

Arts and tricks of comprehensive interview'

Artes e manhas da entrevista compreensiva

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Abstract

The place that interviewing techniques came to occupy within social research is more relevant and differs substantially from the past. The success of more directive interviewing techniques among structural-functionalists paradigms has been followed by the use of more creative forms of interviewing. Among these, this article wants to highlight the comprehensive interview, a qualitative data collection technique that articulates traditional forms of semi-directive interview with interview techniques of a more ethnographic nature. The reason for this option is that comprehensive interviewing is the epistemological and technical culmination of the creativization process to which the use of the interviews has recently been subjected within social research. Interviewing is no longer meant as a neutral, standardized and impersonal technique of gathering information, but as the result of a composition (social and discursive) between two voices, in reciprocal dialogue from the positions that both parties occupy in the specific situation of the interview (of questioner and respondent). The application of the comprehensive interview presumes obtaining a kind of discourse that is more narrative than informative, resulting from the intersubjectivity developed between interviewee and interviewer. Such an exercise requires a creative posture on the part of the interviewer and improvisation in the conduct of the interview, requiring specific arts and tricks. To reflect on the interaction conditions of interviewing process as an exceptional communicative situation, and the respective effects on the production of knowledge and epistemology of social research, are the main objectives of this article.

Keywords: Comprehensive Interview; Creative Interviewer; Improvisation; Interaction Interviewer/Interviewee.

Resumo

O lugar que as entrevistas vieram a ocupar dentro da pesquisa social é muito mais relevante e equacionado de forma substancialmente diferente do passado. Ao sucesso das técnicas de entrevista ditas “semidirectivas” ou “semiestruturadas” próprias aos paradigmas estrutural-funcionalistas, tem-se seguido o uso de formas mais criativas de entrevistar. Entre estas, dá-se destaque neste artigo à entrevista compreensiva, uma técnica qualitativa de recolha de dados que articula formas tradicionais de entrevista semidirectiva com técnicas de entrevista de natureza mais etnográfica. Isto na medida em que a entrevista compreensiva é o culminar técnico e epistemológico do processo de *criativização* a que o uso das técnicas de entrevista tem sido recentemente sujeito na pesquisa social. Já não é necessariamente concebida como uma técnica neutra, estandardizada e impessoal de recolha de informação, mas como resultado de uma *composição* (social e discursiva) a duas vozes, em diálogo recíproco a partir das posições que ambos os interlocutores ocupam na situação específica de entrevista (de interrogador e de respondente). A aplicação da entrevista de tipo compreensivo pressupõe a obtenção de um discurso mais narrativo que informativo, resultado da intersubjectividade que se desenrola entre entrevistado e entrevistador. Tal exercício pressupõe da parte do entrevistador uma postura criativa e de improvisação na condução da entrevista, que requer artes e manhas específicas. Refletir sobre as condições de interação da entrevista enquanto situação excecional de comunicação, e os respetivos efeitos na produção de conhecimento e na epistemologia da pesquisa social, é o objetivo central deste artigo.

Palavras-chave: Entrevista Compreensiva; Entrevistador Criativo; Improvisação; Interação Entrevistador/Entrevistado.

Introduction

The interview has probably been the most mobilized qualitative research technique in field of studies for students and researchers in social sciences, in different formats² and media³. This success stems largely from the fact that interview techniques are a relatively economical and accessible form to access to a broad and diverse set of empirical material. In theory, it would only be necessary to have a recording instrument, some audacity, empathy and communication skills to ask some questions prepared in advance and, later, to extract information and illustrations of previously developed hypotheses from the material collected.

In fact, that is the way interviews are often considered, demonstrating an attitude of *soft hardness* of its choice as main or only research technique in the methodological design of much research: *hardness* relating to the standardized format that the interview application tends to presume from interviewee to interviewee, blind to cultural and narrative idiosyncrasies of each one; *soft* in the theoretical and epistemological reflexivity that underlies the choice for the technique depending on the object of study, as well as the interviewer reflexivity about the effects of all social dynamics implied during any interview.

In the structural-functionalist tradition that for decades dominated social sciences, interview techniques were applied, in particular, to check the capability and cognitive variability of an indicator used in a survey, being this one considered the main instrument for “objective” data collection. Interviews, almost always very directive and structured, were still used as a way to give life to arid numerical statements, or marginally saved for exploratory studies when faced with unknown problems. Therefore, deductive and illustrative functions were traditionally reserved for interviews, subjugated to causal logic characteristic of quantitative methods.

