

SOME INNOVATIVE QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTING TECHNIQUES

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Abstract: *The article is a plea for more creativity in research. It presents a few methodological innovation procedures accessible to researchers, focusing on new qualitative data collecting techniques. Innovative techniques for observing, interviewing and collecting documents are briefly described. Among others, collaborative and participatory techniques, elicitation techniques, digital and online techniques, visual techniques, etc. are presented. Mention is made, for example, of dyadic interviews, unstructured group interviews, photovoice or analogising.*

Key words: *creativity, observation, interview, social documents.*

1. Introduction

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (the largest scientific society in the world that brings together 300 scientific organizations and publishes the journal 'Science') showed in 2000 that 'the scientific method 'is often misrepresented as a fixed sequence of steps', rather than being seen for what it truly is, 'a highly variable and creative process' (Gauch, 2003).

In the context of such a definition of the scientific method, the question arises whether we can be methodologically creative in sociological research. And if the answer is yes, when and how can we be creative? Can we afford innovations in research methodology?

My opinion is that methodological treatises rather discourage innovation. The textbooks of social research methods and techniques are generally lists of rigid rules related to the stages of research, strict designs, all sorts of invariable instructions for the application of specific techniques of data collection, processing and analysis.

However, I believe that there is also a growing concern and interest among social science researchers to make research more open to the new, more flexible, more creative. These concerns have lately become more common. I only mention a few: Gauntlett (2007) proposed a series of creative techniques for the study of identity (see identity box and Lego constructions), Powell (2010) described what is called multisensory research, Clark (2011) presented multimodal maps, Kara (2015) talked

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about what has been developed in recent years as being art-based research, Mannay (2016) showed how sandboxing is used, and Marres et al. (2018) described how social research can be combined with different creative practices.

I will try in this article to present some methodological innovations that could make Romanian sociological research more creative. In my opinion, one of the most convenient possibilities (for any researcher) to be creative in research is to propose innovative techniques for collecting qualitative data. That is why this article lists in particular novelties from the field of qualitative data collection and it is designed as an invitation for researchers: to try these innovations in their projects and to propose other new challenges to the scientific community.

2. Innovation in Qualitative Data Collection Techniques

The renewal, the change in the field of qualitative data collection techniques is stimulated in particular by the technological progress (see the digital and online data collection techniques) and by the recent attention paid to new types of data (see the visual and the 'multisensory' data). But methodological innovations are also possible, for example, by a more serious involvement of the subjects in the data collection stage or by questioning some rules related to the use of classical methods and techniques. In short, I will further describe some such possibilities for innovation within the three main methods of collecting unstructured qualitative data – the observation, the interview and the collection of documents.

2.1. Innovative Observational Techniques

I think that the most important innovation in the observation method would be the use in research of the visual observational data (so as not to go into the details of an 'even newer novelty' that refers to multisensory observational data). I have never understood why the bibliographic materials dedicated to observation deal mainly with 'the observation notes', that is, about the situations when the researcher does field work and notes what s/he sees, hears, smells, etc. The observation can equally be made (if not even better) with the help of the means that substitute the senses - that is, by using the camera, the video recorder, the tape recorder, etc.

Obviously, these devices have long been used in social sciences (especially in anthropology) and in some branches of sociology (especially urban or rural sociology). But my opinion is that the preference of working in research with textual or numerical data has led to the marginalization and even the elimination of the visual data from sociological research even if they are equally important and relevant in the study of the social (Scârneci-Domnişoru, 2020). In my opinion, we describe far too often in words and numbers what we see in the field and we use images too often in research only as an illustration. I think it is time (especially because the software for the processing and analysis of the qualitative data allows it for several years) that we give the visual observational data the place they deserve in research. That is, use them as data in themselves.

