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The Interview as a Research Technique in Social Work – Methodological and Practical Challenges

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Abstract: *Meeting face-to-face with the beneficiaries of social work services and having a discussion with them, in order to diagnose the beneficiary's problem and identify the context of the case-by-case intervention, is the basic form of performing a social worker's activity. That is precisely why, although the interview, as a research technique, is a method specific to sociological research, this technique has been taken up on a large scale in social work, not only for case intervention, but also as a research method. In general, the beneficiaries of assistential services, who are most often the subjects of scientific research in this field, are vulnerable people, so the interview poses two main challenges as a research technique. The first is organizing the framework in which the interview is carried out and the manner of conducting it by the researcher, in order to create the psychological context that favors the interviewee's communication with the researcher. The second is the way data is analyzed after collection, in order to minimize the influence of subjective interpretations on the part of the researcher. The purpose of this article is to analyze the way methodological errors can be avoided, in order to achieve a research that draws scientific conclusions with a high degree of validity and credibility.*

Keywords: *research methodology, research in social work, interview method, qualitative research.*

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Introduction

The interview is the technique that, in social work, helps developing intervention programs, because the face-to-face discussion with the beneficiary provides the social worker with multiple nuances regarding the situation of the interviewee, as well as complex explanations regarding their opinions, actions and attitudes. In traditional methodology (Miftode, 2011), the interview was classified as a secondary research method, because it does not reveal facts of reality, but opinions and attitudes. In the last twenty years, however, the optics have changed significantly, especially after methods such as appreciative interviewing (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), narrative sociology (Irvine et al., 2019) and Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) have began to be used on a large scale.

It is now accepted (Flick, 2017) that the interview can equally be a primary or secondary research technique, depending on the type of research conducted and the characteristics of the intervieweed subjects. Thus, if subjects are asked about their own experiences, their past actions, and the contexts in which they actually acted, correlated with the motivations that led them to act in the chosen manner, the interview can be an effective fact-gathering method, not only of opinions and attitudes towards a certain issue. The condition is that research participants are asked about events they participated in and not only about hypothetical situations or about rational or emotional considerations.

Therefore, there has been a change of perspective, from the approach that the researcher's questions are the ones that matter and help to probe the social phenomenon (Hofisi et al., 2014), to the angle that the issues raised by the interviewees and the questions that them, in turn, address to the researcher, are equally important to reveal the characteristics of the social phenomenon (Monday, 2020). They are meaningful, in that the interviewees can express reservations, fears, aspects that they want to clarify before issuing opinions, making decisions or that are vital for their decision to act in a certain way or another. From the standpoint that the interview is led by the researcher, optics therefore evolved to the point of view that the interview can be a collaborative tool for gathering data (Henriksen et al., 2022), as it entails an exchange that occurs between the researcher and the research participants.

In order for this exchange to occur and be effective, the setting where the discussion takes place and the way the researcher poses the problem, to induce the right state of mind to the subject, so that the interviewee shows the necessary openness to provide information, are two

aspects that can transform an interview into one that can provide extremely valuable information, or can force the subject to detach from the topic of the discussion and provide only irelevant information. This is the biggest challenge the researcher faces in the data collection stage. The second problem may arise at the time of data processing and interpretation. The discursive axes of the research participants are organized by the researcher, in order to determine the features of a certain social phenomenon, and the segmentation of the research material collected from the interviewees into discursive axes that could be extrapolated to the rest of society can be influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher much more than in quantitative research. This is one of the main criticisms brought (Hofisi et al., 2014) to the interview research method, namely the fact that the researcher interprets the discourses of research participants according to their own vision, which may be different from another researcher's interpretation of the same speeches. Even if the differences are not fundamental, the nuances can be so important, if inconsistencies occur, that the final conclusions may be significantly different, which raises the question of the credibility of these qualitative studies. For this reason, the methodological literature (Alshenqeeti, 2014) insists on conducting interviews in teams of researchers, and the results of the interviews be interpreted by using the method called "triangulation of researchers" (Jentoft & Olsen, 2019), which assumes that three researchers, independently, establish their own discursive categories, according to each one's vision, and then, if differences arise, these discursive categories will be negotiated between the respective researchers until a common interpretation is reached.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the credibility issues that can be raised by a research carried out by the interview method. Our objective is to identify the optimal methods of planning, but also of carrying out the meeting with the interviewees, in order to induce a state of openness and collaboration between them and the researcher. To achieve this objective, we started from a series of questions: a) how should the surroundings for the meeting between the interviewee and the researcher be organized, so as to contribute to an atmosphere of communication between the two? b) what are the communication requirements that must be respected by the researcher, to ensure that the information received is correct, complete and sufficiently detailed?