² King and Horrocks (2010) and Flick (2005, p. 77-126) give a broad overview of various types of interviews used in research in the social sciences (and beyond), from a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, and targeting respondents with very different profiles.

³ Interacting face to face, by phone, mobile phone, skype, chat, email, forums, social networks, etc.

With the resurgence of comprehensive approaches throughout the 1960s⁴, various forms of collecting, recording and processing qualitative empirical material came to have a prominent place in social research (Jovanovic, 2011). Anticipating that the subjects' point of views are more easily *inter-viewed* by discourses,⁵ studies solely based on interview techniques, in a more open format and less standardized (Foddy, 1996; Flick, 2005), and involving small "samples" of interlocutors, began to be more frequent among social sciences, with its epistemological legitimacy deeply discussed and recognized (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006; Lieberman, 1992; Small, 2009).

In this process, interviews became more relevant and considered in a substantially different manner within social research. The success of the so-called "semi-directive" or "semi-structured" interview techniques grounded in structural-functionalist paradigms,⁶ was followed by the use of more creative ways of interviewing (Fontana, 2001; Platt, 2001). Among these, the so-called *comprehensive interview* is paradigmatic (Bourdieu, 1993, Kauffman, 1996).

Arts of interviewing: composition, creativity and improvisation

The comprehensive interview is a qualitative data collection technique that articulates traditional forms of semi-directive interviewing with interviewing techniques of a more ethnographic nature, as an attempt to avoid the dirigisme of the open questionnaire model, or the *laissez-faire* of the non-directive interview. It was proposed in contrast to the tradition of a certain *abstract empiricism*

associated to the extensive and - supposedly - impersonal production of data, especially quantitative. It was also conceptualised to overcome a certain *methodological formalism* characteristic of the structural-functionalist heritage in qualitative research, a follower of interventionist logic of standardized data collection. Moreover, it avoids what Back (2007) called as "intrusive empiricism" (p. 18), specific of some forms of ethnography that mismatch the density and the proximity characteristic of this methodological perspective, to a cumulative, excessive and hiperempiricist torrent of details and curiosities, done without any discernment in terms of analytical axis - trend that camouflages what is truly in question on the research field.⁷

The challenge taken on comprehensive interview presumes a more personal than standardized know-how, resulting from the involvement of the researcher in the development of the research on solid ground; at the same time, it gives place to a higher degree of formalization and systematization than ethnographic techniques of information gathering. Promoting a logic of creativity and of scientific discovery of new theories and concepts, more than a logic of demonstration and illustration of previous theories, comprehensive interview seeks to produce new theoretical prepositions, through a tight and continuous articulation between the data collection process and the process of formulating hypotheses. These ones will be much more creative when grounded in the data collected. A *bottom up* formulation that derives from bottom to top, from the empirical to theoretical field, until formalizing what has become known as *grounded theory*, in its earliest (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) or

4 In contrast to the hypothetical-deductive methodologies - that emphasize the explanation of regularities, functions and causalities of social action -, the so-called 'comprehensive paradigms' (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodologies, phenomenology, grounded theories, etc.) have in common the focus on understanding the meanings attributed by actors to their actions and interactions (subjectivities and intersubjectivities), rationales and reflexivities, motivations and justifications, interpretations and values (War, 2006).

5 *Inter-viewing* permits going beyond the partial vision that the «sight» of the researcher - namely the observing and participating anthropologist - provides about the phenomenon, which is sometimes insufficient to understand native senses and anthropological meanings. *Inter-viewing* presumes «a very special listening» by the researcher (Oliveira, 2000), whose skills and necessary conditions will be the subject of discussion throughout this article.

6 The typology of forms of more traditional interviewing was conceived according to the degree of structuring of the guidelines and the directivity in its implementation, considering its assigned objectives: directive interview (checking / control), semi-directive (deepening), and non-directive (exploration) (Ghiglione and Matalon, 1992, Patton, 1987; Roulston, 2010; Ruquoy, 1997).

7 This is a very common risk among beginners in ethnographic field work. See, for example, the experience reported by Vasconcelos et al. (2002).

current formulations (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 2001, 2003).

