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“I’ve found more difficulties than I expected to”: Raising questions
from field experience

Abstract

Sociology students in Portugal have usually been taught methodology and epistemology in a classical, scholastic way. If students are provided with practical contact early on, this can help them to better understand and apply theoretical concepts conveyed through lectures. During their last graduate year, Sociology students of the University of Minho are expected to design a full research project and to conduct exploratory research, completed by the last semester, and this includes either a residence period or a research seminar. To ensure this works well, methodology units are organised on a weekly basis, according to two types of classes: 1) theoretical and 2) theoretical-practical, with the purpose of gradually enabling students to develop the competencies they will need to graduate. Focusing on the teaching experience of qualitative methodologies, and using as an example the teaching of observation techniques, the purpose of this article is to illustrate the advantages of offering the students early contact with the “field”, and prepare them for future full-scale research. These advantages are acknowledged by students, as evidenced in their written evaluations of their field experiences. However, it is important to note that this type of learning is most fruitful when students have been previously trained in the use of the written language – namely aiming to develop their ability to describe – and social theories.

Keywords

Teaching qualitative methodologies; Field experience; Student feedback.

In Portugal, Sociology students have for a long time been taught epistemology and methodology matters in a classical, scholastic way. Especially when it comes to qualitative methodologies, this enlarges the distance between research theory and practice, preventing them from actually coming in touch with and sensing the multiple problems that the study of social reality raises during their training period. If they are provided with such contact early on, this will help them to better understand and apply theoretical concepts conveyed through lectures. The importance of discussing different ways of teaching social research methodologies is twofold: it addresses the quality of the latter in terms of its outcomes for students as future professionals; and points out weaknesses to be overcome in the context of higher education organisations.

This article begins by offering a brief overview of Sociology in higher education in Portugal focusing on the characteristics of sociology in Portugal and highlighting the dominant approaches, especially in methodological terms. The purpose of this background is to provide a context to understand the work that has been developed specifically in the Department of Sociology of the University of Minho (Northern Portugal) regarding methodology courses. The Sociology graduate course of the University of Minho distinguishes itself from other Sociology graduate programmes for encompassing three methodology courses, all of them mandatory – the first, focuses specifically on methodology and epistemology for the social sciences; the second, on quantitative methodologies; and the third, on qualitative methodologies. By their final graduate year, students are expected to design a full research plan and to conduct exploratory research, competencies they will have to master by the last semester, which includes either a residence period or a research seminar. To ensure this, methodology courses are organised, on a weekly basis, according to two types of classes – theoretical and theoretical-practical – with the purpose of gradually developing the competencies students will need to graduate.

Although the qualitative methodology course encompasses several lectures and exercises on different research techniques, each year one of them is prioritised and students must produce a small research report. During the school year of 2007/2008, exercises on observation techniques were used for this purpose. An assessment of this work is used as an example to show the advantages of offering students an early contact with field practice, thus preparing them for full-scale research, which is often an essential criterion for postgraduate research positions. The advantages of this teaching/ learning methodology are also acknowledged by students themselves, which can be seen in their written evaluations of such experiences. However, it is important to note that this type of learning is most fruitful when students have been previously and successfully trained in the use of the written language – namely aiming to develop their ability to describe – and social theories. These matters will be addressed in part two, where current challenges to qualitative research teaching are discussed.

Teaching social research methodologies in Portugal

Sociology degrees are relatively novel in Portugal. The first graduation degrees in Sociology were created after the fall of the dictatorship, in 1974, among other reasons because the regime tended to envisage this type of knowledge as threatening and contentious. There is nevertheless, a relatively long tradition of social and sociological thought that can be traced back to the 19th century. It is, however, during the 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by an industrialisation upsurge, that research on social reality began to expand under the influence of intellectuals and scholars often linked to the regime itself, guided by the intention of dealing with ongoing changes and identifying obstacles to economic modernisation (Pinto 2007).

The semi-peripheral characteristics of the Portuguese society, the institutionalisation of Sociology as a discipline and autonomous field in Portugal, and the fact that most of those scholars have come from other disciplinary fields has been pointed out as fundamental contribution to the country's sociological thought and direction: e.g. some consensus around the paradigm of critical rationalism; a marked opening to inter-disciplinary thought; a strong investment in the problematisation of research objects (Pinto *ibidem*); and a certain estrangement from some intense discussions, which characterise other social realities, such as the opposition between qualitative versus quantitative methodologies (Gonçalves 2006).

If, as Gonçalves (ibidem) contends, Portuguese Sociology curricula have been characterised by a concern in highlighting plural theoretical and methodological approaches, and Portuguese sociologists seem to be more prone to considerations concerning the fulfilment of scientific validation than to marked animosity against specific theories or methodologies. It is possible to notice a certain tendency towards more structuralist approaches, to logical-deductive reasoning and to quantitative methodology. In fact, qualitative research techniques, such as participant-observation or certain interview types, when present, are usually mobilised during exploratory phases of research, or as a means to expand conclusions drawn from the application of quantitative instruments such as questionnaires. Qualitative methodologies and techniques are thus very seldom used in isolation, especially in the work of published scholars⁵⁰.

