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Public Sociology and Participatory Approaches. Towards a Democratization of Social Research?

Abstract   The subject of participation has been gathering increasing interest from the various social disciplines: from politology to psychology, from urban sociology to evaluation, this concept carries a particular fascination and discussing participatory research has now become an absolute must. However, an adequate reflection on methodologies for analyzing research practices and evaluating hypotheses and effects,[4] when setting up actual research relationships has not followed on the tail of this new tendency. This paper arises from that need and aims, through discussion of the main debates that have interested science and sociology, to reevaluate a critical approach towards the analysis of the social relationships that are created during a research investigation.

This study starts out as a reflection aimed at analyzing the impact that participation, in all its various forms, can have on the way research is carried out. The originality of this article lies in the proposal of a form of participation, and from this, the expression of a hope for the future of social sciences: that we can aspire towards a dialogical model and towards a new cooperative and emancipatory relationship with the public.

Keywords   Participation Models and Practices; Democratization of Social Research; Dialogical Approach; Critical Sociology; Reflexivity; Relationship Between Researcher and Social Actor

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Introduction: An Overview of the Problem

The term participation, while hiding some ambiguities and having become a wide umbrella that covers various types of intentions and practices (Bobbio 2007), has recently had the merit of being part of some key-transformations which have characterized democratic processes, especially in politology and public administration[1]: the tran-

sition from bureaucratic paradigm to post-bureaucratic, from government to governance, from unilateral acts to voluntary pacts and contracts, from the control of learning to the affirmation of deliberation as a particular and more clearly defined form of participation.

Participatory experiences has also had significant repercussions on the field of evaluative research where several authors have underlined the importance of reflecting on the participatory character of democracy, adopting shared research practices in which stakeholders take part as reference subjects for the policies that are the object of evaluation (Brisolara 1998; King 2005).

Starting from this framework, the issue of participation is gaining more and more relevance also in the field of sociology, and specifically in methodology where there is a new debate on the role of the sociological public (Burawoy 2005) and the possible democratization of social research practices.[2]

In reality, the consideration of the relationship between researcher and social actor[3] can be seen as a fundamental part of the affirmation of sociology as a discipline with its own scientific independence: since its origins, the question of the relationship between the subject and object of study has had to deal with the main debates that have interested sociology: for example, the epistemo-

logical debate between methodological monism and methodological dualism; the debate between microsociology and macrosociology and between methodological individualism and methodological holism; the dispute between qualitative research and quantitative research.

In fact, if, traditionally, the relationship between researcher and social actor has been seen as a source of distortion by approaches that are more allied to the idea of methodological monism,[4] on the other hand, it has been more valued by those approaches closer to methodological dualism. From German historicism onwards, these last approaches have had the merit of recognizing that, unlike natural sciences, social sciences are, as far as their field of study is concerned, in a subject to subject relationship rather than a subject to object (Giddens 1976:76). At the same time we have to consider that, while the sociology that has concentrated on micro objects of study has often held in high consideration the fact that the symbolic construction of social science is based on relational facts and, in turn, produces relational facts, the sociology that has concentrated on structures or institutions has substantially neglected the researcher-social actor relationship. Lastly, if the qualitative positions are in opposition to a vitalistic concept of the cognitive process in which the sociologist is first and foremost a social actor able

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[1] After the Seventies, when the paradigm of participation had a central role in the politological field, today, participation democracy has a new relevance, especially starting with the experience of Porto Alegre.

[2] For example, to this issue is dedicated one session of the 2013 European Sociological Association Congress.

[3] In order to respect the dignity, the specific competences, and the reputation of those (single person or group) who represent the subject/object of this social research, I have chosen to use the term social actor throughout this study.

[4] This polarization should take into account the new concept of science that has been steadily growing since the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th: from the scientific revolutions it is important to acknowledge that also in the so-called *hard sciences* the observer records a segment of reality that is not given, but that is built into the composite system of relationships that are created between subject and object (eg., Bateson 1972).