One can say that the comprehensive form of interviewing is the culmination of a recent epistemological and technical process of *creativization* of the use of interviews. These are no longer necessarily conceived as a neutral, standardized and impersonal technique of gathering information, but as a result of a *composition* (social and discursive) of two (sometimes more) voices: voices that perform a reciprocal dialogue from the positions that each interlocutor occupy (of questioner and respondent) within the interview situation, performance that opens the possibility of an extended degree of *improvisation* between the questions raised and the answers given.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that it is not an anarchic form of improvisation, but a form of prepared, informed and controlled improvisation. In music, improvisation is conceived as the ability of, simultaneously and quickly, to produce and to play sounds, within certain harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic parameters. Thus, to improvise, the good players have to master the reciprocal control of parameters on which they are working musically - particularly if they are not playing alone -, or the sound created sounds incongruous. The same happens with the *arts of interviewing*.⁸ At the gathering of positions that constitute any interview (composition), the position of interviewer is not impersonal, nor too technical, and much less so standardized. To assume a command function through the act of asking is to clearly assume a position that implies a point of view - to inquire, and delimit research domain(s).

However, paradoxically, the interviewer should manage the inter-view in a way to be the least imposing possible on the respondent's point of view. A well-improvised interview requires from the interviewer knowledge (about the theme to be addressed), planning (on topics that are interesting to both who ask and respond) and experience (in managing social gatherings of this type with some level of comfort and colloquialism). And, above all, it implies the constant ability of the interviewer to

put himself, dialogically and vice versa, before the respondent's point of view, so that the exercise of improvised composition leads to the best results for both. Hence the "good question" is not necessarily the one that had been previously prepared by the interviewer, but the one that, in certain point of the conversation, makes sense to the interviewee and inspires him to take a stand, to narrate a point of view with density. In other words, a "good answer" is always the result of a successful creative exercise of improvised composition.

Interview as an exceptional social situation

What do the various forms of interviewing have in common, one may ask? The first is that it implies a specific situation of social interaction, predominantly - yet not only - discursive. The specificity of this social interaction can be found at various levels. To begin with, the interview is a moment that breaks the communication habits of the individuals, distinctive from other everyday-life verbal exchanges. It is important to emphasize the difference between the interview format and the numerous other interactive formats in current situations of everyday life that can organize the discourse of the same individuals on the same topics.

The interview is not a simple "conversation" (Patton, 1987, p. 108)⁹, but it offers a *situation of exceptional verbal communication*. A conversation assumes the existence of verbal exchange symmetry, even when the actors occupy different roles and positions in the field. A conversation also presupposes that can happen at any time, not being clearly demarcated in time and space. It further presumes a very fluid delineation of the roles (namely of interviewer and interviewee), as well as the sequence of discursive action. A conversation does not have to be structured around question/answer pairs, and the dialogue can be established far beyond the topics within the scope of the researcher interests, giving rise to a reciprocal flow of information between him/

8 As Grawitz mentions, "there is, without question, an interview technique but, more than a technique, it's an art form" (1990, p. 762).

9 Even if it deals with an informal «ethnographic discussion», which occurs as part of field observation procedures developed by the researcher with scientific interests (Patton, 1987, p. 110-111).

her and the respondent.

On the other hand, the interview situation presumes “the whole encounter in which the researcher explicitly asks information from the actors about certain themes or topics, structured in terms of alternating between a question/answer, and of an initial definition of the participation statutes in asymmetric terms - that is, establishing an explicit separation between the status of interviewer and interviewee” (Nunes, 1992, p. 274). In fact, the interview supposes a particular case of interaction between various interlocutors, configuring an unequal social exchange, in which the lead and control of the situation is largely the responsibility of the researcher.

The sense of *exceptionality* of the interview emerges from the expectations associated with the situation among those who participate within it, resulting from the rarity of daily circumstances that configure the process of interaction recognizable as an interview. Such conditions refer to the fact that the interview configures: a *private* encounter with a stranger, in which happens the sharing of personal experiences, often intimate, subject to rules of confidentiality, anonymity and tolerance (in terms of control of value judgments); an encounter explicitly *placed* in time and space, through clear markers that separate it from other everyday occasions characterized by routine and informality¹⁰; a *formalized* encounter, always intended and requested by the interviewer, and whose interaction model recognized as appropriate is based on a structured dialogue of inquiry, framed as a sequence of question/answer that clearly identifies the social roles of actors: it is up to the interviewer to ask questions about the topics that interest him, and the respondent to give answers to the questions set by the first.

This is a model that defines a unilateral direction of data flow, giving the interviewer the right to circumscribe the thematic issues considered relevant to research, formulate the questions that best represent these themes, as well as organize and conduct the interaction with respondents. It

is an *unequal* relationship because they share a vision on the research phenomenon without major counterparts by the interviewer (although some respondents like to redirect the questions ...). The loosening of this model can transfigure the interview into a conversation, reducing the asymmetry of the statutes of participation within the interview, but never reframing the terms of the relationship between the participants. Even when the interviewer is led to abandon his script or improvise the interview sequence depending on the answers he receives, the *asymmetry* of the original relationship remains preserved through maintenance of question-answer sequence.