The involvement of the subjects in the observational process is another innovative element. The observation method is often blamed for the probable subjectivity of the researcher in recording the observation data. We often try to counteract this shortcoming by sending several observers in the field in order to have more perspectives on the same situation observed. I have always wondered if, given the fact that several observers' perspectives on the observed are involved, it is not paradoxical to ignore an essential perspective - the observed one.

Thus, I have discovered that there is an observational technique when the researcher observes, produces photographs or films in the field in collaboration with the subjects (Pink, 2004). Actually, the participants in the study decide with the researcher what is to be observed, to be filmed about them, their activities, etc. From among those who support the emic approach and the elimination, as far as possible, of the power relationship between the researcher and the subjects, this method of data collecting is quite popular. It is, in a way, a form of validation of the data collected by checking with the participants. I have largely described this possibility in a book: Scârneci-Domnișoru (2016). It is a technique that could be considered as unusual in the Romanian space of sociological research.

The Internet has allowed a widening of the observational field and the emergence of a unique observational technique. When people moved their activities online, their observation had also to be moved to the medium where they take place. So, the observation can be made online too, on what is called a field site, taking notes or by screenshots. It is very easy now to capture everything you have on the screen with screen recorder program type in order to get a digital recording of the observed online environment. Not only simple screenshots, but also video recordings of observational forays can be obtained on websites.

Because in ethnographic studies observation is the basic method, the online observation technique is linked in most methodological bibliographic materials to ethnography (see virtual ethnography in Hine, 2000, cyberethnography in Teli et al. 2007, ethnography in Kozinets, 2010 or digital ethnography by Murthy, 2008).

Consequently, the classic observation method can be revived by including the visual observational data in research, by getting the subjects involved in the observational process and by broadening the 'field' where it can be applied, by using the current technical means. The enumeration of the renewal possibilities in the observation method is not, of course, exhaustive.

2.2. Innovative Interviewing Techniques

As early as the 1960s and the 1970s, an interview technique still little known and used in sociological research in Romania appeared in the social sciences: the 'visual elicitation' interview. The expression is commonly used in the literature abroad to designate a technique more and more used in interviewing: subjects are visually stimulated in order to speak more in interviews, to detail the answers and to make them remember things they forgot.

In fact, the expression 'photo elicitation' is more common in literature because many researchers who use visual stimulation in interviews use photographs. Of course, other visual data can be used in the interview, for example drawings (graphic elicitation) or films (film or video elicitation). Harper (2002) considers that there is no reason why paintings, graffiti, street advertisements or any other image could not be used in interviews. Similarly, objects that stimulate information acquisition can also be used (see the Lego elicitation technique in Gauntlett, 2007); that is why, it is more correct to talk about visual elicitation - an expression that includes all the ways of visually stimulating the interview.

The visual data used in the interview can be collected by the researcher in the field (e.g. by shooting or filming), they can be owned by the subjects (e.g. photo albums, memory boxes), by the researchers (e.g. advertisements, graphics), can be made by the subjects upon the request of researchers (e.g. self-portraits, photographic journals) or they may already exist in archives or collections (e.g. images from old newspapers, websites).

Visual stimulation can be used in any kind of interview, in both face-to-face and online, individual and group interviews, synchronous and asynchronous online interviews, in both the written and the verbal interview.

The current times have brought about technical means that usher in innovations even in interviewing. Now both the individual interview and the group interview can be taken not only face to face but also online. There are synchronous techniques, real-time online interviews (see chat, messenger or video conferencing) and asynchronous techniques (see email, message boards, forums). Online techniques have amazing benefits. For example, they allow access to participants that would otherwise be difficult to reach and involve much lower costs compared to face-to-face interviewing.

What I find remarkable about these new techniques is that online interviewing facilitates access to the context the interviewee is in. The participants who use a tablet or a phone have the opportunity to show the researcher the environment they are in, they can walk, they can switch the image from them to what they see (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Similarly, because they are in their setting, participants have easy access to all sorts of objects that can be relevant to the interview that can be shown, manipulated, etc. It was only home interviewing that made it easier for us to access any additional research data. In addition, in online interviewing photos or movies can be easily changed between the researcher and the interviewees, they can be discussed about in individual or group online interviews of the visual elicitation type, as I have indicated above.

