On "Qualitative" Methodology: An Interview with Aaron V. Cicourel

SAŠA BOŽIĆ
Dissertant
Institut für Soziologie
Grund und integrativwissenschaftliche
Fakultät, Wien

Aaron V. Cicourel nikada nije bio uzrokom "velikih teorijskih rasprava", ali su na njegove radove često reagirali njihovi sudionici. Tako J.Habermas tvrdi da je upravo Cicourelova zasluga što teškoće prikupljanja podataka nisu zapostavljene i svrstane u "probleme istraživačkih tehnika". U sada već klasičnim djelima - "Method and Measurement in Sociology" (1964), "The Social Organization of Juvenile Justice" (1968), "Cognitive Sociology" (1973) - Cicourel povezuje mjerenje društvenih fenomena s najosjetljivijim epistemološkim problemima, što mu je osiguralo popularnost kako među teoretičarima tako i istraživačima - posebice onima kvalitativne orijentacije. Cicourelova upozorenja da različite razine analize nisu ni metodološki ni teorijski očiglene te da se etnografski, odnosno ekološki kontekst prečesto zanemaruju, većina sociologa danas potpisuje bez razmišljanja. Ipak, imajući u vidu da još uvijek premalo znamo o organizacijskim i interpersonalnim razlikama koje utječu na istraživanje -posebice u njegovim završnim fazama - Cicourelovo inzistiranje na razdvajanju "teorije instrumentacije" i "teorije podataka" (odvajanju istraživačkog postupka od materijala koji istraživač iskazuje kao "podatak") nije izgubilo na aktualnosti.

Nakon znanstvenog i istraživačkog krstarenja objema Amerikama, profesor Cicourel je trenutno pri University of California, San Diego.

* * *

- How would you describe the state of the debate on the qualitative/quantitative devide in social research?

A.C. I don't really know whether there is a debate any more over "qualitative" and "quantitative" research. What has happened is that each group tends to itself and not to each other. They publish separately, when they do one kind of research or the other they think of particular audiences each time. There are some journals in America that publish both kinds of research and have editors who look at both kinds of research, but most people don't read each other's research. I don't think, frankly, that there is a big debate. Students tend to choose one or the other, in some departments they have to take more of one than the other, but at UCLA, which is a big department, one of the biggest in the US, students can avoid many "quantitative" courses. I think this is a mistake.

- Are there any important attempts to integrate "qualitative" and "quantitative" approaches to research at the moment? Is it possible to organize strategic studies that would allow such an integration?

A.C. I don't think that there is much attempt to integrate the two, but integration is absolutely necessary. As I indicate in the case of social network analysis - the data originally start the same. Depending on how you get your data, whether you interview people or observe people, somebody had to interact and there had to be some communication. If that information gets coded by an organisation itself then you don't see the interaction, you just see the outcome. Many times social network people would look at the fact that, for example, the same people went to the same school and they are now interacting, working in the same

or different companies... This kind of network can be quantified easily. But there is no real difference between "qualitative" and "quantitative" data. You can transform any "qualitative" into "quantitative" data. Depending on how you frame the research you can go either way.

Some people say that you cannot do "qualitative" research in population studies. But you can-I have done it. You can interview people about fertility, you can even find out about death rates by going to hospitals, coroner's offices. But all you can get there is the output of these offices. You will not understand how the cause of death was determined and if you examine the suicide studies you will find that this has been a problem for many years. My point is that I can study migration by doing interviews, by looking at the World Health Organisation's statistics or census bureau statistics. But everything there is based on interviews or questionnaires. The information starts, as far as I'm concerned with "qualitative," but you can transform it into "quantitative". In Argentina years ago you had one year to register the birth of your child, which resulted in big complications for deciding what the birth rate was because people would wait and report even after a year. I want to stress the fact that some studies look like they are clearly "quantitative" but this doesn't have to be the case. Recently in America the notion of rational choice theory has become very popular. You can study rational choice theory by "qualitative" methods, interviewing or observing the way people make decisions, or you can study it at a later part of the process. So, where you examine the process often determines whether it is going to be "qualitative" or "quantitative". The "qualitative" people prefer to look at the process in the organisations themselves or in everyday life. The "quantitative" people prefer to look at the process after it' s gone through many changes. The organisation gives you labour statistics, but if you go to the offices where people come to register and seek unemployment insurance, there you will find many ambiguities about unemployment status. There you will find, if you talk to people after they have gone to the office, that often they were unemployed earlier but didn't tell the office. How do you find out about these people? It is not so easy. The process of turning basic data into "quantitative" forms always involves a communication process. The "quantitative" people are not interested in studying the communication process.