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to establish a privileged relationship with the subject/object of the study, the quantitative positions, on the other hand, show the necessity for a more detached relationship between researcher and social actor.[5]

Although extremely typified, these debates reveal a limitation in the type of reflection that has taken place within sociological thought on the relationship between researcher and social actor: the inability to explain the relationship between the two subjects in concrete terms, or, in other words, to evaluate the nature of the human interaction which takes place between the subjects over the course of the research.

Rarely, in fact, these debates were capable of recognizing that social research is a historically relevant activity that can, above all, lay claim to its social character, as an exercise based on codified norms and shared reciprocal expectations. On the other hand, social sciences rarely consider that their outcomes affect social reality—in that they may affect the actors' awareness to action, the definition of problematic situations, and the attribution of labels, et cetera.

For this reason, in this article, I will try to analyze the democratic and participatory issues in social research, assuming a reflexive approach. Reflexivity, in fact, means assuming a critical approach to

the study of sociological practice in order not only to analyze the internal dynamics of the relationships that are created during the research in a more realistic way, but also to challenge them in view of possible renewal. As Gouldner says (1970:489), in fact, the historical mission of reflexive sociology "would be to *transform* the sociologist, to penetrate deeply into his daily life and work, enriching him with new sensitivities, and to raise the sociologist's self-awareness to a new historical level."

In particular, in the first part of this article, there is a brief review of examples of reflexive approaches that originated during the 1960s and 1970s, during the period that has been called the *crisis of traditional methods* and which was the result of the convergence of studies from a variety of disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology, up to psychology: the common thread linking these was the idea of challenging the positivist and scientist origins of the *mainstream*, as well as affirming the primarily relational character of research activity.

These reflections are the basis for a general consideration: the necessity of admitting that social science forms a part of the social world, as well as being a concept of it. This means acknowledging not only that a relationship of a social type exists between the researcher and the reality in which he lives, but that the interaction that takes place over the course of the scientific investigation between the researcher and the social actor represents a central moment of co-construction and shared representation of the reality being investigated. This also means that sociologists stop behaving as if a subject and an object exist, as if

sociologists study and lay people are studied, as if they belonged to two different breeds of humans. "There is only one breed of man—Gouldner firmly reminds us—but as long as we are without a Reflexive sociology, we will act upon the tacit dualistic premise that there are two, regardless of how monistic our professions of methodological faith are" (1970:490-491).

The reflections that make up the second part of this article are dedicated to filling in this gap. Beginning with several considerations on the relationship between researcher and social actor,[6] these aim to increase reflexivity over the course of the research investigation and raise a question which has galvanized new interest in the human sciences today: the theme of democratization and participation within the field of social research.

Input From Critical Sociology

In the field of sociology, in conjunction with the period known as the *crisis of traditional methods*, reflections on research practices have led to the re-evaluation of the relationship between researcher and social actor, since this is the central moment of interaction and construction of the representation of reality being investigated. To this line of thought belong some of the studies that under-

line how social investigation is characterized by a typical division of labor between the client, the researcher, and the social actor (Gilli 1971): here, there is a clear division of tasks between the different actors, based on the different needs, ability, and *know-how* that imply pre-established relationship structures. But, when the nature of these social relationships is inspected more closely, we see how some of the more significant aspects are represented through the structuring of the interactions, which are often not placed on the same level, in an exchange of horizontal reciprocity, but are instead highly hierarchical and based on latent authoritarian models. For this reason, various parties have talked about social research as an exercise of power (Galtung 1967; Gilli 1971), thus highlighting the asymmetry typical of research relationships.

Gilli (1971) makes his ideas clear about this concept when analyzing the roles of the different actors involved in the investigation, and he believes that the whole research experience is an application of power on several levels. However, the core of the social investigation is represented by the relationship between researcher and the subject/object of study. It constitutes the central nucleus not only during the construction phase of the information base, but also during the whole investigation, from the identification of the problem to be analyzed. On the same theme, Galtung (1967) also observes the existence of underlying assumptions during the interaction practices that are typical of social investigation and which have authoritarian implications, and where we can recognize at least three different types: normative, remunerative,

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[5] At this point, I have to stress that, according to several authors, this position is not simply the result of a legacy from positivist scientism, but more an affirmation of value capable of guiding the investigation so that the results are a way of seeing past the facts and can be useful and fruitful both to scientific know-how and human knowledge.