Narrative as an intersubjective composition

Although an exceptional and controlled discursive event, the interview situation never matches the conditions of a scientific experiment: it is of limited manipulability, being practically impossible, even advisable, to perfectly apply standardized protocols. The constraints that the interview is subject differ from situation to situation, contemplating infinite possibilities hard to predict in advance. As Ruquoy refers (1997), “putting two subjects face to face with their subjectivity, we cannot guarantee that the information obtained is identical in another situation of interaction. It is also impossible to guarantee a perfect comparability of the data, since the interviewing device may not be strictly identical” (p. 85).

This means that even if one tries to standardize procedures, there is no way to eliminate the “disruptive factors” involved in the social situation of an interview. This understanding entails renouncing claims of neutrality of data obtained through the interview, and recognizing that its validation process implies the contextualization of social situation in which the interview is produced. More than thinking about removal all “disruptive factors” of interviewing - in the sense that from it are extracted “non-distorted data”, or *information* -, it is

¹⁰ Using a recorder, for example, is one of these markers. Not only because of its presence throughout all verbal interaction, implying audio recording, but also because its use, through the act of switching it on and off ends up contributing to defining the beginning and end of the interview time.

worth reflecting on its effects: *expectation effects*, resulting from what interlocutors expect and what motivates them to give one's time and opinions to a stranger; *inquiry effects*, arising from the way the script is developed, as the questions are put and how the interview is conducted; and *interaction effects*, derived from the social signals expressed by interviewer and interviewee.

Tradition considered the interview as a technical-methodological device through which it would be easy to collect *information* from anyone willing and able to give it. However, the data obtained through this device cannot be recognized in the epistemological statute as *informative data*, but *narrative data* that informs and is informed by points of view. As stated by Blanchet and Gotman (1992), "the questionnaire elicits a response, the interview build a speech" (p. 40). That is, a set of statements that gives symbolic density and narrative coherence to the phenomenon studied from many points of view. The narration is not factual information, but a reflexive remembering that always implies a subjective interpretation about the narrated episodes (Garcia, 2000). And this is precisely the great asset of the interview: more than gathering "realistic" information about facts, it allows access to a narrative that comments, values, interprets, lists and contrasts facts.

In the context of an interview, this narrative is not lonely constructed as the narrator is never alone. The interviewer does not just collect information and/or speeches about experiences and opinions of the interviewees, and these answers do not represent mere descriptions of those experiences or opinions with a certain level of detail and density. They are intersubjective constructions, i.e. descriptions and discursive positions that are built from a situation of structured interaction from question-answer pairs, in which the narration of the interviewee is not automatic, and the intervention of the interviewer is not neutral. A good interviewer always wants the respondent to produce descriptions and to express visions that go beyond the superficial description of phenomenon, using techniques to assist him and make him as comfortable and relaxed as possible during a situation that, for him, as we have seen, is exceptional.

In this perspective, the interview does not show how people create their internal life world through words (similar to a diary, for example), but how they create it in the *active* presence of an interlocutor (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), who not only listens but also interacts through questions, encouraging reflexivity and narrativity. The informant is not limited to provide information about himself, but he is implied within a task of creating his own identity while trying to rehearse before the interviewer positions of unity and biographical coherence; or on the contrary, trying to deal with his inconsistency and contradiction. Therefore, the results of interviews are discursive data that do not reflect objectively a reality, but that result from an intersubjective and discursive *com-position* improvised by interviewer and interviewee in the course of the situation, configuring a kind of *experimental situation* (Kauffman, 1996).

In fact, the narrative discourse which is (co) produced during interviews is often a chain of actions and interpretations that might never have been formulated by the respondent before him/her being asked. Most of the time, in the daily hustle and bustle, one does not stop to reflect about what one does and what one experiences. When this happens, it implies more conscious and reflective aspects than others. Thus, the meaning, rationality and coherence that are built through the stimulus of a question, frequently, are not there prior to the facts, but found and improvised at the time of the narrative: in this way, during an interview, "the elements which at the time seemed scattered and rationalities that at the moment emerged as spontaneous, structured themselves into a coherent whole that ties the guiding line of multiple decisions and actions" (Guerra, 2006, p. 19).

