

Chapter 2

The Qualitative Researcher in the Quality of Life Field

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2.1 Subjectivity and Persons

In qualitative studies the emphasis placed on the existential thing, makes an impact on the process of production of knowledge, recognizing the word as the place where the meaning is constructed and the research practice is understood, that is, as a dialogic process between the researcher and the interviewed subject, opening a space for coproduced knowledge.

Considering that this is not a book on philosophy, we shall abstain from making a deep analysis of the concept of subjectivity. Nevertheless, and taking into account that subjectivity is inherent to qualitative studies, we coincide with Lechner (2002, p. 43) in that subjectivity is a complex phenomenon which embraces values and beliefs, mental dispositions and practical knowledge, norms and passions, experiences and expectations.

Torres Carrillo (2006, p. 94) believes that subjectivity is transversal to social life and is present in all social dynamics of daily life, both in micro-social and macro-social spaces, as well as in the daily inter-subjective experience and in the institutions that constitute the structure of an age.

If we consider that the human phenomena are subjective, due to their specific quality, then subjectivity is not opposed to objectivity. The qualitative researcher works on the subjective productions of each of the persons he/she studies and, in the quality of life field in particular, that subjectivity acquires special importance, since quality of life is a concept composed of two dimensions, objective and subjective, the same as social reality.

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Natanson (1974, p. 23), commenting on Schutz, points out that, for the social researcher, his objects are not only objects of observation but also beings possessing their own pre-interpreted world and carrying out their own observation, i.e., they are fellow creatures inserted in a social reality. The world we live in is intersubjective because we live in it, relating with others, it is a world of culture and “a universe of meaning, a texture of reason we must interpret in order to orient and conduct ourselves within it”. (Schutz 1974, p. 41).

The qualitative researcher is expected to feel personally involved in every step of the research process, because every consideration and decision will have to be based on entirely personal grounds (Fink 2000). According to Jaramillo Echeverri (2006, p. 112) being a subject in the research is the chance of sharing and relating reflective experiences with the subjects of research and placing oneself, intentionally, in their circumstances.

The manner in which we feel and experience a certain society is not only determined by the objective connotation of the problems we are affected by, but also by the ways in which those problems become subjective (Gonzalez Rey 2006, p. 241 quoted in Diaz Gomez 2006b). In this sense, the reconstruction of reality, a major task in qualitative research, is achieved when it stems from the actors and situations proposed by the researcher’s presence (Vélez Restrepo 2003, p. 148).

Likewise, it is important to remember the place of sensitivity in this process. Being sensitive means being able to penetrate and give significance to incidents and events shown by the data (Strauss and Corbin 2002, p. 52). Thus, personal/professional experience may increase that sensitivity if used appropriately. In this sense, Boyatzis (1998) points out the need to apply creativity to the direct study of the phenomena.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to distinguish between his own world and the world of others so that they may both be analyzed. It requires the researcher to be able to conceptualize, write and communicate. According to Morse and Field (1995, p. 1) “doing qualitative research is an intense experience, it enriches one’s life, it captures one’s soul and intellect”.

2.2 Participation of the Researcher in Every Stage of the Research: The Importance of Transcription and Quoting

An important issue to consider is, precisely, the participation of the researcher in each of the tasks required in the development of a research process.

In the role distribution within a research team, we traditionally observe a watershed dividing two groups: those who carry out the field work and the ones who collect the data and analyze it.

Though it is understood that the stages in the professional lives and development of the members requires that each of the researchers should train in different activities and carry them out, the task of transcribing and quoting the interviews

or team meetings is a question that requires special attention, since it has been observed that, in a great number of cases, the researchers who carry out the interview and/or coordinate a group, are not the same persons who will later transcribe and quote the data derived from those situations.

It is necessary to remember that the use of the interviewing technique in the research field is not reduced to an encounter between the researcher and the subject of the research. Once this encounter has taken place, it is the researcher's task to devote to the transcription of the said material and to its quoting, as soon as possible.

Mero-Jaffe (2011, p. 232) quoted Kvale (1996) who defines transcription as the transference of spoken language with its particular set of rules to the written word with a different set of rules and, at the same time, quoting Lapadat (2000), the author considers that this process of transforming uninterrupted dynamic oral language spoken in a particular context to a static form of representation (written language) is necessary for the management and organization of data, since only written language can be managed; in other words, sorted, copied, examined, evaluated and quoted.

