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Autobiographies or Portraits? Methodological Differences in Qualitative Social Research

Abstract

The author considers methodological differences in the use of autobiographies. However, while doing so, he does not focus on technical differences in the application of the method but asks about cognitive possibilities that come (or not) with certain methodological tools. It is through this perspective (epistemological capacity of theory and empirical knowledge) that the author discusses the difference between two very close and yet so separate methods of research: sociological autobiography and anthropological portrait. He refers to Florian Znaniecki's methodological guidelines and juxtaposes them with other important sociological works. Analysing Znaniecki's method, he finds elements that make it seem closer to anthropological portrait. This approach is to encourage the readers to look at the method in a different way – as something secondary to the accurate definition of the socio-cultural context for the studied phenomena.

Keywords: sociological autobiography, anthropological portrait, epistemology, Florian Znaniecki

Sociology and anthropology: two distinct epistemological horizons?

A discussion about methods of empirical social research cannot be limited to technical issues, i.e. whether one method is better than another. The point should not be whether one empirical research technique is indeed

more efficient than another since this would sidestep the epistemological question giving rise to the field study.

There are, in fact, patent differences between sociology and anthropology in connection to variations between disparate, if not diverging, and yet contiguous epistemological horizons for all the social sciences.

The urban-industrial horizon of sociology

From the start – that is, from the days of this discipline's founding fathers such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel – the specific sociological horizon has been urban-industrial. The implication here is that sociology has chiefly focused on urban studies and specifically on cities where modernity developed – in particular, on the industrial sector. In this context, Durkheim's renowned dichotomy between *mechanical solidarity* and *organic solidarity* is worth mentioning.

Emile Durkheim points up that mechanical solidarity emerges and develops in situations of proximity where the various actors maintain strongly personalised relationships and live in relatively small communities. This form of solidarity is founded on an affinity of roles and behaviours; thus, division of labour is scarcely developed (Durkheim, 1893). Accordingly, mechanical solidarity is based on similarity and is generally prevalent in small groups such as family, kin, village, tribe etc.

These small collectivities, where highly personalised relationships are prevalent, are far more important than the single individual. Ultimately, according to Durkheim, mechanical solidarity is a social characteristic of archaic, primitive, backward and traditional societies as well as tribal, pastoral or rural ones. One cannot fail to notice that Durkheim's representation of mechanical solidarity mirrors that of societies under colonial regimes, or possibly of the *France profonde* peasant communities of his times.

Instead, organic solidarity emerges in societies characterised by a marked social differentiation and thus with a highly differentiated system of social division of labour, which generates a considerable complexity of social roles and positions. Accordingly, societies based on organic solidarity have a high degree of specialisation, which may be regarded as the true guarantee of social cohesion since everyone is dependent on everyone else's labour. Organic solidarity is therefore rooted in the certainty of reciprocal dependence between individuals who have a specific function or exercise an

activity within society. Consequently, unlike mechanical solidarity societies, organic solidarity societies do not have a strong collective conscience but rather an individual awareness that the division of labour safeguards their members' existence. This promotes an allegiance not so much to persons as to public institutions and to the laws, norms, rules and customs of the collectivity. Based on the law of restitution and contractual practices, the formal legal system thus finds its legitimacy. Finally, given their specific social structure, these are modern societies with a great number of members and are characterised by a considerable social complexity.

In this dichotomous conception formulated by Emile Durkheim, an implicit value judgment, perhaps involuntary, spontaneous and possibly unconscious, comes to the fore. Essentially, societies based on organic solidarity are deemed more advanced and thus more modern, since even the subtitle of Durkheim's book in a so-to-speak spontaneous manner mentions the concept of *sociétés supérieures*. Undeniably, in Durkheim's book, societies are characterised by mechanical solidarity; in the words of Edward B. Tylor (Tylor 1871), they are survival, i.e. a residual category, or better yet, a relic of the past. Thus, mechanical solidarity is a phenomenon heading towards extinction, whereas organic solidarity, i.e. modernity, constitutes the present and above all represents the future. What is striking is that even an insightful observer, such as Durkheim, lapses into a number of clichés typical of a specific evolutionism of his times.

