this last point will continue to be our fundamental task. [23]

After Ethnograph opened up the road, NUDIST-4 and Atlas-ti have become leaders in the perception of Mexican scientists who have overcome the epistemological terror to use computers in qualitative analysis. Although among the groups it is common to speak of the differences among WinMax, Anthropac, HyperRESEARCH, Code-A-Text, Folio Views, CATPAC and many other more. And is usual to maintain the difference between the software that is solely designed for descriptive works and those that already allow theory construction in the hypertext sphere. [24]

5. Perspectives

For the XXI century, a collection of steps, which must be taken by qualitatively oriented Mexican social researchers in order to strengthen their relationships, are summarized below: [25]

Political action and empowerment

To establish necessary links with groups and real everyday people, with the purpose of propitiating the perceptual empowerment which Barney GLASER refers to (1999, 840) as a result of Grounded Theory taken to its final consequences. The challenge here is to assimilate our collectively built conceptual baggage from the contributions of GLASER and STRAUSS (1967), STRAUSS (1987), STRAUSS and CORBIN (1990) and DENZIN and LINCOLN (1994), to involve us in the rebellious critic and constructivism of the possible worlds that guide social action. And to discover the underlying patterns to the built narrative fictions from the power in the daily life of the popular sociabilities, with their cultural projects and their growing participatory civil society. Here it is worthy to mention the recent effort made by different social actors, civil groupings and public organisms (NOVIB/GDF 1999) to build useful social knowledge about Mexico City, from a viewpoint made by misery and pain of "children of the street", worker mothers, educating women, migrants and indigenous, although the perceptual empowerment is still pending. We need to think of social science as everyday life. [26]

Journals

To group around common editorial projects, for example, the appearance of journals dedicated to qualitative research of the daily worlds. On this aspect, the effort to begin (FERNANDEZ & CISNEROS 1994) the discussion around Theoretical Psychology, defined as a discipline whose truthfulness criteria doesn't really reside in the data, neither in application of knowledge, but in the arguments. When a journal on qualitative research doesn't exist, our efforts are dispersed and we don't recognize each other, or ourselves not only in Mexico but, also, in Latin American context. See, for example, the contained articles in journal *Psicologia & Sociedade*, 10, 2, published by Brazilian Association of Social

psychology (ABRAPSO, 1998) and the necessity to build national and continental scenarios of discussion will be more comprehensible. In Latin American context, we need a Journal of Social Qualitative Research. [27]

Networks

To form professional associations that, in the mark of interdisciplinarity, allows reciprocal enrichment of research projects. Here, the diagnosis formulated on the institutional groups of scientists located in Universities and Institutes of Research shows that the future is not too disorganized. Although here the effort can be diversified: a civil association, mailing lists, projects in WWW, virtual communities, and so on. [28]

Civic journalism

To develop professional profiles that links our qualitative strategies of research to real everyday people. Beyond the wide editorial projects of scientific popularization, we should be convinced of the indispensable task of writing "without specialization of scientific concepts" or, in the terms formulated by DENZIN (1997) to make ethnography like civic journalism. There are already examples in Mexican qualitative social research; we should only socialize more thoroughly them. So, we need write to everyday people about everyday people in ordinary situations. [29]

Interdisciplinarity

In the scope of multicultural citizenship and multiethnic democracies, which are so important in our time, we should not lose direction, the capacity of ethnographic research to show us different positioning that real people develop in their interactions. In that address, the works carried out by Enrique HAMEL, who for some time has been developing a link to qualitative sociolinguistic, for example to the problems of indigenous bilingualism and policies of language (HAMEL 1995) and who, at the same time, has not left interacting with social psychologists, anthropologists, medics and other professionals dedicated equally to qualitative analysis, have been particularly important. [30]

Conceptual heritage

Since at the end of a century we reevaluate our inheritances, it is also important to view contrasting perspectives. For example that there is of relationship among British focal groups (MORGAN 1988) and Spanish discussion groups (IBANEZ 1992); that there is in Alfred SCHÜTZ's thought, particularly relative to his theory of intersubjectivity, in our histories of Community Psychology and Political Psychology (MONTERO 1994); as thinking again to the pattern of participatory action research by the light of critical thought linked to qualitative methodologies, and as, finally, to use the narrative focuses (RIESSMAN 1993) when they have not interculturally analyzed the conceptions of Self implied in conversational processes. [31]

Assemble

To generate databases that allow us to know the different aspects of researches performed for national private companies, for international organisms, for organized social groups, for companies of financing, for government organisms and for political parties. There are research experiences that, being very rich, if they are not socialized, will be forever among the accumulated documents of those who requested the study. For example, in our country there are studies that have explored among others topics those related to natural disaster and medical situations of emergency, electoral process and political movement, citizenship processes and everyday life, illness and perception of risk. These studies have generated qualitative approaches of whose data processing I can't report since it isn't published. [32]

New topics

Finally, to generate qualitative investigation about the crime and the public insecurity, the acceptance of new technologies in the rural areas, urban policy and sustainable development will be high priority in the short term. The studies related to Art and its public will continue being important. Likewise, the visitor studies to museums. The multi-sited ethnographies will continue acquiring interest and certainly we will have better studies day after day. Grounded Theory will be applied in other fields of knowledge. Although, the topics related to overcome the poverty will continue being of the highest priority, like in other countries of peripheral capitalism—in spite of the fact that in this essay, I have concentrated on health and the social identity. [33]

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