The task of transcribing and quoting will allow the researcher to remember gestures and peculiarities of the experienced scene which may turn into clues to the analysis of the collected material. By placing, on the right hand column of the transcription page, the significant terms that may help record peculiarities of the situation in which the person answered the questions, the researcher will be able to, simultaneously, associate those details to the key concepts that will guide the definite process of analysis. This is so, because the qualitative methods attempt to clarify the meanings of society life, thus, they cannot simply examine the mere content or surface of what was said, but it is vital that it should also analyze the way in which it was said, and in what context in order to recover the meaning or possible meaning of the words (Farias and Montero 2005, p. 5).

If, on the other hand, the transcription and quoting had been made by another member of the team, it is clear that the latter would be unable to recover those details, basically, due to the fact that he/she has not experienced the scene; therefore, the researcher who made the interview would be required to read the transcription immediately and place those meaningful concepts in the aforementioned column. If this process were not carried out a short time after the interview, part of that information would be irremediably lost and, with it, the possibility to advance in the analysis of concepts which are significant to the achievement of the final product of the research.

In this respect, let us consider the comment made by a vastly experienced researcher, on the impressions she obtained while using qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews in the development of her studies in the quality of life field:

In my personal experience in qualitative studies, the researcher's task is crucial, for there is a mutual influence between the researcher and the approached social actors. As we know, qualitative research is an interpretive process concerned with the way in which the social actors produce and interpret the social world, assuming that reality is multiple and subjective.

In the case of the semi-structured interview, conceived as an encounter between persons, the ethics present in the communicative situation becomes fundamental; it should create a space for interchange in which the main concern should be to listen to the person interviewed, to the meanings he conveys, which emerge from his own context of significance generated in the dialogic space.

On the researcher's part, it requires generating confidence, an initial clarification of the job to be carried out, and the guarantee that the name of the person interviewed will be kept anonymous and the interest aroused by his/her expressions, confidential. All of which implies the researcher's acknowledgement of his/her historical position which, in turn, makes his interview unlike a similar one made by another researcher, fundamentally acknowledging the fact that we are dealing with subjects, not objects.

It is ideal, I believe, that the person carrying out the interviews should be the one to read them, transcribe them, and quote them, in order to increase familiarity with the data and whatever field notes might have been taken, thus recovering images and even tones and voice inflexions; all these codes of communication make it more significant.

I mention the specific case of transcriptions because, if made by someone other than the interviewer, however conscientiously made, it will fail to reflect tones of voice, associated images, and intention, which will indeed be captured in the "reading" of the person who has actually experienced it and quoted it in the transcription. So important is this that it might be determinant to the questions posed on a re-interview, and of the utmost importance to its analysis.

In my humble experience, participating in the whole process is the way to contribute some real understanding of the study in question. I find it useful to associate everything; images, voices, my various listening sessions, note-taking; that is why I am so insistent on step-by-step participation. (Female, 47 years old, expert in quality of life and diversity studies).

If, on the other hand, the interviews had been developed for a Doctorate or Master's Thesis, the importance of the transcription and quoting being made by the authors, would not be arguable. If that work were done by another person, the author of the thesis would, clearly, miss the opportunity to obtain a profound knowledge of the results of the research in process.

2.3 Three Dimensions for Analyzing the Qualitative Researcher's Role

We will propose three dimensions for the analysis of the role of the qualitative researcher: personal dimension, professional dimension and political dimension (Tonon 2013).

- Personal dimension: is centered in the researcher's perceptions and experiences.
- Professional dimension: considers the role of the original-traditional professions and the emergence and inclusion of new professions in the research field.
- Political dimension: analyses the decision process in the academic research field; this implies the analysis of the power systems and their different forms of expression.

2.3.1 Personal Dimension

It is centered round the perceptions and personal experiences of the subjects, at an initial stage; and though it is the essential and structuring dimension of every research process, it is also the least considered in the academic scope, maybe, because in that field, research is a "natural activity" to a university professor, a university student and/or an acting professional.

In qualitative studies, the process begins with the researcher's recognition of his/her own socio-cultural and historical position, which implies ethics and politics in connection with the research (Gianturco 2005). Doing qualitative research requires the researcher to be methodologically versatile, to have extensive knowledge of theory, to be persistent and focused in the research and to be able to conceptualize, write and communicate (Morse and Field 1995).

This scenario requires the trust that stimulates the collaboration and allows the subject interviewed to reduce the uncertainty in the circumstances. At the same time confidentiality is necessary to preserve the intimate and secret information conveyed by the person (Tonon 2009).

In my personal practice as a researcher and professor of research methodology in various courses of study and post-graduate courses within the field of Social Sciences and Humanities, I have been able to observe that, in order to be initiated in the role of researcher, certain conditions are previously required and, if that were not the case, a firm decision to achieve them would be necessary.