The Sociology graduate programme at the University of Minho has always been unusual when compared with other courses in Portugal, both due to the importance given to theoretical approaches more focused on the (micro)analysis of social (inter)action and to the length of student training in social research (currently encompassing four semesters, whereas in most graduation plans it covers two semesters). Regarding the latter, it is understood that students' early contact with social research instruments and their implementation in the field is of the utmost importance; both to facilitate first-hand understanding of epistemological matters and to develop competencies fundamental to the sociologist's work. In this sense, I have tried to comply to Delyser's (2008) vision, who argues for a teaching model that simultaneously attends to the understanding of methodologies, epistemologies and theoretical foundations, and the active coaching of students' research abilities instead of expecting these to develop on their own once in the field. In fact, epistemological and theoretical proficiency appear to be intimately linked to firsthand field work experience, since a full understanding of the implications and requisites of social research – designing a research plan, construing a theoretical object, designing data gathering tools, and so on – can be best accomplished when its problems are actually experienced by students themselves.

During the third semester, Sociology students attend a course on Social Research Methods II, which focuses on qualitative methodology and techniques. The course starts with a discussion of the epistemological and theoretical assumptions of qualitative methodologies, covers several observation techniques (including participant-observation), life-story interview, focus groups, and content analysis, and ends with the writing of qualitative reports. Besides lectures, students are expected to work on specific readings and to solve exercises on each subject. Since they are supposed to deliver a final research report on a specific study object by the end of the semester, such exercises are conceived so as to progressively contribute to its completion.

Training observation techniques: an experience

During the year of 2007/ 2008, students were asked to choose a subject that could be researched using participant-observation techniques considering access, time, and resource constraints, which would be the topic of their final research report. A series of exercises were designed so as to contribute little by little to the

⁵⁰ One notable exception is the work of José Machado Pais, who has been one of the very few Portuguese scholars devoted to publicise the importance of qualitative research methodologies in the analysis of social phenomena.

elaboration of this report. Exercises were designed to get increasing difficult, and were adapted from Janesick's (1998) proposals.

Specifically, students were sequentially asked to observe and describe: 1) an animal, during one hour; 2) a single person and his/ her actions in a public environment, with his/ her knowledge, during half a day; 3) a complex (public or private) environment with several individuals, during a week. All exercises were designed so that, by the time exercise 3) had to be planned, previous experience would help. All exercises were written and delivered in theoretical-practical classes, followed by a discussion of the students' impressions. Apart from diverse queries emerging from field experience, discussions were based on the students' answers to a series of questions included in each exercise relating explicitly to: 1) the main difficulties they had found; 2) how they had felt during the course of the exercise, especially whether they had ever felt surprised and if so what had surprised them; 3) what they felt they had learned.

Apart from an evaluation of these results, the analysis of student evaluation forms supports Sells, Smith and Newfield's (1997) findings, who have concluded from their own teaching practice that students' field experience, besides enhancing their research skills, tends to be perceived by the latter with clear enthusiasm.

Learning through field experience: some results

In the course of the assignments, most students seem to have built up their awareness of the difficulties and decisions researchers are faced with when conducting empirical research. Since qualitative research, and particularly ethnographic methodologies based on observation, do not obey logical-deductive research plans supported by a previously defined and closed theoretical-analytical model, but rather to a logic that is constructed along the way (Becker 1994; Denzin 1997; Denzin and Lincoln 2000), most of them start by stressing an initial sense of being "lost". This refers specifically to difficulties in deciding exactly what is important to observe, as well as how to record the information. This seems to be particularly true when the settings and the object to be observed become more complex, as in exercise 3), since both the amount of information and the presence of several individuals tend to render such decisions more complex.

A point that is frequently made by students regarding the problem of determining what information is important is the need to repeat their observations. Students gained an accrued sense that one single observation is scarcely enough to account for an object's characteristics, attitudes, or conduct, since patterns tend to emerge with time. In fact, such consideration is often linked to what most of them tend to consider a surprising fact: that there is much more to be observed than they had expected. Statements such as "I had never realised cats' complex cleansing rituals, or details such as changes in eye colours and shapes depending on whether they are alert or not", or an amazement with what some call "an incredible amount of detail that we usually ignore" are quite frequent.

When students have to observe human beings they tend to mention the difficulty of accounting for the inner worlds of the observed. Although this was also pointed out regarding the observation of animals, especially when their own pets were chosen for this purpose, in this case, the main trouble seemed to be an inclination to humanise them; that is, to ascribe them specifically human characteristics⁵¹. As for the

⁵¹ A matter which has, in fact, recently been the topic of a special issue of the *Qualitative Sociology Review*...

observation of human beings, students tended to be divided between, on one hand, the idea that it is easier to understand them and their conduct, since they believed they share cultural meanings and understandings, and on the other hand, the idea that it is more difficult to because of the risk of ascribing taken for granted or assumed meanings. In both cases, emotions are central in self-evaluation reports and tend to relate to a central aspect of field research: emotional involvement with the observed and the need to watch one's emotions in order to be as objective as possible.