[6] To resume some of the considerations already made in previous studies (Cataldi 2012), the theme of the relationship between researcher and social actor will first of all be seen in the context of critical approaches which originated in the 1960s in human sciences, focusing specifically on anthropology (Scholte 1972; Tedlock 1979; Clifford and Marcus 1986), and then, successively, developed within the wider field of reflections on the participation models which underlie research practices.

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and coercive.[7] These three different types of power are, in reality, nothing more than the application of a more general social power, which therefore use the most common instruments of control, namely, incentives, sanctions, and shared norms and values. In research relationships, however, it is important to consider the existence of a *surplus* element, of an additional characteristic which permits the hierarchical structure and legitimizes the authoritarian nature of the relationships. This element is that form of power that Gilli (1971:105) calls *technical*: in synthesis, it can be defined as that "*set of abilities that help to direct* the individuals or group...which finds its contents and its legitimacy in the researcher's (the scientist or the professional) possession of *a body of scientific knowledge.*" In the practice of social research, in particular, we can identify different ways of expressing technical power: the first regards the asymmetry between the researcher and the social actor's knowledge of the research objectives, the

study tools, and the models for carrying out the investigation (Gilli 1971); closely linked to this aspect are other ways, such as the *scotomization of reality*[8] (Gilli 1971:105), the *lockdown of the situation*[9] (Gilli 1971:107), and lastly the tendency to favor some specific categories within the group of subjects being analyzed, preferably those belonging to social positions such as the middle class (Galtung 1967).

Technical power, then, is the reply to the paradox typical of the human science scholar: to be both within the reality being studied, in that he/she is part of it, but also external to the reality under analysis, as observer and scholar.[10] If the psychologist addresses a problem by adopting various techniques for distancing and detaching himself from the patient who lies on the couch with the promise of hard-fought psychological stabilization, and if the historian, in his turn, manages to get over this difficulty by specializing in the study of previous

generations from the past, how can the sociologist neutralize his relationship with the study object when it represents, above all, the very environment in which he is completely absorbed, in that he is both member and dynamic actor, and directly involved? From this paradox, then, in hindsight, comes the need for traditional sociological methodology of a neo-positivist and behaviorist type which, according to Galtung (1967), tends to overshadow, as far as possible, the social and relational nature of the relationship between the analyst and the analyzed.

What Sort of Participation for Social Research?

Even though they came about in a climate of controversy and breakaway from official science, the instances of criticism from the 1960s and 1970s cannot be hastily labeled and set aside: we would run the risk of not considering the outcomes of a reflexivity that has analyzed research relationships in concrete terms, from a meta-sociological point of view. Indeed, such considerations express the profound need for a reformulation of the relationships that are established over the course of a socio-historical investigation, taking into particular consideration the cognitive objectives and core values. In this sense, the theme of the relationship between researcher and social actor cannot neglect the aspect of values in sociology. First and foremost, it has to take into account an ethical perspective. Gouldner (1970:791), for example, reminds us that reflexive practices cannot be "value-free," but must analyze the idea that "motives and terminating consequences would embody and advance certain specific values."

In the same vein there are also other, more recent proposals, such as those related to the so-called *critical turn to public sociology*, proposed by Burawoy (2005),[11] which has as a reference point the relationship, defined as both spontaneous and reflexive, between the two subjects of the research, or rather, between social scientists and civil society. From this comes an invitation addressed to the scientific community—to be more ethical or more conscious of the relationships that are created with people who are the object of study, and of the effects that this produces: "[we] should be more self-conscious about our relationship to the people we study, and the effects we produce in the act of research" (Burawoy 2005:323).

In order to rise to the challenge, some authors have recommended participation in social research (Ferrarotti 1961; Schwartz and Jacobs 1979; Martino Simeoni 1991). However, I believe that it cannot be considered the cure for all ills. We must therefore ask: What does participation in social research mean? I will try to answer the question starting from an analysis of the different phases of investigation, and it will be enough, then, to contextualize the question and identify some participation models.