The number of participants in interviews divided the classic interviewing techniques into individual and group. Certainly, methodological innovation can come from here, as well. There are situations when dyad or triad type interviews are more appropriate than individual or group interviews (Morgan et al., 2016). There are situations when, for example, two family members have emigrated together; in this context, interviewing them in pairs may yield more data than interviewing them individually. Or, there are, for example, situations when three specialists in head hunting can talk in a triad better and more about the problems of their profession than the same specialists would do in individual interviews or with other specialists in group interviews.

When it comes to group interviewing, most researchers think about focus group, namely, structured group interviewing. In my opinion, just as there are more or less structured individual interviews, there should be more or less structured group interviews. In many research situations we also need exploratory group interviews, in-depth group interviews, and narrative group interviews, etc. I don't see why we should reduce our options for group discussions with rigid guidelines and strict timings. That would be the innovation, especially for the sociology in Romania: conducting unstructured or semi-structured group interviews. How would it be, for example, a free group discussion with Roma women about contraceptive methods, or with the village elders about the history of the locality, about the customs of the place, etc.?

The focus group comes in literature with a lot of rules that can be questioned. For example, it is said that, usually, in focus groups participants do not have to know each other or the moderator; it is recommended that the groups should be homogeneous; it is indicated that it is not advisable to address very sensitive or intimate topics in group interviews; it is stated that focus groups should take place in neutral, formal environments, especially in institutional or organizational spaces.

I deem that the methodological renewal could also come from modifying or contextualizing these rules. There are research situations when the participants are members of the same organization, where they have common interests and they are equally interested in solving a problem and in what the other participants have to say about the topic. It would be an exaggeration to say that in such situations group interviewing should not be used. Consequently, group interviews can also be carried out when the participants know each other, even when there are all kinds of professional and even power relationships between them. Group interviews can also be conducted when it comes to special experiences that all participants went through (e.g. incarceration, domestic violence, alcohol dependence, etc.). Group interviews can also be conducted in a living room, for example in community studies when, in the house of different community members, friends, neighbours, relatives gather and talk.

These discussions are natural, they exist outside the research and I do not see why it would not exist within it. Managers often call their employees to discuss company problems and find solutions together, people with problems often enjoy discussions with others with similar problems, informal media have never been an obstacle to communication, and in case you want to get some detailed, in-depth information, as it happens in the interview, I consider that it is really desirable to look for favourable contexts, without arbitrary limitations.

Modern technology allows for revolutions in interviewing, not only in terms of access to interviewing anyone on the planet but also in terms of the number of people who can be interviewed simultaneously. Thus, the online community (spontaneous or provoked) makes it possible to interview a very large number of participants (from tens to hundreds of thousands of people). This number of participants is impossible to achieve by face-to-face interviewing techniques. Researchers can, not only observe online communities of extremists, dog lovers, women with young children, etc., but they can interfere with the proposal of discussion topics or with specific questions. They can create, through invitations, online communities which they can observe and interview for a certain period of time.

Besides the possibility of bringing the participants together, in group discussions, dyad, or triad, there is also the option of separately interviewing the members of a group (e.g. family, team) about an experience, an incident, a problem, etc. These are multi-perspective interviews (Vogl et al., 2019) that are very similar to what police officers do in their investigations and that are used mainly to understand relationships, interactions in a group where the members have different roles. The perspectives of the participants on the same situation, solutions, etc. can be identified and compared.

I have enumerated only a few innovative interviewing techniques, but the renewing possibilities for this method are multiple. In my opinion, interviewing is easier to innovate than observation.