The stages of designing an interview

In order to answer the questions mentioned above, it is necessary to initially clarify which stages must be completed when carrying out a research

using the interview method. **Choosing the research topic** is the first step, because the topic must be suitable for a research interview. Generally, if the objective is only to confirm certain features of a social phenomenon or to uncover a causality process based on the law of large numbers (Neha, 2021), it is recommended to carry out a quantitative research, possibly through a questionnaire survey, and not a qualitative one, such as the one carried out through the interview. Research interviews are recommended (Hazreena, 2022) to be done when the researcher wants to probe the dimensions of a social phenomenon in detail, to focus on nuances, on the psycho-social stimuli behind the choices of individuals or their opinions, as well as for exploratory research, when there is not enough data about a certain social phenomenon and it is desired to establish a starting point to formulate some hypotheses that would be verified through other research methods.

Since the interview is ideal for detecting the particular notes and subtle connotations of some social attitudes and practices, the **establishment of the research universe**, as a stage in the methodological design of the research, is done differently, as compared to quantitative research. In general, the research universe will consist of those people who are directly involved in the studied social phenomenon (Buriro et al., 2017). Among these people, in the next stage, that of **sampling**, it is recommended (Romero et al., 2019) to choose those people who would have the potential to provide the most detailed information, therefore, research participants will be chosen because they are representative par excellence for the studied social group. Unlike quantitative research, in which case the number of research participants is usually very large, in order to ensure the statistical relevance of the study, and the sample is established at the beginning of the research, in interview research it is recommended (Romero et al., 2019) that the sampling be done not according to a predetermined number of participants, but according to their characteristics, correlated with speeches obtained from previous interviews. In other words, as many interviews will be conducted as necessary, until no new discursive axes emerge from the newly conducted interviews, and the discursive axes already discovered in the previous interviews will be repeated enough times to indicate that they represent common features of the studied phenomenon for a large number of subjects. As an exception, in the case of extensive interviews (a topic that will be detailed later in this article), which are carried out on a large sample, a representative sample can be established from the beginning of the study.

The drafting of the interview guide, i.e. the research instrument containing the questions based on which the interview will be carried out, is different, depending on the research purpose (social representations,

opinions or social practices) (Miftode, 2011), the research objectives and the research questions. Thus, in qualitative research aimed at scrutinizing *social representations*, questions will be drafted regarding the subjects' way of thinking on certain aspects that are of interest for the research (this type of research is suitable for topics in the field of ethics, social values, etc.) . In research aimed at investigating *opinions*, the questions will focus on the points of view of the interviewees regarding certain social practices, the optimization of certain reactions in particular contexts, the appropriateness of certain social policies, etc. This type of research is recommended (Miftode, 2011) in order to verify adherence or, on the contrary, social distance to certain behavioral, social or contextual templates offered by the researcher to the interviewees. Research on *social practices* is ideal for exploratory research on innovative social practices, on minority groups that seek social validation or acceptance by the majority group (Huidu, 2021). In research of this type, the interview can be invaluable in the primary identification of the characteristics of a social phenomenon, the motivations that make individuals act in a certain way, and to obtain the first pieces of information that may lead to a causal explanation of those characteristics or motivations. If the interviews are carried out with people who are telling their own experiences, the interview can provide data about social facts, that is, information from the protagonists of the social phenomenon. Thus, interview research becomies a primary research method.

The type of interview guide that is used is also important, because it must be correlated with the type of research one wants to develop. For exploratory research, the *unstructured or non-directive interview guide* is usually used, which is composed of open-ended questions, of course, but which, for the researcher actually interviewing the subject, has only a guiding role, because, depending on the answers received, the researcher can supplement the interview guide with a multitude of additional questions, to probe deeper into the phenomenon (Fritz & Vandermause, 2018). When research is about opinions or social representations, *semi-structured or semi-directive interview guides* are usually used, which also use open-ended questions, but these are centered on broad themes or thematic axes, which are oriented towards the research topic and guide the discourse of the research participants so as not to allow them to stray too far from the purpose or central axis of the research (Polkinghorne, 2005). A final category of interview is the *structured or directive interview*, which is composed of closed-ended questions and which, from this point of view, is quite similar to a questionnaire.