Borrowing a well-known type used in the field of sociology of work (Delamotte 1959; Blumberg 1968), it is possible to identify different pure types of

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[7] Normative power derives from a cultural background and makes reference to an obligation based on shared norms and values: in the field of research, it can be used by the researcher when seeking the collaboration of the subject, by appealing to social values such as the common good or the improvement of the *status quo,* or by using little tricks that put the subject in the condition of being unable to refuse the interview (for example, by saying that all the other people have accepted). Remunerative power is a particular form which is fully expressed in an economic system of exchange: in fact, it envisages the payment of the subject in both monetary and moral terms. But, there is another form of the exercise of power, and that is of a sanctionary nature, which is typical of a coercive power and which, according to politological tradition, is expressed through the exercise of force. Excluding its purest manifestations that should not belong to social research, we can attribute to this type those forms of the exercise of power that tend, in different ways, to force the subject to participate in the research according to the researcher's pre-planned procedures; in this category, for example, are all the *captive audience techniques* (Galtung 1967:147), and especially all those devices that appeal to indirect sanctions, as often happens in research carried out in professional environments where the choice to participate or not in the research is not completely free and is conditioned by work relationships (Gilli 1971).

[8] To explain the concept of the *scotomization of reality,* Gilli (1971:105) states that among the researcher's possibilities there is the faculty to arbitrarily make a cut in the relevance in the analysis of the reality being investigated, adopting a relative point of view that by definition is delimited and simplistic. In fact, what normally happens is that the choices of relevance are made in relation to the specific interests of the researcher and even more so those of the client, without worrying at all about the real cognitive needs of the subject being analyzed; and also, in most cases, this means not taking into account the psychophysical and emotional entirety of the subjects, but only evaluating certain characteristics in relation to the expectations for the research results.

[9] By *lockdown of the situation* Gilli (1971:107) means a specific authoritarian manifestation that obliges the object to have themselves portrayed in a static position. Galtung (1967:153) attributes this, in particular, to the *survey.* The assumption at the basis of this manifestation derives from the physical-natural sciences and imposes the non-modification of the object being studied in order to guarantee maximum scientific objectivity.

[10] This is the paradox that Gadamer (1960) expressed so well in the hermeneutic tension that has always existed between familiarity and unfamiliarity.

[11] Public sociology brings into question that vision of the community of sociologists influenced by paternalism, authoritarianism, elitism, and deference; in contrast to a sociology community that is decentralized, democratic, and egalitarian, which seeks to make knowledge more accessible not only to students (who represent the main audience for academic sociologists) but also to the public on a second level, or in other words, civil society (Burawoy 2005).

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participation of social actors in research. The first type takes inspiration from *idyllic participation* (Delamotte 1959; Blumberg 1968): this can be seen as the division of roles that is characterized by the negation of conflict and which is based on a mechanistic and unproblematic concept of research relationships. In other words, research practices of this type are defined by the uni-directionality of the decisions about the ways in which the social actors participate in the research and the outcomes of that research: so the relevance that the social actors attribute to the problems of research is not important; the actors are substantially called on not only to participate in procedures that have already been defined by the research team, but also to give a contribution limited only to the need for information.

The second type arises from *institutional participation* (Delamotte 1959; Blumberg 1968). It regards those forms that include the institutionalized involvement of social actors during the most crucial moments of the research. This type recognizes a psychological and cognitive depth in the subjects involved in the investigation and includes practices that envisage shared management of some of the specific phases of the investigation, such as taking on key actors during the initial phase, adopting empathetic interaction models in the data collection phase, or the involvement of the subjects studied during the analysis and the interpretation of data phases.

Finally, the third type is based on the *conflictual* model (Delamotte 1959; Blumberg 1968): following on from the metaphor of the sphere of industrial relations, it is based on the acceptance of the existence of a permanent dualism between sociologists and social actors'

points of view. For this reason, it is not possible to talk about effective participation in this model, but rather about research practices that are characterized by the awareness that two different *Weltanschauungen* exist and the denial that an effective relationship between the research actors is indeed possible.

On closer inspection, however, all these types of participation reveal an evident limitation: they are based on one-way relationship models, where either only one active subject exists or the two active subjects never meet but travel along parallel planes or planes of pure conflict; but, above all, these models do not adequately take into account the implications of the actor's real participation in the research process.

