QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

Qualitative research represents „studying people in their natural environment, in their everyday life. It aims at knowing how people live, speak and behave, as well as the things that they enjoy or upset them. It mainly aims at knowing the meaning that own words and behavior have for people" (Emerson, 1983).

Norman and Yvona (apud Chelcea, 2007: 72) define qualitative research as a process of concentration of several methods, involving an interpretive and naturalistic approach of the subject studied.

Petru Iluţ (1997) believes that there are three main meanings in which qualitative analysis is used in research:

1) as multi-, inter- or trans-paradigmatic;

2) as major paradigm that includes some particular paradigms, but not the positivist;

3) as methodological concrete strategy (methods and practices of empirical research) and of completion and presentation of results, which can have an aparadigmatic character.

Petru Iluţ (1997) considers qualitative research an independent domain of investigation. It transcends disciplines, thematic areas and topics. A complex and interconnected family of terms, concepts and assumptions surround the term of "qualitative research". These include the traditions associated with post-positivism, poststructuralism and many qualitative research perspectives or methods connected to cultural and interpretive studies.

The experiment in social sciences

In the domain of social and health sciences, there is an increased interest of some branches to assess whether some programs, services, treatments improve the quality of life of individuals. Precisely for this reason, knowledge of welfare perceived by service users is relevant not only to the concept of quality of life (Verdugo, Sabeh apud Verdugo et al., 2005), but also from the perspective of assessing the effects, quality and importance of intervention (Drummond apud Verdugo et al., 2005).

1. Clinical trial

A special research mainly used in medical sciences to determine the effects of introducing a random variable is the experiment. The experiment is a form of structured observation conducted within an artificial laboratory (Chelcea, 2001). The experiment may have particular value in the (quantitative) test of causal hypotheses (Chelcea, 2001). Experimental psychology as a branch of science seeks the validation of a hypothesis through controllable varying of a single variable while maintaining all others constant. In what follows we will refer to random clinical trial as a form of social experiment.

The process of designing a randomized trial can be conceptualized as answering five questions (Green, 2002: 5-7):

WHAT? Conducting a randomized trial implies that we are comparing two or more intervention groups with regard to outcome. The first question is what is being compared with what? The structure of an experiment can encompass a variety of different situations, including the following possible types of comparisons:

- a new experimental intervention versus nothing (no intervention);

- a new experimental intervention versus placebo;
- an intervention versus another;
- an intervention versus the same intervention plus something else (Vlasă, 2011).

WHICH? What makes a randomized trial ethical is the presence of uncertainty, that we do not know which, if any, of two (or more) alternatives is more effective. The randomized trial provides an unbiased assessment of the consequences of proceeding down one path compared with another (Vlasă, 2011).

WHY? The objectives of an experiment need to be defined clearly. Also, it is important that the trial has an appropriate method to measure results. If an objective definition of success can be agreed upon in the design stage, such a variable can be a very practical outcome measure for the trial (Vlasă, 2011).

WHO? It is essential to define eligibility for the experiment. The ability to recruit larger numbers may actually enhance statistical power while providing greater generalizability.

HOW MANY? An essential part of any trial design is to determine the sample size and trial duration. The number of participants must be adequate in order to ensure a particular intervention effect. Increasing the sample size increases the precision of the estimate of intervention effect (Vlasă, 2011).

Experimental research seeks to obtain repeatable results to certify the applicability of the results in any real situation corresponding, at least partially, to the experimental situation. In practice, most often, a control group and an experimental group is established to the same requirements; they are considered homogeneous and relatively symmetrical. To the experimental group an independent variable is applied, through whose measuring conclusions can be drawn regarding the proposed hypotheses.

In clinical research, the experiment can measure the effects of the introduction of a new treatment, a new therapeutic protocol. In experimental psychology reactions of subjects are experimentally tested, thus hypotheses about behavioral specificity can be verified. In social work, the effectiveness of an intervention approach can be verified through experimental method compared to previous others. The social experiment involves a series of ethical boundaries. Regarding experimental practice, a series of ethical codes are formulated and must be rigorously followed (Astarastoae, Loue, Ioan, 2009).

The Nuremberg Code stipulates:

- the mandatory character of voluntary consent of participants;
- the benefic character of results for society and impossibility to achieve results by other means;
- founding the study on previous results obtained outside of experiments on human subjects that would presume anticipation of results of the present experiment;
- unnecessary physical or mental injury must be avoided;
- waiving conducting any experiment where there are indications that damage of subjects is significant;
- experiments should be conducted by persons with appropriate scientific qualifications;
- subjects must be able to withdraw from the research at any time even if it would affect the proper functioning of the research and its results;
- the researcher must be ready to interrupt or terminate the experiment if he considers that further development will affect participants.