- How can we improve the generalisability of claims in "qualitative" research?

A.C. One way to improve the generalisability of claims may be to have more than one case, for example by studying two more carefully, and one in particular more carefully. So you have general demographic data, survey data, organisational data about several cases but you focus on two and then one. When you find details about one and then two, you can more easily generalize to other cases even though you don't study other cases because you have the information about many cases. The idea is to take many cases, then go down to specific cases so that you can observe in more detail the everyday process of how social structure is reproduced.

If I were to do a study of high schools for example, I would look at several high schools in different places. I would study them in terms of the demographic characteristics of the school populations. I would look at how many go to college, what kind of courses they took before they came to high school, their test scores. Then I would focus on two high schools that are different - one in a more middle income area and one in a lower income area. Then I would focus on those two schools by doing interviews. My argument would be that if I had a sample of schools that included lower income and middle income areas, then I would choose one of each group and study it more carefully. That's how you can generalize although you had only studied two cases.

- Can we distinguish between "qualitative research" and the use of "qualitative" methods?

A.C. You have to remember that the origins of "qualitative research" presumably started in America in Chicago with studies of different kinds of cases. People studied dance halls, gangs, taxi drivers, they had studied all kinds of things. My way of doing field research

includes how you do the systematic observation. I didn't write about that in the earlier studies, but I did some of it in the 'Juvenile justice study'. I went with the police different days of the week, during the day, night, with different police, and I compared two cities. I also had general statistical data from five hundred cases in each city. I did that research in 1960 and that was the best field research at that time. I spent four years doing that research - two cities, two counties, two police departments, two probation departments, two sets of judges. That's how I did my sample. Even before I could formulate it I think I was already doing it. I also think I combined the two, so it doesn't make sense to think of just one or the other.

- What usually motivates an ordering party to choose a researcher who uses "qualitative" research methods? What influences his/her choice of such a researcher?

A.C. When companies call and ask for research they usually don't know what they want. What you often have to do is try to decide what is practically possible and what seems to be the best way to give them the answers that they think they want. When I say that I don't mean what they want to hear but the kind of information that you think they need. They may not want to hear it. Many times they don't. I've seen companies ask for marketing research, they pay for it and then they put it into a file cabinet and don't use it. This is because they do the study not to know the results, but only because then they can tell their board - well we did the study and we are doing fine. This is like a politician who pays to have a poll.

- Can you predict the future of "qualitative" evaluation research? How often does the "ordering party" decide to hire a research team which uses "qualitative" evaluation?

A.C. I think that evaluation research is a very dangerous kind of research. Any time you do something called evaluation research you need to do some basic research at the same time. If you don't, then it's too easy to be fooled by who's asking you to do it. I personally would never do such a study unless I had the freedom to do also some basic research. I just came from an institute that does social criminology research. We discussed their research, and they have a practical problem in terms of divorced parents and what to do with the children. I gave them advice on how to do both, how to study basic processes of communication - family is a good place for that - and also how to study the research methods that are being used by the judicial agency. I think you have to combine these things. Otherwise if you just apply method and you don't study your application of the method, then you can fool yourself. The people I talked to know this and one of the parts of their study is how people are doing interviews, collecting the basic data. What I'm trying to do is to get some validity by having other people at the higher levels go out and interview the people who did the interviews, as well as clients and some judges. You cannot take your research method for granted. Research method is not a proven thing. You always have to be careful about how the research method is going to lead you to make a mistake.

- Why did you start to avoid the term "triangulation"?

A.C. I used it before as a way of trying to talk about getting more than one kind of data. I don't use the term today because I don't think that using the term is going to make a difference. What makes a difference is what you actually do. If you use the term you can fool yourself and think that you've done something and all you have done is - you used a term. The necessity for combining methods is essential. I tend to be biased in favour of observing and getting tapes of how people actually talk when they are solving a problem, or when they are just communicating routine things. If you don't have some transcriptions - you can't always tape - there are other ways of dealing with that. My point is - if you don't have a good record of what people say and what they are doing when they say it, it is very difficult to understand concepts such as reproduction. Reproduction is a process, but no one who uses the term ever studied the process. They usually use a survey, some demographic

data, and they make inferences about what is reproduction. If you cannot find a way of combining the two so that you do some observation as well, then you are in trouble.