In the wake of Durkheim in particular, many representatives of the social sciences have developed similar, albeit not identical theoretic approaches, although not all of them have drawn direct inspiration from his work. We refer in the first place to the so-called theories of social change chiefly conceived as a unilinear modernisation process, although it is regarded as multilinear much more rarely.

These approaches theorise transition as a more or less requisite and above all advisable passage from the traditional stage to that of modernity, i.e. an urban-industrial reality where organic solidarity is prevalent. Moreover, the vast majority of modernisation theories are still very popular despite criticisms especially in discussions about social strategies and development policies. These theories ultimately regard these societies, rightly or not, as traditional or, due to specific sociocultural characteristics, as premodern. Accordingly, these societies are viewed as deficient sociocultural aggregations.

Therefore, mechanical solidarity societies are also defined as exotic, traditional if not indeed backward, are the negative reference of Western modern societies and are considered underdeveloped. According to these theories and discourses of social development policies, these socially and culturally lagging societies must be helped achieve modernisation by copying or at least drawing inspiration from the Western model. In essence, Western societies are indisputably the reference model to pursue.

Clearly, to a greater or lesser extent, all theories of development smack of ethnocentrism, which tends to belittle and at times even censure the social representations and practices of societies that are not founded on organic solidarity. Yet, a social organisation in line with the principles of organic solidarity implies living and acting in a society where both formal organisations and the consequent social practices should be, in theory, predominant, if not generalised so. In principle, informality is banned from the public sector, yet tolerated and regarded as normal in the strictly private sphere or, better yet, amongst people linked by intimate relationships; for example, family members or close friends entertaining strictly emotional relationships. Informality, particularly in the public sphere, is frowned upon as it is deemed dangerous because of the dysfunctionality it may trigger in the institutions. As these observations suggest, Durkheim's theoretical legacy may no longer be conspicuous, but it is still extant.

In this urban-industrial scenario, however, rural sociology remains a subordinate and marginal discipline as the international programmes of general sociology strongly suggest – possibly with the exception of Poland, as a society where the agricultural sector has always been crucial. In some cases, rural sociology can look to the urban-industrial horizon, thus becoming a minute sub-field recognised by general sociology. However, rural sociology remains a Cinderella theory compared to her much more popular sisters, such as urban or industrial sociology, or the sociology of modernity and of globalised economy.

The ethno-colonial horizon of anthropology

If sociology focuses mainly on studying one's own society, anthropology looks at a highly different research horizon. Unlike sociology, anthropology analyses societies that from a social, cultural, political and economic point of view are very different from those the researcher studies. It is no secret

that from the start anthropology turned its attention to societies defined as primitive, primary, archaic and backward, i.e. to societies that Emile Durkheim regarded as being characterised by mechanical solidarity.

We need only mention the earliest evolutionist anthropologists such as Edward B. Tylor, James G. Frazer and Lewis H. Morgan who, like any characteristic armchair scholar, did not carry out any fieldwork, but rather speculated about the characteristics and development of primeval societies. In line with the spirit of the time, these societies were considered not only primordial, but above all savage. In this sense, they were not only at a lower stage of civilisation in comparison with the civilised societies – namely, the Western ones studied by sociology – but also in comparison with the barbaric societies studied by premodern history, which were at an intermediate stage.

Later, both the British functionalism, represented in the first place by Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown and their followers Edward Evans-Pritchard, Edmund Leach and Max Gluckman, as well as the American culturalism dominated by the towering figure of Franz Boas together with a sizeable group of distinguished scholars such as Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Alfred Kroeber continued to study these societies. But even when using different theoretical approaches and specific techniques of empirical investigation directly in the field, their study led to the conclusion that were socially and culturally inferior as well as rapidly dying out.

This supposed social and cultural deficit reveals a colonial slant, a more or less covert leitmotif that, until recently, drove anthropologists to believe they were dealing with societies that were less socially structured and complex than their own, i.e. essentially based on kinship and ethnic structures. We need only mention the French structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss and of many of his scholars who are chiefly focused on the study of various kinship systems. This is precisely why anthropologists have often remarked on the essential socio-structural difference between simple societies – the ones they study and complex societies, i.e. the ones they belong to – which are a primary object of sociology's research.