The ethical principles of researches on human subjects, namely: respect for the person, the principle of benefit and of justice (Astarastoae, Loue, Ioan, 2009) are applicable to any kind of research, including social.

Experimental research is considered from this point of view by some researchers (Miftode, 2003b; Chelcea, 2001) as having the most serious ethical implications. Therefore, in the experiment on large populations where it is impossible to obtain the informed consent is usually replaced by participatory research and participant observer method by which the observer is directly involved in the community studied, which is supposed to affect it the least. Another experimental method is the so-called *ex post facto experiment*, which is the analysis of an event that already happened as if it had the character of an experiment, identifying random variables.

Action research as discursive practice

Traditional action research[4] was methodological defined by the founder of social and organizational psychology and group dynamics, Kurt Lewin. His theories are based on the concept of force field analysis which constitutes a constructive framework of identifying the factors and forces that influence a social situation (Lewin, 1946). The term "action research" was introduced by Kurt Lewin in the study of *Action Research and Minority Problems* (1946: 34-36). Action research is described as a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action. The method uses a spiral of steps, each consisting of a circuit as a planning, action,

identification of social facts and results of action type (1946: 34-36). The fundamental characteristic of action research is *collaborative research practice and use of collaborative methods*, a practice community being established in order to transform methodologies of problem-solving at the level of that community. Action Research is an interactive survey that puts into action simultaneously the problem solving process with the collaborative analysis of data research in order to understand the functioning and implementation of changes within the organization (Reason, Bradbury, 2006). From the semiotico-hermeneutics perspective, we notice that we are actually dealing with discursive practice models, the research having specific qualitative nature involving a semiotic and phenomenological pronounced side compared to traditional sociological research whose quantitative side of analysis of statistical variations was predominant. In action research we rather deal with symbolic analysis practices that apply to the particular socio-cultural situations, probably unrepeatable.

A taxonomy of action research with reference to studies aimed at multicultural communities is proposed by researchers Cassell, Buehring, Symon şi Johnson (2006):

- *Action research as a social experiment:* the one used originally by Kurt Lewin, based on an objectivist epistemology within methodological monism, and starting from a realistic ontological assumption: social reality is real, and can be studied objectively; the results can be obtained by applying the correct methodology, accurately describing social reality (Cassell et all, 2006: 790).

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[4] Another version of this chapter was published in the volume *Dimensiuni etice ale comunicării în postmodernitate/ Ethical dimensions of communication in postmodernity*, Lumen Publishing House, 2009.

- *Inductive action research:* is also of positivist orientation, following the inductive access of researchers to the cultural context in its natural state. The inductive action research model is based on a hermeneutic epistemology and on a semiotics of social fact, favoring comprehensive methods (based on understanding), within the development of qualitative methods in the form of "Grounded Theory" that guides further intervention (Cassell et all, 2006: 792). Grounded Theory is considered a privileged manner of qualitative investigation of the social, that involves construction of categories and research hypotheses through a process of interpreting the data collected, rather than using social research to validate theoretical hypotheses proposed a priori by the researcher and subject to validation (O'Connor, Netting, Thomas, 2008: 28-45). Simona Branc stated in this regard that Grounded Theory involves systematically generating concepts and theories based on the data collected, being an "inductive method which is based on general observations", followed by the analysis of primary data to form conceptual categories (Branc, 2008: 83). Stefan Cojocaru points out the advantages of using qualitative research, and particularly Grounded Theory, in program evaluation given the avoidance of contamination of results with predefined views of the researcher (2007: 211-224). In this sense, qualitative research has the advantage of obtaining interpretations from the opinions expressed by those interviewed and not from own presuppositions. An interesting example is presented by Daniela Cojocaru (2011), which examines the social construction of

childhood and parenting in constructionist perspective using epistemic constraints of Grounded Theory.