2.3. Collecting Documents

Two types of social documents can be collected in research – the spontaneous (i.e. pre-existing, already available) and the provoked ones (i.e. carried out at the request of researchers, elicited). Unfortunately, they are seldom used in the sociological research in Romania.

The existing collections of documents are quite little exploited in research despite the fact that they are quite numerous and, with the help of the Internet, quite easy to access. Collecting social documents has always been, in sociology, the step-sister of the other methods - rather neglected and disconsidered. Thus, there are many archival documents that can be used in research (see newspapers or magazines from the past, photo or film collections, etc.) and the world wide web is an extraordinary archive where we can find absolutely anything we want (see the wealth of data found available on blogs, or social networks, electronic family albums, You Tube footages, etc.).

It seems very odd to me that we give, in research, a lot of importance to what the participants declare and that we are not interested at all in what they produce - the texts written by them, the images produced by them or the objects made by them. The social documents are numerous (absolutely anything that is produced by humans can be used in research if they provide useful data for solving research objectives), they are very easy to collect (usually they are in the drawers of the participants, of institutions or on the Internet) and they are unobtrusive (how many data collection techniques can boast of non-reactivity?).

The situation in which the researcher asks the participants to produce social documents is even less common in the sociological research in Romania. This feature is all the more unfortunate as, in my opinion, the technique of collecting provoked social documents is the one that offers the most generous space for innovation, for the manifestation of creativity in research.

For example, people can be asked to show in a Lego construction how they would like their neighbourhood or city to be like, to build frames in sand to illustrate interactions, to make collages that should represent experiences, or to produce all sorts of texts - for example, to write a diary where to record everything they do in a week or to make a list of everything they buy in a day or of all the people they talk to on a weekend.

Thus, collecting social documents produced at the request of the researcher allows innovation in each new research project. Each time, a new task for the participants can be invented, adapted to the research objectives and to the characteristics of the subjects. They may be asked, for example, to keep video journals, to take photos of what makes them proud of their profession or to draw the social classes in Romania, and the online communities can, not only be observed and interviewed, but also challenged with all sorts of attractive tasks. The possibilities are endless.

The collection of visual social documents is a new technique of data collection for Romania, especially in the variant of the provoked documents (when the participants are asked to draw, photograph or film). In fact, when it comes to visual data, the methodological novelty is inherent because the images have been inexplicably little used in social research, being considered for a long time, also inexplicably, 'unscientific'. And this when natural sciences use visual materials as something indispensable; no one can imagine what biology, physics, or astronomy would look like without photographic evidence (Becker, 1995).

As images have occupied an increasingly important place in Western social research in the last 20-30 years, methodological innovation related to visual data has become increasingly common. There are, for example, some already well-known techniques related to photography - see photo-novella or photovoice. Photo-novella presupposes that the participants arrange the photographs one uses in research into meaningful sequences and add short texts that make the understanding of the message they want to convey easier (Burke and Evans, 2011). The photovoice involves data collecting in the form of photographs produced by participants upon the request of the researcher. These images speak for themselves about the topic studied, but they are also accompanied by short explanatory texts also provided by the subjects (Milne and Muir, 2020).

Then as far as drawing is concerned, techniques such as relational maps, timeline or self-portrait can be applied (Bagnoli, 2009). Similarly, participants can be asked to make graphic short stories (drawing sequences where images are accompanied by text, Galman, 2009). And the film can be used in the walking with video version (participants guide you around a location that has a special significance for them, Pink, 2008).

As mentioned above, the innovation related to collecting provoked documents is open to anyone (whether we talk about images or not). Even simple collections of textual data, thus classical data, can bring significant methodological novelties. For example, in several research situations when I set out to study the identity of the participants, I asked them to describe their home or to continue a narrative about them that would start with "I wish I had been ...".

