

THE SOCIO-ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH : EXPLORING AN ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH POSITION IN TRAINING, EDUCATION, AND LEARNING SCIENCES

L'APPROCCIO SOCIO-ETNOGRAFICO: ESPLORAZIONE DI UNA POSIZIONE DI RICERCA ALTERNATIVA NELLE SCIENZE DELL'EDUCAZIONE E DELLA FORMAZIONE

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Abstract

This article attempts to demonstrate how the development of a socio-ethnographic approach by the researcher in education and training sciences allows research to emerge from the field and thus gives a central role to the concerns of its actors. It aims to contribute to the dissemination of this approach and to provide a reflection on the interest of using such methods in our discipline. It is built in three parts: first, the author proposes a return to the epistemological foundations of this approach, then she gives an illustration by describing a doctoral research and finally, proposes a political reflection.

Abstract

Questo articolo cerca di mostrare come lo sviluppo di un approccio socio-etnografico da parte del ricercatore in scienze dell'educazione e della formazione permetta alla ricerca di emergere dal campo e quindi di dare un ruolo centrale alle preoccupazioni dei suoi attori. L'obiettivo è quello di contribuire alla diffusione di questo approccio e di fornire una riflessione sull'interesse di utilizzare tali metodi nella nostra disciplina. Il contributo si compone di tre parti: nella prima parte, l'autrice propone un ritorno ai fondamenti epistemologici di questo approccio, nella seconda ne dà un'illustrazione attraverso la descrizione di una ricerca dottorale per proporre infine una riflessione in chiave politica.

Keywords : socio-ethnography ; comprehensive approach ; education and training sciences

Parole chiave : socio-etnografia ; approccio globale ; scienze dell'educazione e della formazione

Schematically, research in the field of humanities and social sciences is characterized by two major orientations that have evolved through different eras: the explanatory approach and the comprehensive approach (Schurmans, 2011). While the first approach highlights the importance and weight of the system, objectivity, structure, and determinisms, the second leaves room for the actor, meaning, subjectivity, and freedom. Since my introduction to Training, Education, and Learning Sciences, my research work has been firmly embedded in this second approach, because it was my understanding that research must start from the field. Following Mucchielli (1994), I readily concede that "it is better to 'understand', by accepting to buy into the outlook of the social actors, in touch with the phenomenon" (Mucchielli, 1994, p. 12). Developing such a qualitative research approach requires the construction, on a daily basis, of a constantly evolving posture. In the field of Training, Education, and Learning Sciences, Véronique Bordes (2015a) has contributed to conceptualizing the "socio-ethnographic" approach, which is grounded in the works American sociologists from the Chicago School and French ethnographers. This approach allows the researcher, by being as close as possible to the field, to shed light on the interplay of social interactions.

This article attempts to show how the development of a socio-ethnographic approach by the researcher in Training, Education, and Learning Sciences allows research to emerge from the field

and thus gives key importance to the concerns of its actors. This epistemological work is carried out from reflections resulting from a research work. It is based on a very personal approach, which requires a necessary contextualization to clearly define the author's point of view. Its objective is to contribute to disseminating this approach and to reflect on the interest of using such methods in our own disciplinary field¹.

1. Epistemological definition of the socio-ethnographic approach in Training, Education, and Learning Sciences

Drawing on the translated works of Chicago School sociologists (Chapoulie, 2001) as well as the French social scientists – such as Yvette Delsaut (1976), Stéphane Beaud and Florence Weber (2010), and Michel Pialoux (1999) –, Véronique Bordes (2015) has characterized her position in Training, Education, and Learning Sciences as "socio-ethnographic." She defines this stance as consisting of interpretative frameworks from both sociology and ethnography data collection practices.

Ethnography provides the material through its "seeing and describing" process, while sociology introduces core concepts that accompany the "understanding" of the written expressions and the construction of a scholarly reflection from the field of research. The socio-ethnographic approach invites to "see, describe and understand" and thus reveals the interplay of social interactions. This positioning is also used by historians, psychosociologists and other researchers in educational studies (Duret, 1996; Lepoutre, 1997; Vulbeau, 2001).