Nothing prevents the researcher from combining these types of questions in order to achieve an integrated research. Thus, if before moving

on to the opinion questions, the researcher wants to find out if the interviewee is more or less knowledgeable about the research topic, they can use closed-ended questions to determine the subject's degree of knowledge about the topic, thus establish the limits of the subject to participate in the research. Later during the interview, at the stage regarding the interviewee's opinions, semi-open-ended questions can be used to help the subject make a choice, that they are later asked to justify. However, when the subject is expected to narrate personal experiences relevant to the research, it is recommended (Khan & MacEachen, 2022) to use open-ended questions.

Another issue debated in the methodological literature (Jin et al., 2019) is whether or not interview research is susceptible to **formulating hypotheses** or, due to the specificity of this qualitative research method, only research questions can be formulated, because the method is not suitable for confirmatory analyses, a type of research imposed when hypotheses are being formulated. On the one hand, it is considered (Sandu, 2012) that qualitative research excludes the formulation of hypotheses, and particularly in the case of an exploratory research, this is impossible to do. In the case of an exploratory research, even interviews should be done in two stages. A first stage is that of the non-directive interviews, aimed at revealing the experience of the interviewees as part of an in depth analysys, so that the researcher, with the help of their answers, may identify the important characteristics of a social phenomenon, which are to be considered for further analysis during the same research. At the debute of this stage, only a series of research questions can be formulated, and the development of research hypotheses is not even desirable, because the researched phenomenon is still unknown or insufficiently known. The second stage is marked by a second set of semi-directive interviews, starting from the discoursive categories discovered in the answers provided by the first goup of interviewees. The purpose of the second interview being to foreshadow the research hypotheses. The hypotheses will be formulated only after the analysis of the data obtained from the second set of interviews, through a confirmatory quantitative research, possibly carried out by means of a questionnaire survey.

In another opinion (Sandu, 2012), the formulation of research hypotheses is not excluded in the case of interview research. If the purpose is to analyze a relatively well-known phenomenon, but with respect to a population group that has not been investigated or insufficiently investigated up to that point, then the researcher can formulate research hypotheses. Hypotheses can be verified especially in the case of extensive interviews, because they are carried out on large representative samples, that exclude

participants who are part of minority groups or who have specific, atypical characteristics (Flick, 2017). So, a qualitative research can be analyzed statistically (by quantitative methods) (Jin et al., 2019), if it is an extensive interview, with closed-ended or semi-open-ended questions (the latter offering a series of predetermined answers, which are pre-coded, but also the possibility for the subject to augment their answer with other variants, which are not provided within the interview guide). However, the formulation of hypotheses is excluded in the case of intensive interviews, which are carried out on restricted samples, are very similar to the case studies and include, among the sample, people with special, particular features, who have features that are different from the majority of population. As Maurice Duverger (1961) pointed out, extensive interviews are usually documentary or opinion interviews, and the intervieewes are asked what they know or what they think, while intensive interviews are personality interviews, or those that scrutinize social practices, and participants are asked what they did and why they did certain things.

The formulation of hypotheses is not excluded in the case of repeated interviews (also called panel interviews). In this case, the same research participants are subjected to repeated interviews, at different time intervals, but the questions are not being modified or substantially modified (Buriro et al., 2017) (the researcher can ask additional questions, if it is observed that during the previous successive interviews, the subjects changed their initial opinion, in order to find out the reasons for that change, or a focus group can be held later for this very purpose, as an additional research method, if the researcher doesn't want to modify the interview guide). Panel interviews aim to monitor the same sample over a longer period of time, to see if there are changes in perception, opinion, positioning towards the same social phenomenon, as well as the causes of these changes. In such research, hypotheses about the factors that influence change in opinions and attitudes can be formulated and tested, as long as the questions are directed to this end. The most common methodological problem in this type of interview is the homogeneity of the sample, which must be maintained throughout the duration of the research. However, many times the researcher is faced with the withdrawal of some of the subjects from the research, so to combat this risk, it is recommended (Hazreena, 2022) to use a control sample. This sample consists of people other than those in the main study group and who, moreover, are different at each stage of the interview, and the role of the control sample is to serve as an element of comparison with the research group itself. Any differences between the two groups will have to be carefully analyzed, to determine if

these differences are generated by the change in the identity of the subjects that make up the actual sample or by actual change in society, due to certain causes.