At first, anthropology was, unlike sociology, definitely linked to actual hegemonic policies and its associated colonial interests. In fact, the greater part of the anthropologists mentioned above carried out their research in places under the dominion of their own colonial power and was thus complicit with it (Kuper 1993). This is also true of Malinowski who, though

an Austro-Hungarian subject and as such a prisoner of war of the British in Australia, was granted permission by British authorities to undertake fieldwork at the Trobriand Islands from which at the time it was nearly impossible to abscond.

Thanks precisely to this confinement, Malinowski was able to develop and apply his renowned fieldwork method; moreover, widely disputed nowadays. Furthermore, the remarks in the previous paragraph also apply to the first generation of American anthropologists who performed fieldwork in the more peripheral areas of the United States and thus in specific situations of domestic colonialism.

Following decolonisation, anthropology's guilty conscience began to surface especially in British and French anthropology and in Italian, Spanish, Dutch and Belgian colonial ethnology. After all, anthropology had also been rather aptly defined as colonialism's docile handmaid. Thus, new and more critical theoretical paradigms have emerged along with innovative fieldwork methods. Given this article's subject matter, I will take into consideration two of these, i.e. interpretive anthropology proposed by Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973; Geertz 1983) and the anthropology that developed in the context of postcolonial theory proposed by authors such as Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhaba and others (Ramone 2011).

Drawing on Max Weber and his *verstehende Soziologie*, Clifford Geertz criticises what Edmund Leach had already described as a *butterfly collection*, i.e. a purely descriptive collection and display of empirical data worthy of a cabinet of curiosities. This is why Geertz talks about a *thick description* – i.e. the interpretation of facts (Geertz 1973; Geertz 1983) – and not only of a mere quasi-photographic but the apparently objective representation of the reality observed by anthropologists.

Through his interpretive anthropology, in line with Max Weber, Geertz calls for anthropologists to highlight the meaning that the actors themselves give to their actions and social institutions. Anthropological research is not so much an ad libitum collection of facts as the reconstruction of a meaning that is often obscure, thus usually undetectable via sheer anthropological observation. The point, therefore, is to highlight the underlying rationale of specific behaviours within a given society by means of a social logic unknown to the researcher.

Ultimately, Geertz aims to reconstruct and above all understand the social coherence linked to specific institutionalised behaviours of the society

studied, while putting aside the relativising of one's viewpoint as a for-eigner from faraway social contexts. In essence, it is about uncovering the soundness of specific behaviour that, to an outsider, seem irrational and unjustifiable, if not indeed disgusting. Clearly, this method of analysing the social reality studied involves a quantum of relativism, lacking which anthropology would be going against itself.

Developed in cultural studies, postcolonial theory has also had a significant impact on anthropology's self-interrogatory debate over the past forty years. In fact, the theoretical framework of this approach is based on the dichotomy conceived by Antonio Gramsci between hegemonic and subaltern cultures (Gramsci 1948–1951) which, expressed in sociological terms, highlights the differences and tensions between core and peripheral societies (Wallerstein 1974). Accordingly, the colonial expansion of the core societies, chiefly European, into the world's peripheral regions is the paradigmatic example of a process that produces power relations between hegemonic and subaltern societies and heightens the asymmetry between *the West and the Rest*.

This dichotomy is clearly reductive since it is too radical, simplistic and fails to consider intermediate or alternative social realities, such as those of the emerging societies that are now able to counter and probably curb the overwhelming supremacy, economic and political especially, of Euro-American hegemonic societies. We need only mention large and small emerging societies, such as the so-called Asian Tigers, i.e. China, India and Indonesia on the one hand or Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia on the other.

Despite its theoretical shortcomings, the postcolonial theory undoubtedly prompted anthropologists to reflect on their discipline's empirical research practices and its analytical reach. Moreover, it spread unease among anthropologists since they could no longer view their discipline's founding fathers as unimpeachably high-minded. Due to these criticisms, anthropology has lost its original naiveté and had to reconsider its role, as well as its theoretical parameters, which led to a legitimate radical critique of the ethnocentrism inherent to authors who until recently had been regarded as demigods, i.e. classic authors on the subject.