Interviews are social situations that involve an injunction of reflexivity on the person interviewed. When one has already reflected on the question, the answer is ready, fast, "on the tip of the tongue. When not, the interviewee appears thoughtful, surprised, reluctant (Adler and Adler, 2001). Interviewing causes an exercise of self-analysis that operates a work of discursive explanation, sometimes rewarding, other times painful, during the enunciation of experiences and reflections, sometimes reserved or

repressed, packed in the trunk of biographical time, other times never considered... Forcing the other to speak, interrupting, turning his lived story into a story told, often about what never had been placed as a question, is to exert an enormous arbitrary power. It is an exercise that, being triggered by the interviewer, requires his responsibility, care and realism in his follow-up, more than impassability and impersonality.

From this perspective, what is told during an interview situation turns out to always be a *tale edited* by the interviewer, actively involved in the composition of the narratives that give account of experiences and meanings. To ask is never an impartial attitude, and there are no neutral questions. Each question formulated constitutes a stand by the researcher; who, however, must find the order of relevance and subjective interests of the respondent, connected with the order of relevance and scientific interests of the research undertaken. For both, interviewer and interviewee, the questions should result as being relevant and interesting. To ask, is not a mere act of requesting for information, but the establishment of an intersubjective bridge through which the circulation of different interests and points of view is possible. Only in this way, through the confrontation between the worlds of the interviewer and the interviewee implied in any interview situation, results a real “ethnographic encounter”, mutually comprehensible and mutually gratifying (Oliveira, 2000).

The creative interviewer status

Being a private, formalized, localized, and asymmetric encounter, these are procedural characteristics of any interview that configure the exceptionality of this specific verbal interaction situation in everyday life, and that have implications in terms of the intersubjective management of information wanted and received. If it is the interviewer who initiates and establishes the rules of the game of interviewing, this initiative obliges him to actively manage and direct all the resources necessary to maintain the involvement of respondents, so the interview is successful. Therefore, it is up to the interviewer to create the conditions for the development of an

extra-ordinary speech by the interviewee, which would never be produced in any daily conversation with friends, family, acquaintances, or even with other strangers than the interviewer.

Although being the interview always an extraordinary situation, it is the art of the interviewer, paradoxically, to know how to guide this exceptionality in order to trivialize it as much as possible during the interaction situation with the respondent. The interviewee finds within the interview an exceptional occasion to witness his existence, to bring his experience from the private sphere to a certain intimate public sphere, so he may explain and understand himself (to another and to himself). Nevertheless, if the exceptionality of the moment of being interviewed justifies the interlocutor’s desire to take advantage of this rare piece of space-time offered to him, later, it is up to the talent of interviewer to make the interlocutor believe that such moment is an ordinary situation of two people conversing, acting with simplicity, casualness, and availability.

One of the traditional concerns shared on the classical view of interview application is the loss of objectivity of interviewer, via an “intimate interaction between interviewee and interviewer that amends and modifies the *purity* necessary for scientific observation” (Bravo, 1983, p. 319). Dominated by fidelity to the old methodological principles of neutrality and standardization of procedures, on behalf of a positivist ideal of scientific rigor, this view of the interviewer posture presumes that it would eradicate the effects of his personal intervention during the interview situation.

His fidelity to a script previously prepared on the basis of theoretical assumptions in order to minimize the application variations from one interview to another, as well as the maintenance of a contained and emotionally distanced stance often substantiated in interviews administered as questionnaires, are conditions that would ensure the impersonality and invisibility of the interviewer, and that would neutralize of any form of *symbolic and epistemological violence* able to affect the answers of the interviewees (Beck, 2007; Bourdieu, 1993; Kaufmann, 1996). This model of methodological virtue empowered the interviewee as *privileged informant*, assuming the interview as a mere technical information-gathering

device, of supposedly aseptic material.

However, as pointed out by Kaufmann (1996), should one put the hypothesis that the supposed impersonal stance of the interviewer and non-personalization of the questions might also lead us to the non-personalization of the answers? Or better yet, is the supposedly more impersonal and standardized form of interview able to go beyond the superficial and immediate normative opinions of the interviewee, stimulating his conscience and reflexivity? Does not the non-personalization of questions also constitute a form of symbolic and epistemic violence among respondents, often in the face of displaced questions, asked in language far from their social and cultural experiences?

If there are technical aspects to be taken into account in the implementation of any interview, these cannot be object of blind standardization. Undoubtedly, on the creativity and ability of improvisation of interviewers lies some of their main skills for performing a good interview (Douglas, 1985). Or, one could say, the main *arts of interviewing*. In doing so, the interviewer has the role of bringing out the point of view of the respondent on certain topics. This presupposes treating him not only as an *informant* –asking the “questions made in search of specific answers” – that “create an illusionary field of interaction” – but as a real *partner*, actively heard and questioned in a permanent and mutually meaningful dialogue (Oliveira, 2000, p. 23). It is part of interviewer’s skills, that are technical as well as social, to know how to lead the respondent without directing him, attitude that implies a dialogue without imposing a point of view, namely of the research starting hypothesis (Arce, 2000, p. 110).