Researcher-interviewee communication and its challenges

Organizing and conducting the meeting with the interviewee requires both methodological and psychological preparation. Beyond good documentation on the topic and creating an interview guide that allows the discussion to evolve towards all the aspects which are relevant to the research, it is necessary for the researcher to carefully plan the setting of the meeting. From this point of view, three aspects are of interest: the preparation of the place where the meeting is to take place, choosing the person who will conduct the interview and avoiding the errors that are frequently made during an interview.

The place and time of the meeting must be convenient for the research participant. Especially the place where the discussion takes place must not intimidate them, or not require additional psychological adaptation to the environment, because this will distract their attention from the topic of discussion, which will be directed to attempts at harmonizing their frame of mind with the environment. Depending on the characteristics of the research participant, it is sometimes recommended (Alshenqeeti, 2014) that the interview take place at their home or in a neutral space, that is familiar to the subject and where they feel good. For other subjects, it is possible that a formal, professional setting will be more suitable and draw their attention to the importance of the research, and this will help them focus and cooperate with the researcher.

Regarding the researcher most suitable to do the interview, it is considered (Hofisi et al., 2014) that they must be experienced, because conducting an interview is, at the same time, a problem of socialization and one of connecting at a psychological level with the interviewee. For this reason, many times, in qualitative research that involves direct contact with subjects, researchers work in teams, and the interviews are carried out by one or another of these researchers, depending on their skills and specialization, but also by taking into consideration a previous evaluation of the subject's personality traits, choosing that researcher who is part of the research team and could best connect with the subject. However, the researcher's experience is not a single and infallible criterion by which to judge the researcher's ability to successfully conduct an interview.

Another problem that can arise during an interview, even for experienced researchers, is how they are perceived by the interviewee. To

avoid the risk of a circumstantial discussion and to encourage the subjects to be opened to discussions, comments and express their thoughts honestly, the researcher must assess the level of social distance between them and the interviewee, and try to diminish the asperities given by possible social differences (Monday, 2020). Social proximity is desirable, because it naturally and effortlessly creates bridges of communication, but most of the time the subjects participating in social work research are from disadvantaged social classes or backgrounds, which implies quite visible social differences between them and the researcher. The social superiority of the researcher can cause inhibitions on the part of the interviewee or the feeling that they are not understood or accepted, so it will generate either a simulated behavior or a communicative distance. As a consequence, the interview will remain a sterile approach, which will reveal only little useful information or superficial information. On the other hand, if the subjects participating in the research are part of favored social environments (such as, for example, professionals in a certain field), the social inferiority of the researcher can generate a reaction of lack of confidence towards the research in general, or the researcher's competence to conduct the research, and the research questions could be perceived as an intrusion into aspects that the researcher does not understand or should not be allowed access to (Romero et al., 2019).

Choosing the right member of the research team who will conduct the interview thus appears to be extremely important, but even in the absence of the "ideal researcher for the ideal interviewee", the researcher can overcome the asperities of social distance by patience, intuition and imagination, if they show adaptability, avoid value judgments or adversarial discussions, advice or criticism (Flick, 2017). The aim is to encourage the subjects to express themselves, to identify and relieve them of their anxieties, given by potential negative consequences of participating in the research, or by the interference of the questions in their private life. An important ability of the researcher is to direct the discussion towards the research topic, without allowing digressions that dilute the conversation, in order to bring to light the latent discursive axes, that may not appear in the discourse of the interviewees based on their own initiative.