When I refer to conditions, I do not mean the storage of a certain amount of information in the brain, or having a certain IQ; in fact, I have had brilliant students, academically speaking, who have not been successful in the research field. What I allude to refers to certain attitudes such as being open to discovery, the need to go on learning, not being afraid to revise the history of one's own learning; all of which confront each of the subjects with the risk of verifying or, failing to verify what they have, in fact, incorporated.

In the case of professionals of long standing, it is not easy to notice whether they have submitted their practices to enough reflection. It is not easy, either, to become aware that, thinking out a research problem and carrying out a research project, is a task that differs from participating in a case of assistance to a subject or family, or carrying out a pedagogical proposition, or again conducting a social project or generating a public policy. It is the same as the difference between writing a report, a project of a professional intervention, or a professional book; between writing a scientific article, a scientific research report or a Doctorate or Master's Thesis. Thus, at the first sign that the research problem must be re-formulated, and/or the text must be amended because it is not argumentative enough, the persons show attitudes of frustration, anger, or the intention to abandon the research.

The following expressions were uttered by post-graduate students undergoing their first experience in qualitative research.

When I began this research process, I thought it was not unknown to me. I took for granted that I knew something about it; little by little, this sensation vanished. Doubts began to arise, uncertainty, anguish and, somehow, the decision to accept the challenge. (Female, 46 years old, post-graduate student).

Life, at university and outside, personal and professional, has taught me and is actually teaching me that, if I don't enjoy it, I'm not living it, only passing; that's why what I like the most about this path "towards research" is, above all, my inner search. If I weren't at ease with the people I'm with, week after week, I wouldn't be able to go on... The path leading to research isn't at all easy; many sleepless nights, many comings and goings, often, the feeling that what has been accomplished is not enough, that I'm behind, that I won't make it, that I'm about to give up; yet, I'm still here, trying hard every day... which is far more than it seems to be. (Female, 48 years old, post-graduate student).

I'm going through a stage when I think the following: "With practice we can construct what we really want". Learning how to do research by using the right method; this demands great perseverance, order, patience, intelligence, etc. But, above all, there must be passion for the subject of our research for, only that passion will encourage us to train in order to become good researchers, because we can't do anything properly if we don't get to like it, first. (Male, 32 years old, post-graduate student).

In the first place, focusing on this research process is something new to me. It's taking a new path full of doubts, curiosity, the will to search more and more, to read and re-read; a path of self-questioning, of deciding what I want to do, of thinking a lot. A path which, on the one hand, arouses uncertainties, generates nervousness, anxiety, restlessness, but which, at the same time, allures me, attracts me. Accepting this challenge also has a positive effect for I want to learn and feel like doing so, and doing it well, becoming committed. One often has mixed feelings; at times, we feel that we're stuck, that we can't move on. But the moment one finds or discovers something, one pushes forward, and new doubts arise, or tentative answers; and that's the way we come and go. This is a great challenge to me; it draws me on, and I'm determined to face it. I know it's not easy, but it's not impossible, either. (Female, 39 years old, post-graduate student).

I've never thought of doing research and it's one of the difficulties I've found in the post-graduate course. I feel that I know nothing and, suddenly, I construct something meaningful out of something that arises. . . I believe myself to be strongly committed to the task, which is not easy. (Male, 55 years old, post-graduate student).

The abovementioned discourses show how post-graduate students, initiated in research work, share mixed feelings; on the one hand, eagerness to learn and make progress in the project development; and, on the other, the difficulties they find in reviewing their own learning histories, in paving a new way which requires them to go on with their studies and which, in their own words, implies a great challenge.

Thus, the decision to become qualitative researchers, above all, leads them straight away to a revision of their own histories and to introspection. It is necessary for them to keep up an open and humble attitude for, if the subjects possessed knowledge of everything, they would be unlikely to be able to learn.

2.3.2 Professional Dimension

This dimension considers the possibility of including in the scientific field, subjects whose professions have emerged only in the last decades.

The professional peculiarities of each of the researchers designate and condition the development of their future careers. There are professions traditionally devoted to research work, while others have come to emerge in this field, in the course of the last two decades.

Thus, those whose professions have, historically, produced theory and who impose them through traditions, can be distinguished from those whose stereotype has been, historically, focused on practice rather than theory, and are beginning to be sequentially included in the scientific field.

This is a complex and contradictory process, and it is a source of opposition and confrontation. The re-location of points of power, formerly typical of generational changes, is also occurring nowadays among traditional and emerging professions.