The more involved the interviewer is in his beliefs (even if supposedly scientific, through a cast of previous hypotheses), the harder communication will be with the other, notably with one that does not match with those beliefs. As Rubio (2005/2006) points out, on many occasions an interviewer who is more technical and/or shy, armed with his previous interview script, is not able to achieve more than a “replica of his own speech” by imposing on the respondent the categories, assumptions, schedules, perspectives, or other research frames of his own viewpoint on the phenomenon in analysis.

This is precisely the type of “disturbing factor” that must be diluted as far as possible during the interview, in order to reduce to the maximum the interviewer’s intervention on the level of discourse contents and of epistemic and *symbolic violence*. It is not the case of avoiding that the interviewer make his presence known during the interview, but to try to control as consciously and reflexively possible what can be controlled regarding to the effects of this presence, in order to ensure some guarantees of understanding empathy, nonviolent communication (notably of the level and type of language used), and of collaboration in deepening the respondents “space of points of view” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 9-10).

This presupposes, on the part of the interviewer, mastery of a know-how which implies not a set of rules and generalized and/or generalizable precepts, but specific capacities, competences and circumstances that facilitates the respondent’ process of discovery and exploration of the topic proposed, with interest and density, and in accordance with his own categories of thought, and following his own narrative path. This implies on the part of the interviewer not a role of neutrality, but his active involvement in the dynamic of interviewing and creative formulating of questions, in order to improve the performance of the interviewee during the interview.

This is not, of course, to show approval or disapproval towards certain answers, but to humanize the interviewer’s presence in a personalized yet discreet way during the interaction, through his communicational skills, openness to the other and improvisation. So, against the illusion that consists searching for neutrality through the annulment of the interviewer, one must admit that it is not “spontaneity” that defines the “purity” of the data obtained from the interview, but the capacity of enabling what Bourdieu calls a *realistic construction* (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 916). During the interview situation, it is the role of interviewer to follow the train of thought of his interlocutor and, at the same time, to ensure the relevance of the questions and answers in relation to the research aims. This is a two voices composition exercise, inter-subjectively controlled, where the interviewer’s creativity and ability to improvise is a *sine qua non* condition so that a “good question” is asked. This is not necessarily the query

previously contemplated in the script, which can seem out of place considering the development of the interaction. The best question is always found at each moment of the interview situation, based on the latest answer of the respondent .

Inter-viewing tricks

Conducting an interview requires specific competence regarding the ethical stance of the interviewers, the ways of obtaining relevant and dense data, as well as the strategies and technical procedures needed for the adequate progress of this private interaction situation. It is especially important to consider some precautions that lead the interviewee to empathize and trust the interviewer and give as much of himself as possible during the interview. The interviewer is always primarily responsible for the establishment of a climate of confidence and comfort in the meeting, managing the impact of the conditions (material, social, interpersonal and cultural) in which the interaction takes place, and trying to minimize the factors that may block the confidence and communication from the beginning to the end of the interview encounter.

Although, in general, the interviewer is unknown to the respondent, during the interview he should provide the conditions to become an intimate, subject to confessions of secrets, to revelations never verbalized: “the sociologist who does long interviews is a special kind of confidant: a confidant that disappears once the confidence is built” (Lahire, 2002, p. 27). Which means that the continuity of the relationship between interviewer and respondent beyond the interview situation should not be forced, neither obligatory the possibility of returning to the interviewee the data transcribed and/or analyzed. Moreover, to clarify and ensure to the respondent that the material resulting from the interview will be treated in respect to his anonymity and confidentiality, is a fundamental condition for the dialogue to begin with confidence. It should also be explained to the respondent, in language understandable to him, what the purposes of the interview are, explaining the objectives of the research.

The option for the use of *free and informed consent*, a procedure that is becoming common nowadays, should be reflected considering the population and the context under analysis. The ethics of the researcher must go beyond formal and bureaucratic procedures, which can make little sense to the populations studied - especially when they have little or no familiarity with the language, scientific procedures and rights described in such documents.¹⁰ What appears to be the institutionalization of an act of information can become more a form of symbolic and epistemic violence, which may compromise the attainment of a “good interview”. The rights of requesting additional information about the project, of not answering any question, and/or even interrupting the interview, should be communicated to the respondent clearly - but this may happen in a more informal way, at times deemed appropriate to the interviewer, particularly when the interviewee shows some symptom of discomfort to a given question.