It is recommended (Buriro et al., 2017) that the start of the interview be done in a way that helps the interviewee adjust to the setting and to the topic of discussion. This presupposes that, before starting the actual interview, the research topic and its objective should be communicated to the interviewee, and then the type of collaboration that the researcher is proposing should be explained, highlighting the importance of that person's participation for the overall research. It is psychologically important for

participants in scientific research to know, understand and feel that their contribution has a purpose higher than their own experience and that by participating in research they will help the larger social group, to which the research is dedicated. These aspects can help build communication bridges between the interviewee and the researcher. The researcher's intention, if it exists, to record the conversation by audio or audio-video means must be expressly communicated, and the interview should start only after the subject has expressly agreed to these terms. Also, the subject must be informed who will have access to those recordings and the conditions under which this access will be allowed to third parties, as well as how long the recordings will be kept until they are destroyed, in order to respect the protection of personal data (Simionovici et al., 2019).

Naturally, the researcher will be able to use formulas or methods to direct the conversation to the topics relevant to the research, but it is necessary that these methods be used carefully, in order not to influence the direction of the interviewee's speech and not to suggest ideas. Conducting the conversation must be done in a way that ensures full freedom of expression of the research participant's own ideas. For this reason, if the dynamics of the discussion require it, the researcher must be very careful if they share their own experiences with the subject. Researchers are generally in a position of social moral authority (Hazreena, 2022), so the risk is that sharing common experiences will alter the way the subjects themselves formulate their own thoughts.

Manifesting empathy with the interviewee is recommended for functional communication, as long as it does not lead to emotional contamination (Alshenqeeti, 2014), through excessive commenting on the answers, which can have the negative effect of suggesting future answers. Moreover, one should avoid disclosing the opinions of other research participants, as an example, to the interviewee. When the subject requests additional explanations for certain concepts, situations, conjunctures, they must be explained carefully, to provide only unbiased information and not the researcher's own opinions (Hofisi et al., 2014). Moreover, the researcher must refrain from making any type of promise to the subject that they cannot fulfill, it is not allowed to offer material aid or other forms of patrimonial compensation for participating in the research (as a rule, although there are cases when participation can be rewarded, but such research process must be declared from the early stages of the research design and closely supervised by the research ethics committee) (Monday, 2020). If the subjects wish to withdraw from the research, by refusing to further participate in the interview or if by choosing not to answer some questions, the researcher can encourage

them to change their mind, politely and respectfully, after carefull consideration of the reasons given by the subjects, but the interviewer is not allowed to insist beyond the point that participating in the interview would cause the subjects psychological discomfort (Polkinghorne, 2005). If any such discomfort is foreseeable due to the sensitive topic of the research, the interviewee must be informed from the beginning and must be clearly told that they have not only the right to refuse participation in the research, but also the right to withdraw anytime. Naturally, at the end of the interview, the subject will be thanked for participating.

Conclusions

There are no pre-defined ideal ways of conducting an interview and the researcher will have to adapt to the context and the interviewee. It could be argued that conducting a successful interview requires a communicative action (Habermas, 1985), during which the researcher and the interviewee exchange information, but rational communication must be doubled by emotional empathy and functional non-verbal communication. From a constructionist perspective (Sandu, 2016), attention is drawn to the fact that what the interviewee says, does not always refer to something that exists or has existed, but to something that is constructed by speaking and, even when recounting past events, the discourse can be augmented according to the perceptions and feed-back the subject receives during the interview from the researcher. In constructivism (Hutchison, 2006), it is believed that during the interview, the researcher and the research participant reach a form of confluence, which involves an interrelation between the reality of each of them towards a common, mutually comprehensible reality.

In narrative sociology (Irvine et al., 2019), the events narrated by the subject, as a result of the discussion with the researcher, end up being abstracted, classified, characterized and transformed into meaningful patterns for society as a whole, not only for the subject who recounted individual experiences. In appreciative interviewing techniques (Cojocaru, 2005), the emphasis is placed on the advantages that the subject's participation has for the research as a whole and also on the advantages for the interviewees themselves, as they are encouraged to emphasize those topics of discussion that help explain some less known or accessible trends of the social phenomenon. In interviews based on neuro-linguistic programming techniques (O'Connor & Seymour, 2011), it is insisted that good communication between the researcher and the research participant is achieved only if the latter feels accepted by the researcher, which favors an attitude of openness and sharing of own experiences.

Whichever of these techniques is used, independently or in correlation with the others, the interview research has its explanatory limits of a social phenomenon, but it presents the major advantage that, through the interview, complementary data can be collected about the topic under study, which would otherwise remain inaccessible to the researcher and the research would be widowed by the nuances that the studied phenomenon presents socially.

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