This approach has given rise to an anthropology deemed progressive and increasingly centred on an identification with the subjects being studied; therefore, characterised by *empathy* for the culturally *different* or

socially *fragile* or discriminated against. As the capacity to place oneself in the position of another person belonging to a different society or culture and thus understanding the actions and perceptions of the other, empathy has been transformed into the action of identifying oneself with the other. Consequently, the anthropologist becomes a mouthpiece of the social actors being studied and no longer aims to analyse and reconstruct a social logic that is alien to him and thus undetectable at first sight; therefore, a reflection and subsequent interpretive analysis via anthropological concepts and categories is lacking.

Ultimately, this so-to-speak method based on empathy, understood as stepping into another person's shoes, stems from the anthropologist's guilty conscience and often goes hand in hand with seeking a possible atonement and breakaway from the past. Given also the psychological aspect of empathy, anthropological research becomes a form of mentalist research steeped in do-good misery-spotting. After all, the researcher's distance is viewed as a serious lack of sensibility towards others' diversity and instead of being a crucial quality, it is regarded as a form of collusion with hegemonic societies whereas the anthropologist should act as the mouthpiece, if not indeed the champion of subalterns. Accordingly, the anthropologist's new role is to become the representative of an applied science that aims to counter the overwhelming supremacy of the hegemonic societies by means of specific resistance strategies.

These marked forms of empathy have also spawned new forms of research strategies employed in what has become known as *applied anthropology*. Here, the anthropologist goes beyond being an observer to becoming a veritable activist as well.

Two disciplines: two different fields and empirical methodologies?

After this brief overview of sociology and anthropology's different research horizons, we ought to highlight that their specific theoretical viewpoints have a decisive influence on the choice of specific methods of research. The reason for this emphasis is that both disciplines have always shaped their specific identity by emphasising their empirical characteristics.

This section thus identifies and analyses the specific research techniques that sociology and anthropology have chosen to carry out their respective

empirical research. Such research has been conducted within view of the substantial difference between urban-industrial societies, defined as modern and ethno-colonial societies or, in rather obsolete and pejorative terms, traditional, exotic or underdeveloped societies.

Analysing all the techniques of empirical research connecting or separating sociology and anthropology would clearly be impossible, as well as misleading. This article will discuss the theoretical and empirical epistemological differences that characterise two rather close yet fundamentally distinct empirical methods: the sociological autobiography and the anthropological portrait. This choice was based on the fact that these two field research techniques have both differences and similarities.

The autobiography form is famously associated with research activity in the field of urban sociology carried out by the Chicago School and is linked to two of its distinguished representatives: William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. These two authors, and Znaniecki in particular, developed a qualitative sociology based on an idiographic epistemological approach that recalls the theoretical programme of the *verstehende Soziologie*. Admittedly, their book *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* first published in five volumes (Thomas, Znaniecki 1918–1920) constitutes a manifesto for this new type of sociology that shuns simplistic approaches of a positivist nature. It is thus basically behaviourist and quantitative as an approach that was then very popular in the United States, but is still important nowadays although not as prevalent as in the past.

In fact, this book has certainly influenced many American and European researchers over the years in urban sociology and more. We need only mention a recent classic, also closely related to anthropology – *Street Corner Society* by William Foote Whyte. Although not employing the autobiographical method put forth by the authors of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, Whyte clearly drew inspiration from the urban studies of the Chicago School, including the research of Thomas and Znaniecki.

Ultimately, we can state that

- the originators of *symbolic interactionism* that drew inspiration from George Herbert Mead, in particular Herbert Blumer and Howard Becker (Blumer 1968; Becker 1963),
- the originator of the *dramaturgical perspective*, Erving Goffman (Goffman 1959) and his reflections on the social role of *impression management*, and finally

- representatives of *ethnomethodology*, such as Harold Garfinkel and Aaron Cicourel (Garfinkel 1967; Cicourel 1974),

The above researchers have also been directly or indirectly influenced by the Chicago School and are thus part of the American hermeneutical and declaredly qualitative sociological research, thanks to their brilliant analyses based on empirical researches. Yet all three of the above-mentioned sociological currents also show traces of positivist behaviourism since this theoretical paradigm had a considerable influence on social sciences in the USA.

We need to point out, however, that the Chicago School's qualitative and idiographic sociology; in particular, that of Thomas and Znaniecki in their renowned book mentioned above, fell into decline especially after the 1930s. Thus, to this day, hermeneutical sociology is limited to highly specialised researches, especially (Schühly 1998).