More than signatures on documents, the *arts and tricks* of the interviewer must be directed to the promotion of conditions of empathy and confidence encouraging a dense discourse on the part of the respondent, in order to be introduced to the most intimate and emotional categories of his interlocutor. This requires communicative resources and personal sympathy on the part of the interviewer, but also professional self-surveillance resources in order to suspend all his own morals, opinions and categories of thought during the interview. During this exceptional moment, the interviewer needs to forget himself as a citizen and demonstrate an unconditional acceptance and warmth towards the opinions and sentiments expressed by the respondent. The interviewer has to know how to put themselves in the place of the interviewed, in his structure of thought, of language, even of body posture. It is in this sense that Bourdieu (1993, p. 906) speaks of a “species of mimicry” on the part of the interviewer, by exercising a posture of absolute submission to the uniqueness of the case in front of him. Also, Lahire (2002) is attentive to the fact that the comprehensive interview should constitute a “true

¹¹ On ethical issues surrounding the interview technique, see King and Horrocks (2010, p. 103-124).

democratic exercise”, making real and concrete the classic statement “respect for the other” (p. 401).

The maintenance of this attitude of full availability to the interviewee and his speech throughout the interview situation is not an automatic capability, but a competence that needs to be trained. It requires of the interviewer a certain accumulated experience of distinct interview situations (Rubio, 2005/2006, p. 17), since one rarely exercises this experience in daily life as citizens. In fact, in most current conversations, each person tends to react to the other with their own schemes of thought. The less experienced interviewers run the risk of falling into this kind of situation, even when they apply the scheme of thought (supposedly scientific) underlying the interview script, their protective shield against surprise and shyness, against the risk and uncertainty present in all situations of relatively open conversation, rearing to fail the research goals. It ends up failing in the essential: discovering what is still covered by the armor of scientific certainty.

But beyond the domain of some arts of improvisation, some tricks and techniques can also be activated during the interview in order to promote and encourage the interviewee to reveal innermost thoughts. It is wise therefore not relax attention, trusting to the fact that all that is said is being recorded. Developing an *attitude of active listening* (Back, 2007; Blanchet and Gotman, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993), patient and available, but also attentive and curious to what is being said, allows the interviewer to continuously follow the interviewee’s speech and, at the same time, adequately improvise new questions or more relevant sequences of questions than were planned. As a listener, the interviewer should signal that the narrative arouses interest and strive to understand it, encouraging the respondent to proceed until the end, through the use of brief expressions (“I see ...”, “humm..., I understand ...”).

Some more sophisticated active listening techniques also help clarify, deepen or rekindle a discussion at the right moment:

- mirror techniques: the repetition of the word or phrase that has just been said confirms that the interviewer got the interviewee’s message and encourages the respondent to continue and deepen the idea exposed;
- summarizing techniques: interjected partial syntheses when one wants to close a theme, or the reformulation of a portion of the respondent’s speech in the form of interpretation, has the same effect as confirmation of understanding and encouragement to continue on the same topic (“in other words, are you saying that ...”);
- complementary techniques: help to deepen or clarify certain aspects of a narrative, through requests for clarification (of words, phrases, or substantial parts of the interview), or continuation of a story, an argument, or an explanation (“can you tell me a little more about the subject?”, “can you give me some specific examples?”, “would you like to talk a little more about this point?”);
- confrontation techniques: using counterexamples or collation of what is said with other information, when used carefully, can introduce new information in already structured cognitions, which are susceptible to lead the respondent to restructure the field of their cognitions and to produce a richer and less normative discourse;
- voluntary incomprehension techniques: manifestations of lack of knowledge of the field by the interviewer, which promote *pedagogical effects* on the interviewee, oblige to not taking for granted the knowledge of the experience under observation and analysis (“I don’t understand very well what you want to say, because I don’t know”, “what does this expression mean”);
- recovery techniques: to avoid interrupting the speech of the interviewee is a golden rule in the course of the comprehensive interview, not only for reasons of courtesy, but also in order to have the opportunity to follow the structure of its argument to the end. If, however, another question arises in the mind of the interviewer, he should write it down and only present it after the interviewee finishes his reasoning, via recovery techniques (“he told me after that ...”);
- silent techniques: in the same way the speech of the interviewee should not be interrupted, it is also up to the interviewer to know how manage their moments of silence. As has been said, often the interviewee is confronted with questions

which he never had thought about and needs some time to think. Other times, silence arises from a question that touches emotionally demanding and difficult points for the interviewee and the interviewer should be sensitive and ethically responsible during these moments. The interviewer should know not to fill these silences, giving way to reflection and/or to the expression of pain. Likewise, silence on the part of the interviewer also suggests to the informant that more is expected, encouraging him to prolong his talk.