- *Participatory action research:* is based on two different assumptions, first according to which the investigated community members participate actively throughout the research from design phase of the research to the diagnosis and the adoption of action strategies, the researcher's role being that of facilitator (O'Connor , Netting, Thomas, 2008). A second approach addresses the entire community, analyzing the “need for change” occurred in the community in its own terms. The research is based on interviews and focus groups with the purpose to generate further strategic planning, and to give feedback to community members on transformation of problems they face in an organizational agenda.
- *Intervention - Participatory Research:* aims at participation of individuals of the community in political processes such as democracy. The model is based on critical theory on processes of democratization of social practices. Habermas brings into attention of epistemologists the change of sensory-perceptual experiences under the influence of cultural experience, thus justifying criticism of positivist epistemologies (O'Connor, Netting, Thomas, 2008).
- *Deconstructive action research:* characterized by the assumption that language, with reference to any kind of meta-narration, can not reproduce reality. Linguistic turn suggests (hyper) reality as consisting of a series of social constructors. We can build as many realities as many ways to describe them we can represent (O'Connor, Netting, Thomas, 2008). *Deconstructive action*

research has postmodernism as constitutive paradigm. Another version of deconstructive action research is, in O'Connor's vision, constructionism promoted by Gergen. It brings into question the annihilation of meanings through “democratic agreement” on the interpretation of discourse (O'Connor, Netting, Thomas, 2008). Constructionism is, in our view, in agreement with O'Connor, a constituent of postmodern and deconstructive discourse, but can be considered as a starting point of transmodern effort of rethinking integrative reality through affirmative action. In this respect, within the affirmative paradigm, based on constructionism, “appreciative inquiry” has developed. This aims at notification and enhancement of the positive, and the construction of social from the elements of inherent positivity in any community.

Literature defines the following major types of action research:

- *Science Action* aims to study the atitude design of people in need. Argyris believes that human actions are planned to achieve the desired consequences, and they are governed by a number of environmental variables (Argyris, Putnam, Smith, 1985).
- *Cooperative Inquiry* starts from the premise that all active participants in action research are actually fully involved in this research as co-researchers (Heron, 1996: 56).
- *Participatory Action Research* involves all relevant parties in the common examination of current actions- seen as problematic- in order to change or improve them. The method is based on a collective critical reflection on the historical, political, cultural, and economical context where action occurs (Wadsworth, 1998).

- *Development-Action Survey* is based on self-transformation of the organization's actions in a more active and sustainable way.

Triangulation and validity issues in qualitative research

Simona Branc (2008) considers triangulation as a technique frequently used in qualitative data validation. Alina Hurubean (2007) states that: "the social sciences specialists plead for compliance, during scientific investigations, with the principle of triangulation (triangulation strategy) which assumes that social-human reality is very dynamic and complex, thus it requires combining multiple theoretical, methodological perspectives, and consulting multiple sources of data in order to obtain a more complete (richer) and valid image of the studied reality" (Hurubean, 2007: 17). In literature it speaks of four types of triangulation: of data, of researcher, theoretical and methodological. Data (sources) triangulation involves collecting data from multiple sources (individuals, groups, social contexts). For example, research on adolescent school dropout phenomenon can be studied in schools from rural or urban environment, public schools versus private schools. Researcher triangulation refers to a situation where more researchers will participate in research or the investigation conducted by a researcher will be resumed by another researcher (for verification/ validation of results) (Caras, 2011).

In general, followers of triangulation method define *its double utility* in social sciences:

- as cumulative validation process (through convergence of data);

- as a process of "composing" a more complete image of reality (through complementarity of data) (Kelle, 2001: 8; Cojocaru D., 2011).

Although in methodological literature there is a very broad consensus on the issue of utility of triangulation, *methodological triangulation* (also known as multi-methodical approach) has been the subject of criticism about "imprudent" formulas of triangulation in the same study, based on contradictory, ontological and epistemological premises, included in the theoretical framework of the research. Despite the controversy still alive in this debate, "dialogue of paradigms", recognizing that all methods are interactive, hybrid, emerging productions, has been imposed increasingly more with the idea of pragmatic bricolage and multiple interpretative practices (Denzin, 2010: 423; Cojocaru D., 2011). An alternative metaphor of the triangle, proposed in qualitative research to illustrate the richness and complexity of qualitative creation, as well as the complex bricolage process, is that of the multifaceted crystal (Richardson, 2003).

"I propose as the central image for validity in postmodern texts, not the triangle, a rigid, fixed, *two-dimensional object. Rather, the central image is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance in an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionality and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change,* decay, but are not *amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect and refract externalities,* creating *different colors, patterns and shapes. What we see depends on the angle from which we look. Not triangulation,* but *crystallization. In hybrid postmodern texts we went from flat geometry to light theory,* where *light can be both particle and wave. Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of* validity *(*we feel *that there is no single truth,* we see *how texts validate themselves by*