The challenge consists in allowing them all to develop and move forward, according to their specific knowledge and interests, with a vision of the future which envisages integration rather than separation. It should be understood that new professions and new proposals should not be considered as a peril, that the professionals incorporated in the new scenario are to be regarded as a contribution to the field and, therefore, as new colleagues rather than new competitors.

2.3.3 *Political Dimension*

It refers to the analysis of the decision-making processes in the scientific-academic field, which implies the consideration of the systems of power and their different expressions.

Díaz Gómez (2006a, p. 225) has expressed that the production of knowledge goes hand in hand with institutionalization processes and with the generation of power mechanisms that privilege certain kinds of research and allow the spreading of specific knowledge and perspectives of theory, as well as the preeminence of a kind of discourse which is becoming natural and, therefore, widespread in university classrooms and research scenarios.

Bourdieu (2000, p. 89) acknowledges two forms of power in scientific fields: an institutional political power held by those who formally stand in “decisive positions”, and a specific power, based on personal prestige, therefore less institutionalized, and born of invisible colleges of scientists united by mutual recognition. Moreover, the author considers that the former type of power is obtained through political strategies which respond to the rules of bureaucratic capital and constitute what is known as *institution science* which establishes routine practice as a model of scientific activity (Bourdieu 2008, p. 47); whereas the latter is achieved by accumulating purely scientific capital, solely derived from effort and scientific work. This explains why prestige is not necessarily a synonym of power. (Bourdieu 2000, p. 90). Thus, if the assessors and those assessed end up being colleagues and competitors, due to the conflict of interests among the members of the scientific field, the aforementioned situation is aggravated, the fields may be turned into “machines”, generating a pathological situation (Bourdieu 1990). The author (1990, pp. 157–158) expressed the difference between the two concepts by identifying the field as the place where the agents and institutions struggle with different forces and according to the constituent rules of this space; and though the ones who predominate, are well equipped, they also experience the resistance of the rest; whereas, when the dominators of the field possess the means to neutralize the resistance, the latter becomes a “machine”.

Thus, the communication of knowledge in academic discourse is imposed, responding to position, the market flow and/or the prevailing fashion. Bourdieu (2008, p. 44) sustains that there is a socially acknowledged scientific rank, generally considered valid, which bestows on those who represent it or appear to, the monopoly of the scientific point of view.

It has been observed that, in different periods, the same text books have been used for different subjects, belonging to the same course of studies, without arousing concern in the external analyst. Something similar occurs with research topics, there being a recurrence in the study of certain theses, prompted by the market and/or the prevailing fashion.

This generates a subtly dangerous situation for it conceals new horizons of development, especially from young teachers and researchers.

Breaking with the establishment is a great challenge and, in this sense, the use of qualitative methods in the scenario of social research enables the acknowledgement of the leading role of subjects in the research processes of the social and humanistic sciences field, while attempting to make progress in the quest to overcome the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods, with the object of integrating both, an issue which will be developed in the last chapter of this book.

Coinciding with Torres Carrillo (2006, p. 100) we shall state that qualitative research allows us to detect the degree of political and cultural determination in the researcher and in his/her research work.

2.4 Following up the Initiation in Research of Young Graduate and Post-Graduate Students

A decade ago, I began my work as tutors to young researchers, a task we have developed within various research programs and curricular spaces in diverse academic institutions in Argentina. This work was developed in the Quality of Life Research Program of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, the tutorial of Theses for the Doctorate in Psychology, and of research papers for students reading for the Degree in Psychology at Universidad de Palermo; also, the tutoring of graduate students in the Scholarship Program to stimulate scientific research by the National Inter-university Council.

I have worked with young people between 23 and 30 years old, males and females, in their initial experience as researchers; graduated in Political Science, Psychology, Social Work, Educational Sciences.

This section comprises three axes for reflection: the university-research-quality of life relationship; the insertion of the young student/researcher in the scenario of research; and the tutor's role (Tonon and Toscano 2013).

2.4.1 *The University-Research-Quality of Life Relationship*

From a traditional outlook, the university structure is conceived as historically founded on scientific knowledge and stems from the consideration that the science system is formulated through basic research founded on the advance of knowledge and the re-affirmation of its concepts; as well as on applied science, which has an outstanding social application (Plascencia Castellanos 2006, p. 31). Likewise,

university has been, traditionally, ascribed four functions: formal education in academic disciplines and professional areas, research, extension- society service, and the production of national figures.