Final considerations

Any of these *arts and tricks* spoken of are procedures that do not guarantee the interview as a perfect encounter between interviewer and interviewee. All procedures and techniques that can be imagined to reduce this distance have their limits. Nothing can neutralize or suspend the social effects of dissymmetry underlying any interview situation. But one can and should reflect on them, i.e., reflect on the conditions in which the interview is conducted and their data produced and interpreted. Many others, before us, showed that the social knowledge does not arise from cognitive asepsis. As it is impossible not to have any effect of intersubjective contamination in the production of data and knowledge about them, we must bring these effects to the center of the analysis and make them object of reflection by the researcher (Roulston, 2010, p. 115-128).

More than trying not to intervene during the interview, or follow general rules dictated by manuals (those available being numerous...), the training of an interviewer must pass not only through the elucidation about the minimum conditions that prevent these kinds of effects, but also by acquiring the habit of reflecting on the formulation and follow-up of questions and the effects of questions on the respondent's discourses, and the conditions (structural and situational) that make possible such discourses and effects intelligible. It is worth it, at the end of each interview, to do an exercise in auto-reflexivity (or possibly even with the respondent himself) about what one did and how one did it, in order to inform what is still to be done (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 128-130; Roulston, 2010, p. 115-129).

Because each question in every interview, is susceptible to critical analysis regarding errors and heuristics potentialities, it is a valuable exercise in order to diagnose whether it is worth transferring it or not for the next interview, under the same or another discursive garb. As we have seen, the comprehensive type of interview is not simply applying a previously designed script based on theoretical assumptions, but implies a script in total reconstruction by researcher - either in the course of the interview situation itself, from interview to interview - as their own hypotheses are being continuously reformulated in the context of new discoveries on the course of research.

It is in this sense that Kaufmann (1996) speaks of the researcher as an "intellectual craftsman" (p. 12-13), whose creativity and improvisational arts invested in building his theory and his own method are simultaneously stimulated and controlled - in a word, reasoned - on the ground, through the capacity that demonstrates in shading and customizing the theoretical and methodological instruments in the course of a concrete project of empirical research. In the type of interview that one wants to be impersonal and neutral, theory tends to be produced early in the research in the form of a model, and the interview protocol is subsequently defined as an instrument of data collection and verification of the modelled hypotheses. The script of questions should be standardized and stabilized, and the conducting of the interview marked by a certain reserve by the interviewer. The comprehensive type of interview radically opposes this epistemological attitude and its operating procedures.

Fieldwork is not limited to mere implementation of a previous script. Although this should exist - containing the guiding topics of the interview, prioritizing the dimensions of more relevant analysis, and controlling what is peripheral in function of the problem one wishes to elucidate during the research -, the script should work merely as an instrument-guide to get the subjects to speak about what is important to the research, demonstrating sufficiently plasticity in its application in order to activate a richer dialogue than the simple response to questions. This situation presumes on the part of the interviewer an attitude of permanent attention

and openness to the perspective and narrative of the respondent, in its content and sequence, as well as flexibility and ability to respond appropriately, in the form of a question, to the topics that emerge in the course of the interview. Sometimes, a topic which is initially presumed as superfluous, or of little relevance is central to a particular respondent.

Therefore, the comprehensive interview presumes an epistemological stance of its own, in which the traditional function of command of theory over empirical research is inverted. The empirical ground is not taken as an instance of verification of a pre-established model, but as the starting point of problematizing; it is not just the context of demonstration of pre-established hypotheses, but context of discovery of new knowledge (War, 2006; Parents, 2002). In short, the comprehensive interview supposes a specific form of epistemological rupture between scientific knowledge and common sense: not the *radical rupture* characteristic of the more classical science model, but a model of *progressive rupture* (Kaufmann, 1996, p. 21-22).

This implies a continuous movement of coming and going by the researcher, creative, interactive and reciprocal, between listening attentively to the interviewees, the understanding of their narrative and categorical and value scheme, the production of conceptual instruments appropriate to the interpretation and explanation of the specific evidence and, finally, the reflexive analysis about their own intervention, voluntary and/or involuntary throughout the process of production of data and knowledge. A task always done in two (or more) voices, a polyphony in which the voice of the researcher should not stifle the voices that sing along with him and ultimately give life to their conceptual compositions.

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