In implementing this approach, the researcher in Training, Education, and Learning Sciences keeps in close touch with the subjects by creating a situation of extended interaction. It reports on the point of view of the actor, the practices and the habits of the surveyed population. According to Blumer (1969) and Strauss (1992), the empirical approach allows for a gradual adjustment to the reality of the field and its resistance. It takes an exploratory form with a permanent return to the facts as they are experienced by the actors. And it is the suspension of pre-existing analytical frameworks which not only guarantees the encounter of the researcher with the field, but above all leaves the research situation open. Beaud and Weber (2010a) contend that to carry out this type of research, it is necessary to establish a balance between getting closer to the field and distancing oneself from it in order to understand it. How accurately should we describe the meaning that social actors give to the events in which they participate? Becker (2002) proposes the hypothesis that the closer we get to the conditions under which they actually and truly give meaning to objects and events, the more accurate and precise our description of that meaning will be. To implement the ethnographic approach, Bordes (2015) conceptualizes the idea of "hanging around the field". This stance is tantamount to "taking one's time" during the research process. In other words, she considers this method of maintaining close connection with the field as akin to hanging around, listening, and observing. Listening and observation involve two methods of data collection: participant observation and ethnographic interviews. The method of analysis also contributes to this approach. The "participatory" dimension of observation had been the subject of debates for a long time before being recognized as a scientific method. Park stressed to his students the importance of the observation method, but he did not commit them to active participation. In his views, the scientist should not interfere with the phenomena he undertakes to study (Coulon, 2020). However, Goffman, Strauss or Becker – among the authors of the second generation of the Chicago School of Sociology – did not follow his line of thinking.

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In a similar vein, the socio-ethnographic approach encourages the participation of the observer: "the researcher can only have access to these private phenomena that are the meaningful social productions of the actors if he also participates as an actor in the world he proposes to study." (Coulon, 2020, p. 14). Sociology works which draw on interactionist perspectives mainly rely on various forms of participant observation. In this regard, Patricia and Peter Adler (1987) have identified three figures of the participant observer and his positions in the field: the "peripheral" role through which the researcher is certainly in close and prolonged connection with the members of the group but does not participate in their activities. The "active" role, in which the researcher abandons his somewhat marginal position that characterizes the previous figure, to take on a more central role in the context being studied. He actively participates in the activities of the group, takes on responsibilities, and acts with the members of the group like a colleague. Finally, the role of a "member completely immersed in the group", as a natural member in his own right. Within this framework, the researcher has the same status as the other members of the group, shares the same views and feelings and pursues the same goals. The researcher can thus experience, for himself, the emotions and behaviors of the participants.

Even if the observation method remains the ethnographer's main tool, the interview constitutes an indispensable complement (Beaud & Weber, 2010b, p. 155). We speak of ethnographic interviews from the moment the interviewee talks about himself in the first person, addressing the interviewer personally, and because the respondent is not "isolated" or autonomous from the survey situation. They are resituated in their environment of inter-knowledge. The interview is based on prior observations and guides future observations. Both methods – observation and interview – contribute in a meaningful way to advancing investigation processes (Beaud & Weber, 2010b, p. 155).

2. When research emerges from the field: on implementing a socio-ethnographic approach

To illustrate the implementation of such a posture and to show how research can emerge from the field, I propose to review the conduct of a doctoral research Training, Education, and Learning Sciences. The field survey took place from October 2018 to January 2020. As is often the case in ethnography, "the investigative relationship is modelled in the form of an implicit contract, not an informed consent form, because it is part of a personal relationship." (Beaud, Weber, 2010, p. 261).

In this specific case, the socio-ethnographic research was carried out in parallel with a diagnostic study of youth photography which was sponsored and contracted by the French partnership platform « *Territoires Educatifs* » (Educative Territories) and the joint research unit « *Éducation, Formation, Travail, Savoirs* » (Education, Training, Work, Knowledge) within the University of Toulouse 2 Jean Jaurès. There was no pre-determined survey protocol. I find it necessary to elaborate on the induction process from the preparation of the survey to the analysis of the results in order to illustrate how a survey can emerge from the concerns of the field and place the latter at the core of the research.

2.1. From the research project to the field survey

My master's thesis work led me to become interested in issues related to youth and youth policies. In ethnography, the field and the object are inseparable (Beaud & Weber, 2010a, p. 39). My supervisor therefore imagined which investigation was possible around this theme and submitted the idea of participating in the activities of a group known as "Priority Youth" which at that time wanted to conduct a reflection on the place of the youth in their territory and to bring out a policy aimed at these young people.