As far as the influence of Thomas and Znaniecki's book in Europe is concerned, I would only like to mention the importance of the methodological contribution of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* and more generally, Florian Znaniecki in Polish sociology. I will avoid going into further detail since this issue of *Eastern European Countryside* on the autobiographical method developed by Thomas and Znaniecki definitely features more highly than qualified contributions on the subject.

In terms of empirical methodology, to this day the autobiography is among the most important techniques, if not the paramount one, in interpretive or hermeneutical sociology. Therefore, the autobiography may be regarded as the hallmark of qualitative social research although, from a sociological standing, it may be problematic because of its anecdotal aspect. In fact, the book by Thomas and Znaniecki features a single autobiography of over 300 pages; it is thus very detailed but comprises of some scarcely credible exaggerations. Moreover, its author Władek Wiszniewski, a Polish immigrant, was paid a commission fee, which casts some doubt on its credibility (Pries 2015, 11 ff.). For many sociologists, its uniqueness, therefore, lies essentially in its psychological significance.

However, for the social sciences, the 764 letters from fifty Polish families are much more significant in terms of both content and expression (Stanley 2010: 144) since they offer the possibility to formulate generalisations and not only show the individual importance of specific representations and behaviours, but also their social importance. Nonetheless, to this day, too

many sociologists regard an autobiography, such as the one gathered by Thomas and Znaniecki, to be too particularistic to be deemed useful to social research.

Barbara Harrison aptly summarises the age-old divide between critics and supporters, especially in sociology, of empirical research focusing too much on the individual person and not on the collectivity:

“Despite these early exhortations to put lives to the forefront of sociology ... there were only piecemeal attempts to utilise approaches that might do so; and the life history or life story methods developed slowly until the 1980s when interest in lives and in personal experience began to be taken seriously and practiced more widely, although there remained some concern that individuals are not ‘the real stuff’ of sociology in particular” (Harrison 2008: vol. 1: xxv).

The autobiographical method and despite criticisms voiced by a specific type of sociology, which could perhaps be defined too simplistically as structural-functional. Given its significance, anthropologists who welcome relations with closely-associated social sciences and disapprove of interdisciplinary barriers between social sciences ought to consider whether the autobiographical method may be interesting and, above all, useful also for their exotic field research, i.e. in societies that are very different from the one where it proved to be very useful and enlightening.

In the first place, we ought to underscore that in his celebrated books on the culture of poverty in Latin America, such as *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (Lewis 1961), *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* (Lewis 1966). The outstanding work here is *Pedro Martinez: A Mexican Peasant and his Family*, (Lewis 1964; Harrison 2008: xxiv) where the distinguished American anthropologist Oscar Lewis, close to but not an exponent of the Chicago School, resorted precisely to the autobiography.

The difference between the methodological process of Thomas and Znaniecki and that of Oscar Lewis is striking not only in terms of their respective titles but also and especially in terms of their texts. As mentioned above, Thomas and Znaniecki commissioned Władek Wiszniewski – and indeed paid him – to write his autobiography, thus they used a somewhat ethically dubious procedure and, in particular, one that is hardly justifiable from a methodological standing, especially nowadays. Instead, Oscar Lewis

gathered his empirical data directly in the field by interacting in person with his informers. Therefore, he conducted his fieldwork in an informal environment that makes for a more relaxed and intimate relationship between foreign researcher and local actors, as my various personal experiences in fieldwork in the Mediterranean area, the Balkans and Southeast Asia likewise confirm.

In contrast, in the case of the autobiography in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, the relationship between researcher and subject is clearly formal. This aspect is undoubtedly strengthened by the monetary transaction, which makes it akin to a formal contract between a patron and a performer. Consequently, the latter may have felt duty bound to be exceptionally thorough, perhaps emphasising certain aspects or fictionalising certain experiences of his life as a Polish immigrant in the United States.

Finally, this degree of formalism certainly makes relationships far less personalised and thus more rigid and hierarchical. A quasi-bureaucratic preoccupation with scientific method can paradoxically lead to a misrepresentation, thanks to a strategy of *impression management*, thus to staging an identity that has little in common with actual life experiences. The point, therefore, is whether, and precisely because of their method, Thomas and Znaniecki were ultimately victims of a conscious or unconscious manipulation carried out by Władek Wiszniewski. We are not suggesting that this autobiography is irrelevant for social sciences. However, one ought to be able to spot *sociological realism* in order to grasp how and why an actor tries to restyle his own social ego in the presence of outsiders.