In fact, students often highlight that they had to be very careful in their interpretations, namely to avoid ascribing their own motives or characteristics to others. One of the students' quotations that referred specifically to exercise 2), is particularly enlightening:

I faced numerous difficulties, namely regarding the person's inner aspects. [...] My observation focused essentially on physical traits and gestures, which I interpreted in a very personal way. I did not know the person, which is a disadvantage to my work, but then that was the very idea of it. The fact that I did not know her allowed me to always find out more than one meaning to a single gesture, numerous justifications for a single attitude!. [...] I wish I had more time to observe her, to interact with her, at the very least to be able to confirm, or to construct a more real account of the person...

In fact, many students refer to a specific characteristic of observation techniques – which they had not been authorised to use – as being fundamental to sort out “accurate” interpretations: its reliance on informal interviewing, which would have allowed them to question actors, both as a way to improve field notes and to include the latter's own motives and justifications in the analysis.

Such considerations tend to emerge as intimately linked to the awakening of the students' curiosity both with aspects of social interaction they had never thought about before and with a concern for the actors' inner worlds, which could only be accessed through a more prolonged presence, interaction and profound contact (if ever!).

Another recurrent issue in the student reports is the influence of the observer over the observed, and vice-versa. Especially in the case of exercises 1) and 2), students notice both how the fact of observing people or animals who know or sense they are being observed changes the latter's conduct/ behaviour, and the fact that they themselves may alter their conduct, at least during the initial moments of observation . Students are usually able to account for the actors' relative awkwardness in the way the latter move, act, or even looks at the observer. With time, however, they believe that most actors tended to forget their presence, at least occasionally, even though this has not always been the case. When observing animals, and when the latter are not their own pets, the most common references go to the animal's curiosity towards the observer.

More specifically, students recognise they feel awkward when asking someone to allow them to observe him/ her and when they themselves feel they are being observed either by the animal or by that person. In the first case, they tend to mention their surprise when people accept submitting themselves to such an experience, in some cases even attempting to actively “co-operate” with the observer by asking the latter where should they stand or what should they do. In the second case, it is quite interesting to see the students' clear perception that their own moves are scrutinised also by animals, which usually leads them to refrain their conduct so as to avoid interfering in their customary behaviour.

This type of exercise seems to be particularly fruitful since they enable the student to turn abstract concepts into first-hand knowledge: during subsequent classes, for example, students seemed to have less trouble linking what they read in textbooks with their previous practical experiences of 'doing' observation. But there is another important outcome: field experience seems to enhance students' perception of their own insufficiencies. When students were asked what they felt they had learned answers tended to highlight the need to "improve" writing skills and/ or a series of matters linked to an insufficient mastering of sociological theories.

Students' awareness of their trouble with written language sometimes relates to a poor command over its basic grammatical conventions – sentence construction, punctuation norms, and so on –, which made it difficult both to write down observations and to feel they could adequately convey their results to others. But most frequently they were linked to the fact that qualitative research writing not only has its own conventions, but it also works as a process of "stitching" data and theory (Becker 1994). Since formal education continues to privilege logical-deductive reasoning, they have been trained for years to write in a similar way, and it can be hard to master alternative ways of doing it.

The role of sociological theories in social research in general, and in qualitative research specifically, is harder for students to grasp on their own. Considering that concepts are essentially ways of looking at reality, they have an important "sensitising" role (Blumer 1969). Sociological theories are thus fundamental tools for social research, since they point out ways to proceed. So, both a part of students' difficulties relating to this matter and their inability to exactly pinpoint their origins seems to be also linked to the privileging of structuralist approaches in sociological theory courses and to the fact that these are usually communicated during lectures with a clearer scholastic layout. This brings attention to the need to render such lectures more operational and to provide learning contexts that may allow students to better perceive their operational character and their fundamental role for researchers, which has also been pointed out by Campenhout (2001)⁵².

Conclusion

The importance of discussing different ways of teaching social research methodologies is twofold: it addresses the quality of teaching in terms of its outcomes for students as future professionals; and points out weaknesses to be overcome in the context of higher education organisations. This article has focused on the advantages of offering students an early contact with field practice, thus preparing them for full-scale research. Results have been highlighted, based on a teaching experience of qualitative methodologies using practical exercises.

Such results may be subsumed under three major headings, showing that: most students gain a greater understanding of the difficulties and decisions researchers are faced with when conducting empirical research; more abstract matters dealt with during lectures – namely the ones pertaining to epistemological matters and the importance of theories for the comprehension of social reality – appear to be better grasped once the field has been experienced firsthand; students are able to better identify their own limitations on several levels, especially in terms of their mastering

⁵² In fact, the author's work constitutes a very interesting textbook for teaching sociological theories, showing how specific theories can be actually used in social research. The book provides examples that range from structuralist to social interaction approaches.

of sociological theories and of a writing genre heavily dependent on the ability to describe.

Difficulties identified by students in their evaluation reports, their gradual assessment, and the outcomes of class discussions have underpinned the need to design and include in qualitative methodology courses, exercises especially focused on improving descriptive writing skills and inductive reasoning. But they have also pointed out to the need to improve the articulation of the relationship between social research and sociological theory courses.

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