Fieldnotes n°1, Thursday 18 October 2018 :

The week of October 8, 2018, the very first week of my doctoral contract, I met my supervisor in a university hallway. She told me that we needed to meet. She was contacted by a working group that was being set up in Ariège as part of the departmental project for concerted educational policies. They envisaged to carry out a "photograph of the Ariège youth". She wanted me to get involved in the project with her as it reflected, to her view, the topic of investigation which I considered for exploration.

This unexpected invitation was therefore "an opportunity" to set up a socio-ethnographic survey in parallel with the conduct of the diagnosis. This opportunity facilitated the start of our fieldwork. In addition, as the project was supported by a research grant, it allowed the fieldwork to take place in several stages. The initial questions were: how is a youth policy developed? Who elaborates youth policies in a territory? These two major questions guided my first readings.

Essentially, it is important to have an overall understanding of the task before arriving in the field, and this means building up a bibliographical reference. In the framework of the socio-ethnographic approach – unlike some Ground Theory methods – it is important not to arrive on site completely 'unequipped'. Reading is an important prerequisite for interpreting situations and reacting accordingly. The researcher does not enter the field without questionings or theoretical references. His or her materials are selected based on "theoretical guidelines" (Whyte, 1984).

2.2. Access to the field and data gatherings

Access to the field and data gatherings occurred on October 18, 2018 during the first meeting with the 'Priority Youth' group. At this moment in time, self-presentation as an outsider was a necessary step (Goffman, 1973): I was introduced through my PhD supervisor who arranged the connection with the members of the group and negotiated my entry into the research field as well as my credibility. I introduced myself as a student in Training, Education, and Learning Sciences pursuing a doctoral degree, followed by a brief presentation my research interests.

Observation diary n°1, Thursday 18 October 2018 :

The meeting was scheduled to start at 9am. I left home at 6:30 am, but arrived 30 minutes later. Everyone was already around the table, waiting for me to open the meeting. I was quite surprised that they systematically asked about my insights on the project and the ways to achieve it. I proposed to undertake a systematic fieldwork in each territory, in a direct relationship with the young people.

The fact that I worked under the auspices of a commission and that I had to carry out a task (photography) had a double effect: it allowed me to be really immersed and to develop a full sense belonging (Adler & Adler, 1987) to the group which also implied an interaction with the actors. In addition, from the very first day, I started to keep an observation diary. As rigorously as possible, I noted my daily observations. I wrote down the date, what I observed in one color, and in another, my personal questions or what my observations meant to me. During meetings, I took hand-written notes

on notebooks. And I systematically reported these notes in the diary. On my logbook, none of the protagonists are anonymous, because it was more obvious for me to make links by having the names. However, I ensured that in the restitution of my analysis, anonymity is respected. According to Becker (2002, p. 40), entering the field requires the researcher to come to terms with "his/her representations". It is a story that he/she imagines of the phenomenon he/she is studying.

The work of french sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, is helpful in understanding the pathway that the researcher has to face:

"Each of us, it's no secret, is encumbered by a past, by his own past, and this social past, whatever it may be, "popular" or "bourgeois", masculine or feminine, – and always closely intertwined with the past as understood within the framework of psychoanalysis – is particularly burdensome and embarrassing when it comes to doing social science work. I have said that, against the methodological orthodoxy which places itself under the authority of Max Weber and his principle of "axiological neutrality", I deeply believe that the researcher can and must draw on his experience, that is to say his past, in all his research undertakings. However, he is only entitled to do so on condition that all these feedbacks from the past are subjected to a rigorous critical examination" (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 55-56).