The use of creativity development techniques as research data collection techniques is also innovative. I used the analogy (Scârneci-Domnișoru, 2019). It can be used when searching for information about self-identification or hetero-identification, in situations where, for example, a person, organization or community identifies himself/ itself or is identified with a car, a profession, a famous woman, a cartoons character, etc.

Analogization is a funny technique that partially saves us from many of the difficulties that sociological research faces: social desirability, subjects control mechanisms,

monotony of questionnaires and the monotony of answers. However, creative techniques are not in high demand among Romanian sociologists. All the more strange as, for example, the leader of the participants can be a snake, the company where they work can be a dairy cow; the colleague could be a nettle and their job a cooked cabbage. And the explanations offered for these analogies can reveal secret details about discriminations, defects, disadvantages, mistakes, etc. Very rarely do we have the opportunity to work in sociological research with such unaltered data; they are very difficult to obtain with the help of classical techniques. Because it is much easier to say that Dacia 1300 (an old Romanian car) breaks down when going up the hill, moves hard, breaks down quickly, squeaks and consumes a lot than to say directly about your colleague that he does not help you when in difficulty, that he is crumpled, grumpy, inexperienced and, unfairly, better paid than you.

From here to other creative ideas in research or even to ideas related to the development of this technique there is only one step. For example, I have explored the possibility of putting into practice the analogization exercise in the form of drawings. The participants can be asked to draw an animal, a medical instrument, a car part, etc. that a community, a department, a politician, a profession, etc. best looks like.

At a first evaluation, I have found out that this invention comes along with all the disadvantages of applying visual techniques in research, but also with an important advantage over the classical analogy: the technique becomes less directive because the subjects spontaneously draw the context, they explain unprovokedly what it is about, so that there is no need for questions to clarify the analogy or to stimulate explanations.

Onuț (2005) shows that 'the creative techniques are themselves the subject of innovation with each use'. I am convinced that analogy could become in research, for example, to draw an object that symbolizes a colleague you do not like, a boss you would like or a company you would like to work for.

In fact, I think we should not stop at the classic Chinese portrait (as the analogy is known in the literature) that I have briefly presented above, but we could use the analogy in any form of 'it's as if', adaptable to research situations and to the characteristics of the subjects. Here is an example: the participants may be asked to continue the sentence – 'When I come to work, I feel like when I go to ...'. What can follow is when I go to – the doctor, marathon, police or anything else and, of course, the related explanations.

As I have already mentioned, the collection of provoked social documents is the most fertile ground for innovation in social research methodology. I am convinced that research will become more and more creative, especially in this direction, and that the subjects, increasingly bored by the classical techniques and less and less eager to participate in research, will rediscover the pleasure of and interest in providing information for the benefit of knowledge.

3. Conclusions

Methodological innovation, the renewal of data collection methods is very possible as the examples in this article have shown. But, in my opinion, the renewal should not be

accidental, in the interest of bored researchers or of some more daring researchers; rather it should be a mandatory thing. People change, technology undergoes major developments and research must adapt, keep up with those it studies and with the current means of communication, relating, etc.

I think that there are more and more frequent situations when classical research techniques become inappropriate, too often used, annoying for the subjects; I think it becomes more and more common to take pains in finding people eager to become participants in our research; I think that there are more and more situations when, although we manage to convince people to help us, we discover uniformity and monotony in their answers.

I think that, at least in Romania, we are too fascinated by questionnaires, we adore them irrationally, we apply them in any context and we ignore almost completely the other methods and techniques (I don't mention how little we care about their innovation).

Therefore, I believe that it is not only desirable but necessary to renew (at least in terms of data collection methods). In my opinion, the use of innovative techniques brings many advantages. I mentioned some of them in this article. In general, with their help, research becomes a special experience for both the researcher and the studied, the data become more suggestive and the results more spectacular.

Moreover, in my opinion, for researchers, that is, for those people who aim at producing new knowledge, it is very inappropriate to reject the new or fear or disinterest in the renewal of the ways of producing knowledge.

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