For this reason, I believe it is important to propose a fourth pure type of participation which we might call *dialogical* (Gadamer 1960; Dwyer 1977): rather than making reference to consolidated investigations, it refers to new hermeneutic, constructivist, and relational concepts that are becoming established in the field of methodological thought on the tools that are available to the researcher during the various phases of the investigation. One of the fundamental characteristics of this participation model is therefore the non-exploitation of the relationship between the researchers and social actors, and recognizing the specific contributions of each person towards the co-construction of the research (Ferrarotti 1961).

Another characteristic of this model can be seen in the inter-penetration into the systems of the two key-subjects of the research: including all those instances which enhance a sort of co-penetration between the worlds of the researcher and the social

actor, and that take into account the transformations that take place during the research until the two subjects react to each other, and therefore until one becomes part of the action objective of the other (Colasanto 2011; Iorio 2011).

Finally, this type of model is characterized by a dialogical structure, so that the scientifically accepted criteria mostly coincide with a form of communication that is as genuine as possible between the subjects. This does not mean denying any conflict that might arise in the research, or the tensions that can arise between opposing views during the actual investigation (Eco 1960). Even though it may be difficult and troublesome (Burawoy 2007), the development of dialogue is the main aim of this participation model which, conscious of its own limits, is offered to the public as a place for discussion and joint action.

What does using either one or other of these research models actually involve? I will now follow up the effects of these choices on the progress of the research, rediscovering in the process all those practices that include the particular involvement of the social actor, and will try to distinguish them according to the specific contribution each ideal type of participation makes.

Participation Models and Practices in the Choice of Research Subjects and in Research Design

The first step is to understand that the researcher and the social actor share the same idea about the *facticity* of the phenomenon they are analyzing, of its external importance, of the fact it *has always been there*. This does not invalidate the specific vocation of the researcher for

the suspension of disbelief, on the other hand, it indicates that social science, more particularly research, is profoundly ingrained in the living world, precisely in function of the tacit agreement that exists between the sociologist and the member of society: he makes sure that there is a common conviction of the fundamental and ordered existence of the phenomenon, whether or not there is an analysis method for it (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). Rather, it is from this shared idea that the choice of research problems derives: daily life, in fact, not only provides the problematic context from which sociology studies arise, but also provides the scientific analysis of the social world with a concept of factual order and cognitive perspective (Ranci 1998).

In other words, from the perspective of participatory research, the objectives of the research can never be unilaterally taken for granted, either by the researchers or the clients, regardless of the attitudes of the groups of people that are the subject/object of the research; they must come from the common awareness of a real problem which is important precisely because of the fact that it has a shared everyday dimension. But, if an institutional perspective of the participation model puts more emphasis on the pragmatic dimension of the origins of the scientific problem,[12] both genetic and functional, which link it to the living world,[13] one aspect of dialogical

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[12] The pragmatist vision of research, as strictly characterized in its cultural background, sees common sense as the basis of every scientific problem, or in any environment in which people are directly involved and the logic of which is defined by a practical sense (Dewey 1938).

[13] As Dewey (1938) recognizes, a very close relationship exists between scientific research and the living world, a relationship that can be understood in a double sense—a genetic relationship, since the research field derives from this sphere, and a functional relationship, since it is the task of science to classify and manipulate existential material.

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participation of a constructivist type places greater emphasis on the idea that sharing problematics with the object of analysis is an essential prerequisite for creating participatory sociology. Thus, for several authors (Ferrarotti 1961; Gilli 1971; Martino Simeoni 1991), the theme of the research must constitute a real element of difficulty and uncertainty for the social actor, it must arise from his practical and cognitive needs.

Based on this, Kahn and Cannell (1957) identify three specific sources for the motivation behind the social actor's participation in an investigation: an extrinsic motivation, an intrinsic motivation, and a social one. In the first case, the theme of the ongoing research is fundamental: in fact, the subject will feel particularly encouraged to collaborate if he finds there is a real coherence with his own personal interests and the objectives or contents of the research project; the second motivation comes about as a result of the personal relationship that is created right from the outset between the researcher/interviewer and the social actor, in that, as many studies have highlighted, the motivation to cooperate with another subject strictly depends on the satisfaction that is gained from the human relationship that is established; lastly, the third type of motivation can be generally defined as having a social basis, in that, it depends on conformity to shared social norms: for example, the most elementary rules of courtesy, respect for authority and for others in general, the common good, which in any case have an important role to play in motivating the subject to *feel a personal interest* in the field of study and the objectives of the research.