As far as Becker (2002) is concerned, the researcher does not have to worry about his representations, because whether they are true or false, they allow him to pose them as a starting point. To submit my past to the "rigorous examination" that Bourdieu (2003) mentions, I have carried out a permanent "back and forth" between the field and the theory. In my logbook, I have explained some of my questions at that time: "Who are these people? What are they doing together? Why them and not others?" From then on, my surveys started to build up. I was interested in the actors, in their reason for being together. Reading throughout the research process allowed me to reconsider my innermost questions, to avoid appearing too "naive" in the field, and to understand some implicit notions. There are many acronyms in the field of youth policy and environment I was not familiar with such as: BIJ (bureau information jeunesse); CAF (caisse d'allocation familiale) et FEJ (fond d'expérimentation pour la jeunesse). This is what Beaud and Weber (2010) call the "indigenous language" that we necessarily had to be familiar with, because it is at the heart of the process of ethnographic collecting. The readings made it possible to become familiar with the field, not to imitate, but always with a view to understanding. To carry out this undertaking in the field, I used floating observations. I conducted these observations from October 2018 to March 2019. These allowed me to have a first approach of the context, to identify places and people. In this early stage of the research process, I developed a broad-based approach. I then narrowed my field of observation as my research object became more refined and as questions emerged. My focus gradually shifted to interpersonal interactions of actors. And since one does not observe without references or landmarks, I used Goffman's (1971) framework of theatrical representation to articulate my reasonings and observations.

2.3. Conducting the survey : from the research project to the research object

On an almost daily basis for a year and a half, I shared the life of the 'Priority Youth' group while participating in their activities. I did not always have the freedom to move around as I wished or to be always present. Beaud and Weber (2010a) addressed this issue and concluded that when the researcher, throughout the observation process, has little or no degree of latitude to change his position, roles, or points of view, the latter has to consider that his or her observations will inevitably be incomplete. In this circumstance, they advised to "name and identify dimensions that one has not

been able to take into account. This observation process has yet to be completed with interviews" (Beaud & Weber, 2010a, p. 162). Following my observations, I conducted interviews beginning in February 2019. The first interview was conducted in a completely informal way. I then constructed an interview guide based on this first meeting, which was intended to further examine the information that still seemed unclear to me following my first observations. I interviewed a few actors in the group that I "selected" following the principle of theoretical sampling (Guillemette & Luckerhoff, 2012). I used the same interview guide for all of them with a view to comparing their answers. The interviews were designed so as to allow me to affirm the perspective of the protagonists I had been observing since the beginning of my fieldwork. Beyond using an interview grid, I allowed myself to be guided by the answers respondents could give me and I deviated from the questions to dig into some of the answers they provided. This method had the advantage of transforming the interview into a kind of discussion and transcending the formal aspect. These interviews allowed me to clarify the questions posed by the actors and to problematize my work. Indeed, the confrontation between the actors' questions and those resulting from the literature review gradually allowed me to refine the theme of the research into an operational research object. Beaud and Weber argued for a working definition of the object. In their view, "a survey that does not change the terms of the original question is a limited, useless, and ineffective survey procedure" (2010a, p. 44). I first read about youth policies, integrated/concerted youth policies since these were the terms used by the actors in the field, to then focus my attention on the search for transversality in public action to finally arrive at the reading of scientific works on "consultation" which is a specific, observable, quantifiable object of research. The surveys unfolded, going alternately through different phases of progressions and setbacks. The aspiration of every researcher is to "collect everything". The problem is the practical impossibility of achieving this exhaustiveness. This then raises the question 'where to stop?' For Harold Garfinkel (1967/2020), research is a "practical activity". At some point, one has to complete one's work. On my part, the exit from the field took place with the end of the research contract in January 2021. To analyze the data collected, one must "radically withdraw from the field" (Beaud & Weber, 2010b, p. 199).

2.4. Data analysis and research results

To facilitate interpretation of the data, I carried out a content analysis as defined by Bardin (2019) using Nvivo software. For Hughes (1971), the pitfall that the researcher might encounter using this method is that the analysis can result in a generalized approach with the risk, at the end of the process, of proposing concepts imported from outside the field and therefore returning to a hypothetico-deductive approach. Bordes (2015) put forward an analysis which involves organizing the data into categories that would help confirm the theory which has emerged from her observations. This theory is then used to develop her analysis and provide a scientifically reflected knowledge of the field. I built categories of analysis from natural categories. I have thus developed concepts using words from the language of participants in their own environment. This method of analysis contributes to the fact that the initial results are derived from the data and not from preconceptions (Guillemette & Luckerhoff, 2009, p. 42).