Nevertheless some authors, like Duderstadt (2010, p. 82), consider that university should not be considered as a mere knowledge factory, for teaching and discovering further defy the existing order and lead to change, by attempting to transform knowledge into wisdom.

And it is, precisely, in the history of higher education in Latin-America that a new era has begun; an era in which knowledge is not only necessary to achieve social welfare but is also instrumental in the improvement of every person's quality of life (Duderstadt (2010, p. 413).

The new trend propounds a switch from the formal university degrees, mainly aimed at young students, to a mode of learning which aims at ensuring the continuity of education for a life-time. Thus, continuous learning has become necessary to guarantee working stability and relevance, as shown in former researches (Tonon 2005, 2010) mentioned in Chapter 1 of this same text-book, illustrating the importance of work in the increasing improvement of people's quality of life.

Duderstadt (2010, p. 425) sustains that "education is regarded, today, as the hope for a significant and satisfactory life", he adds that, in that respect, both education and each subject's abilities, are increasingly being regarded as the keys to a personal quality of life and to the quality of life of society as a whole. (Duderstadt 2010, p. 425).

Unfortunately, the traditional concept of university campus, and the high costs that its organization involves, can no longer meet the current demand—which is impossible to foresee. This situation necessarily leads to the gradual yielding of the reductionist model still in force as certifier of knowledge, to the model of university as a space for the construction of citizenship and democratization of knowledge, as well as for the improvement of personal quality of life.

In the abovementioned university scenario, research becomes a social opportunity to young people for, according to Sen (2000), it increases the persons' potential. Moreover, in the words of Castillo Garcia (2007, p. 799), society and education are the scenarios in which young people are able to evolve as subjects in a certain social reality. Learning to do research and being initiated in the research profession, represents an opening, to young men and women, for the development of knowledge and future labor prospects—both of which are necessary to improve their quality of life.

Nevertheless, this process is not viable if pursued in isolation; it requires experienced teacher-researchers to guide the insertion of the young researchers in order to enable them to achieve their aims and avoid frustration.

2.4.2 Insertion of the Young Students in the Scenario of Research

In order to describe the process of insertion of the young students in research work, it is, above all, necessary to explain that we regard research as a process of

discovery which, though responding to logical and organized guidelines, also involves creativity and reflexivity. This is, perhaps, the most arguable and difficult point to understand: the integration of structured and serious (non rigid) logics with the possibility of creativity and innovation.

The reception of young people who have been selected from different scholarship programs and need to comply with specific curricular demands in order to gain credits for the completion of their courses of studies (as in the case of papers for an university degree), requires the tutor's primary analysis of the subject's background and biographical details. Schutz (1974, p. 17) defines it as the acknowledgement of the fact that the actor's present situation stems from the sediment of all his/her previous subjective experiences, which he/ she does not experience as anonymous, but as subjective and exclusive.

The young researchers will arrive, equipped with background knowledge (Schutz 1974, p. 17), that is, with accumulated experience that will determine their capacity to resolve any new situation they might be confronted with. They may even possess systematized knowledge about the significance of research or, on the other hand, maybe none at all—which explains these young researchers' need to adopt a misleading attitude regarding their present situation in this field.

The first researcher-tutor encounter is a significant human encounter to both, and it cannot be reduced to a mere administrative formality. By interacting, they will both perceive a change within themselves and this new bond will generate commitment in the development of that shared process, in which plays a role; one being the "teacher", and the other, the "apprentice". This brings to mind the words of Wainerman (2001, p. 21) who pointed out that a researcher can only learn through a teacher as in the medieval guilds, for there is something in the researcher's role that cannot be coded and which is difficult to transmit. Research is a craft and, as such, it involves personal experience as well as intellectual-professional activity.

The young researcher and his tutor will then share the research adventure, implying by adventure, quoting Diaz Gomez (2006a, p. 228) a process in which there is a reference of the path to be followed (even when the details may be unknown), accompanied by an element of surprise, questioning and expectation; a situation which clearly differs from a package-tour whose itinerary has been prepared by somebody else and which does not contemplate the freedom of the actors.

This adventure route requires care and organization, which brings up a question: What should the young researcher be taught? In order to deal with this question, we shall organize it in two dimensions: learning acquired within the human and social dimension, and learning within the intellectual and operative dimension.

Learning acquired in the human and social dimension triggers attitudes of commitment with one's work and with other people; learning how to apply life experience to intellectual work, examining and interpreting it (for having experience means that our past has a bearing on our present), affects our capacities for future experience (Wright Mills 1961, p. 207); thus, understanding the acting context; overcoming adversity without resigning our dreams.



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