If you study family disputes you cannot be in the house, but you can ask people in a very careful way when was the last dispute or fight, where was it, who was there, who said the first word. You don't ask the meta-questions - who was angry? You don't use any terms that already have this emotional context. Instead you try to get them to explain each step. The person who explains each step is more likely to have access in their non-declarative memory than if you ask them a question at a more meta-level. The meta-level is something that you can easily dismiss people's comments by. You just get the abstract response. But when you ask - what did you say, what did he say, what was he doing, where was he standing? - all those kinds of questions force people to give information they normally would never give in a survey.

- Then by which criteria should the "qualitative" (ethnographic) research be judged?

A.C. Criteria for me involve some questions. First, are there any studies of a similar nature, do they describe similar kinds of things? Second, can you show any kind of documentation for what you claim you've observed? - and that's where the tapes become very handy. In a paper you cannot show much of the dialog but if you say - I took this many cases, dialogues, I sampled this many and I took five at random, I'll show you what happened with those five with respect to a particular time - it is more convincing.

If you don't have such data then it is very difficult to assess "qualitative" research, especially if the people just give you the narrative of what they claim they observed.

- According to some authors, participant observers have to learn to take and play roles in essentially the same way as they do throughout life. Does this create a sort of schizoid situation in which a researcher easily errs?

A.C. To study power you often have to obtain some power, but the word schizophrenic is a bit too harsh. When you're doing research it can be difficult but there is no way to avoid it. What you have to recognize is that people you study may never be comfortable with you, and you will probably never be comfortable with them. When you reach the point where you think you are completely comfortable and where you think they are completely comfortable you should be careful because chances are that you are making a mistake.

- I also had in mind the private life of a researcher...

A.C. The main thing is that you have to be able to withdraw to your own life and recognize the problems that you are having going back and forth. I always believe you have to write about such problems. That is the only way to avoid making big errors about what you claim is evidence. If you don't write about it then you'll fool yourself again and you'll fool the reader. You have to withdraw and make sure that your private life is sustained, that you don't change it.

Sometimes it depends on the type of the study. If you study a religious cult then you have to spend much time with them. I personally don't think it makes much sense at this stage of social science development to study too many esoteric groups. It is important to study groups that are present everywhere in society. Cults are not present everywhere; schools are, hospitals are, courts are, companies are. First we need to study normative kinds of groups and understand the processes there and the structures, in order to go then to esoteric groups to understand how these groups develop. It doesn't make sense to risk a researcher's private life by spending so much time with, let's say, a cult. You can study a group without becoming a member of it. I know several people who have become members but I don't find that they have necessarily given us better insights. They may be able to show you a few things but it turns out that they often compromised because they have become so involved they don't see any more. Alfred Schutz's concept of stranger remains a very important idea.

- Does the intimate satisfaction, the intrinsic gratification that a researcher gets from the research, influence the validity of that research? Is such satisfaction important for the research?

A.C. One thing you have to remember is that regardless of whether we are doing "qualitative" or "quantitative" research we always tend to assume that what we are doing is what other people are doing, what we are finding is what other people are finding. The exact findings may not be the same but there are similarities and there is overlap. Somebody will always have to decide that what you are saying makes sense. If you study something with "quantitative" data where you never see the organisation or how the data is produced, then other people who have worked with similar kind of data in other organisations will surely be able to say whether this make sense or not.

- Right now, what can Croatian researchers offer to the American sociological audience?

A.C. What would be interesting to know is how does everyday life continue in a war atmosphere where you literally fight to maintain certain boundaries. At the same time you try to maintain life so that it doesn't become a shambles. The real question is what happens to institutions of everyday life under this kind of continual war that is not a war. It's a very unusual situation. The question is: are people studying this or not? Do the legal institutions work the same, is there more divorce, delinquency, do people listen to the same radio programs? In short, how is everyday life affected? These are the things that people would like to know because then you can compare that to what we think is normal.