3. Political reflections on the socio-ethnographic research method

I have explained how the socio-ethnographic approach, using participant observation in particular, makes it possible to develop research results from theories based on the field. This proximity with the field raises the question of the link between action and knowledge. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the discipline of Training, Education, and Learning Sciences, Marcel, Lescouarch, and Bordes (Marcel et al., 2019), conducted an in-depth reflection on this idea. They identified, in the

scientific tradition, two positions which are quite radically opposed. The first, in the name of the strict dissociation between action and knowledge, rejects any form of rapprochement between these two poles. In their view, such a rapprochement could only "misdirect the research process" (Marcel et al., 2019). This conception echoes Bachelard's earlier theorization (1938) according to which the divisions between these two logics are unbridgeable insofar as we are dealing with "two distinct universes".

After the Second World War and in parallel with the development of a comprehensive and constructionist approach, a second conception – inspired by the works of Bourdieu –, gained currency in France and implied a certain isomorphism between action and knowledge (Marcel et al., 2019). Bruno Latour (1997) mentions that this new way of conceiving research frees science from the "political need to stay away from politics". This conception allowed us to imagine that "transitions" between the universe of knowledge and the universe of action are possible. This question of the dissociation between action and knowledge is still the subject of continuous reflections and critical debates within the scientific community. Indeed, the concluding remarks of the treatise on science education research and practice (Beillerot & Mosconi, 2014) also raise the question of how research can or should be useful in solving concrete problems. This question was already very much alive within the Chicago School of sociology. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, American sociologists initiated new research approaches capable of shedding light on the problems that arose in their respective cities. The epistemological anchoring they defended was that of the researcher "involved in the life of his/her city, interested in his/her environment, in the actions that aimed to achieve social change" (Coulon, 2020, p. 11). This anchoring authorizes, at the very least on an intra-individual scale (Marcel et al., 2019), to reconsider Latour's (1997) concept of "transition" between different universes. But in this context, Bordes and Marcel (2019) invite us to vigilance as "there is undeniably a risk of confusionism and exacerbated relativism which calls for caution and epistemological vigilance" (Marcel et al., 2019). This vigilance serves to ensure the protection of both worlds and their codes. The distinction of roles between researchers and actors remains essential and the notion of truth retains its whole importance (Marcel et al., 2019). I am not here to question the necessity of the existence of this distinction, but rather how it coexists within the same research intent.

Since the introduction of the discipline into the French university teaching and research systems in 1967 (Beillerot, 1995), in various ways and to varying degrees, it has always endeavored to invent a different and specific approach on education, to work on the many aspects of education that disciplinary boundaries would prevent from understanding, and to work on the relationships between scholarly knowledge and professional practices. In Bordes and Marcel's (2019) views, there is therefore an "innate" link between research in educational sciences and action on society. As a specific research method, the process of socio-ethnographic collecting strongly links researcher, field and activism (Bordes, 2019) because it requires a human investment on the part of the researcher. Daniel Cefaï (2010) precisely questions the "ethnographic commitment" that scientifically illustrates this choice to be as close to the field as possible, or what Bordes (2015) calls "hanging around in the field." The approach unfolds through a synthesis between a praxeological and heuristic nature of the research and makes it possible to develop "alternative knowledge" in the sense of Le Crosnier and his colleagues (Le Crosnier et al., 2013, p. 73) which has both scientific and social validity. The works of Goffman (1968), but also those of Lapassade and Lourau (1971) in France question this way of doing research "with" and not "on" the subjects involved. It seems to me that a socio-ethnographic approach in the field of Training, Education, and Learning Sciences facilitates the rapprochement of the two theoretical frameworks.

Conclusion

The development of ethnographic approaches in educational studies allows, in my opinion, to produce research that is closer to the concerns of the actors in their real-life environments. It can contribute to the process of conducting research that allows for the analysis and understanding of concrete professional practices or situations in order to act on them accordingly. This type of research, through its inclusiveness, also paves the way for the exploration of new research objects. For instance, when the discipline of Training, Education, and Learning Sciences was introduced, the initial expectation was that it would mainly focus on external and internal school issues (Beillerot and Mosconi, 2014). Alain Vulbeau (2014) specifies that apart from the work of Lapassade (1963), the issue of youth was not a traditional subject in the field of educational studies. Following the works undertaken by Alain Vulbeau (2001) or Véronique Bordes (2007) – who implement ethnographic approaches in French educational studies – youth issue has remained a key area of concern in public policies and government practices.

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