The method developed by Oscar Lewis could not be defined a classic autobiography like the one gathered by Thomas and Znaniecki, since it is comprised of a composite of fragmented data gathered through different methods regarding the life of one or more individuals. In his anthropological researches on the *culture of poverty* in the slums of Latin American cities, such as Mexico City and San Juan in Puerto Rico, Oscar Lewis would never have been able to use written material since the persons with whom he had personal contacts were either illiterate or semiliterate. Consequently, he had to develop a number of verbal research strategies.

The experiences of Oscar Lewis is characterised by a significant fragmentariness in the reconstruction of his subjects' lives are far from unique in anthropology.

For similar reasons, Vincent Crapanzano criticises the autobiographical method from an anthropological perspective. He instead uses the term *portrait* for his intentionally fragmented reconstruction of the life history of Tuhami, a Moroccan tile-maker (Crapanzano 1977; Crapanzano 1980).

During their fieldwork, other distinguished anthropologists have reconstructed a person's life, or only a specific period of a person's life, in a way that was perforce or deliberately incomplete. Among the most renowned cases, we can mention Raymond Firth's portrait of a Polynesian aristocrat from Tikopia (Casagrande 1960), Margaret Mead's reconstruction of the biography of a Samoan woman who moved to the Admiralty Islands due to her marriage (Casagrande 1960) and Clyde Kluckhohn's slice-of-life presentation of a Navaho political representative (Casagrande 1960). These cases can be more accurately identified as *portraits* than as classic (auto) biographies.

We need to underscore that, in addition to Crapanzano, the three authors mentioned above have purposely opted for fragmentariness as a means to differentiate the personal life history reconstructed in a *portrait* from that of an autobiography (Crapanzano 1980: 5) because

“the former rests on the presumption of a correspondence between a text ... and a body of human actions; the latter resides within the text itself without regard to any external criteria” (Crapanzano 1980: 5).

Yet, as the descriptions of Oscar Lewis, Raymond Firth, Margaret Mead, Clyde Kluckhohn and Vincent Crapanzano illustrates, a *portrait* is deliberately incomplete. It could even be described as a series of biographical snapshots that ultimately constitute a composite whole and a far from the alleged and perhaps never achieved completeness of an autobiography, such as the one realized by Thomas and Znaniecki.

A *portrait* is also characterised by its orality and deliberately non-bureaucratic informality along with its impressionistic aspect, much unlike the essentially written and far more formal type of autobiography presented in *The Polish Peasant in Poland and in America*. An anthropologist, in fact, carries out empirical research in a social environment where writing is often lacking or at least limited to few people. Consequently, he needs to rely on direct interactions with his informants. Moreover, his interviewees,

assuming that the term is appropriate, may very well not share his linear vision of human existence, i.e. an ineluctable process from birth to death.

Finally, we need to point up that in many societies there is a deep mistrust towards any outsider, even more so if that outsider starts asking questions about his interlocutor's life that the latter seems as odd or awkward. We may very well wonder why the outsider is interested in his life and why he wants to go into specific details. Could the outsider have a hidden agenda? If so, what is at risk?

This attitude is prevalent in societies where mistrust in the public sphere is very widespread; namely, in politics, the bureaucratic system and more in general in the state's institutions. In these societies, an anthropologist is likely to be perceived as a sly undercover official. I too experienced these attitudes whilst carrying out empirical research in southern Italy and in the peripheral regions of Bulgaria.

When I would ask my interlocutors questions regarding their life in order to reconstruct their personal history or, better yet, sketch their portrait, even when we had known each other for some time and by then they knew I wasn't that fluent in their dialect (Sicilian) or I barely knew their language (Bulgarian), they might somewhat mistrustfully remark: *So, you're a state official, right?* In these cases, the deep-seated mistrust in anything pertaining to the state or to bureaucracy, i.e. the lack of legitimacy of what is known as the public sector, would come into play (Giordano 2013: 27 ff.).

Instead, they were eager and willing to discuss other people's biographies; in other words, to gossip. Yet gossip is also an important source of information, often untrue or deliberately overblown. However, it indicates how people build their presence as well as their identity and status in a given society and thus how they position themselves within their own social structure (Berger, Luckmann 1966). If properly handled, gossip represents an important strategy that can provide advantages for oneself and one's nearest and dearest.

In closing this chapter, we can state, therefore, that neither the autobiography nor the portrait are an objective reconstruction of how a person's life actually unfolded but are rather representations of how the actor views and positions himself in society. Herein lies the significance of both these methods of empirical research.

Conclusion: the pitfalls of dichotomous thought in social sciences

Given the previous sections' reflections, one might think that this article aims to establish a rather abstract methodological dichotomy based on the contrast between autobiography and portrait.

Indeed, given their extensive employment, dichotomies have unsurprisingly become a crucial instrument of theoretical conceptualisations in social sciences, especially from the second half of the 19th century when social sciences started to develop more systematically. However, all these dichotomies are effective yet also misleading. In fact, the various concepts included in dichotomies should not be understood as empirically observable reality. In social sciences, and in anthropology in particular, the terms constituting the dichotomies are Weberian ideal types (Weber 1956). They are thus theoretical and methodological *utopias* artificially created by sociologists and anthropologists to unscramble and classify social complexity.

They are intellectual constructs which may be regarded as conceptual exaggerations. Yet dichotomies allow the essential traits of various social realities to be discovered. These diametrically opposite concepts are especially indispensable in a comparative analysis thus are essential instruments in terms of both theoretical construction and empirical research.

The use of ideal typical dichotomous constructions, such as the one between autobiography and portrait developed in this article, is not aimed at presenting the superiority and efficiency of one over the other. My sole intent was to show, via a methodological abstraction, that the sensible use of an empirical research instrument is linked to the type of society the researcher is dealing with. In other words, the same instrument may be superb to research a given phenomenon in a specific society but may be utterly disastrous to study the same phenomenon in another society.

In fact, there is no universal, thus single method suitable for all social phenomena and for any society, which is a delusion linked to universalist conceptions. Whereas given the great variety of human collectivities, one needs to be relativistic as well as opportunistic or, in politically correct terms, pragmatic by determining the methodological effectiveness of a specific research technique also through preliminary research.

The case of Oscar Lewis, for instance, clearly indicates that employing the formalised and written autobiography method used by Thomas and

Znaniacki in the specific Mexican and Puerto Rican reality would have been downright pointless. On the other hand, employing the autobiography as conceived by Oscar Lewis, with the Moroccan tile-maker Tuhami would have probably spelled disaster.

All things considered, Vincent Crapanzano devised a clever and appropriate strategy for the specific urban reality in Morocco. However, this form of life story would prove to be quite unsuitable for my busy managers of Sicilian cooperatives (provinces of Palermo and Trapani) under a cloud of possibly mafia-like clientelism. These were the leaders of the socialist collective farms who, after 1989, became large landowners as well as successful neo-capitalist entrepreneurs in Dobruja's agricultural sector (north-eastern Bulgaria).

In these cases, a life story would not be a faithful and objective reconstruction of actual life as much as an artful play-acting. Thus, a cunning form of Goffmanian self-presentation for the sake of the impression management is required by one's own politics of reputation. The subjects I was interviewing were, in fact, very keen to spotlight their cleverness and positive qualities in their past experiences.

As we have attempted to show then, a theoretically dichotomous thought that rigidly prescribes a specific empirical technique deemed characteristic of a specific discipline is bound to fail. The first step, therefore, is to acquire a good grasp of the socio-cultural context and then select the suitable instruments for the empirical research beyond any rigid dichotomous divisions in terms of discipline or methodology. Consequently, a good preliminary knowledge of the context's details is necessary before formulating abstract hypothesis and choosing the adequate techniques in a non-dogmatic and flexible way. This allows us to gather credible data, especially that which is not biased by a methodological ethnocentrism stemming from a dogmatic vision about the generalised validity of specific empirical research instruments.

Perhaps my viewpoint is actually more anthropological than sociological. Yet, in my view, the armchair approach methodologies – i.e. those far removed from fieldwork – always seem very naïve and at the same time rather specious, unrealistic and ultimately misleading.

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