Literature contains many examples of specific techniques for engaging the actor in the initial stages of the research: employing a cultural mediator, the use of key-witnesses, interviews with expert witnesses. These are particular subjects who are considered as being competent and trustworthy, and who are therefore chosen because they distinguish themselves from other members of society. One of the fundamental characteristics of these tools is that they give an active role to the social actor, so that there is less of a difference in status between the researcher and the object of study (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970).

However, there is not much literature on the definition of the specific tasks to be carried out by these figures during the different stages of the investigation, and so a brief outline follows. First of all, in some cases, only the key-witness and expert witness can influence and direct the structuring of the research project: seeing that they are figures who belong to the community being analyzed, their advice and indications give them the opportunity to push the researcher towards changing direction and altering the target, depending on the way things transpire during the investigation. The research project is not always planned on the basis of the researcher's direct experience in the field; in this way, the sociologist can get an idea of the different stages of the research, not just based on prior experience—personal or otherwise—or on the results of similar research, but can make use of the help of key-witnesses and expert witnesses in deciding which areas of observation are more important, which research tools will be more or less acceptable to the social actors, and in what order

to carry out the various stages of the research. Another important area of intervention is the moment of contact between the object of analysis and entry into the community under study, which involves the specific role of the cultural mediator. This figure gives the researcher the opportunity to establish a good relationship with the members of the group being analyzed, helping him to overcome any difficulties with integration or linguistic or cultural comprehension, and to overcome any explicit or implicit *rites of entry* into the community. Access to information flow is the specific job of the *gatekeeper*, a figure who is also often the key-witness, and who, because of their social position, is responsible for information control and for maintaining social control within the group. Finally, all the figures mentioned above, through their mediation and their direct knowledge of the other community members, are able to support the sampling stage, and can offer interesting information about the most suitable subjects for the aims of the research and about the characteristics that should be considered during the selection stage. Also, during the research activity, the key-witnesses and expert witnesses may be asked to help in defining the concepts and the boundaries of the reference classes, or for extra information with personal opinions on the characteristics of the study object, or perhaps for some immediate feedback on the researcher's ideas and the proposal of a subjective interpretation. Finally, all of the figures mentioned thus far might be called on to take the role of interlocutor and dialectical representative if any problems come up along the way, especially if these concern relationships and the whole group being studied, or just some particular subjects.

Participation Models and Practices for Data Collection

As we know, data collection for social research is principally done in four different ways: analysis of documents, collection of secondary data, participant observation, and direct collection through interviews. In this section, attention is focused on participant observation and on the interview, in an attempt to show the participation models that underlie the different ways these two techniques are used and interpreted.

Starting with participant observation, the main objective of this technique is to overcome the cognitive and cultural gap that exists between analyst and analyzed by moving one of the actors towards the other (Gobo 2008); it is up to the researcher to approach the subject/object of study, relinquishing the detachment typical of the observer and trying, by participating in the social actor's world, to acquire their language, to understand their symbols, and recognize how they express themselves. This does not just mean gaining the social actor's compliance, but also mastering interpretation keys and specific competences that are not familiar to the researcher. The outcome of this access means being able to reconstruct the set of rules and codes that make the behavior and communication dynamics of the social actor understandable and meaningful. This only seems possible if the researcher enters the social actor's group of origin, taking on the role of a participating member (Adler and Adler 1987): the distance between the academic and the subject/object of study becomes closer, so that the researcher's immersion in the social actor's world takes the

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typical form of a *temporary enrollment* (Ranci 1998).[14] Precisely because of this temporary nature, participant observation also reproduces the ethnographic complexity that belongs to the relationship between natives and foreign observers. It arises, in fact, from the idea that it is possible to observe at the same time as living: but this, Ranci notes (1998), requires a balance that is not only a paradox on a theoretical level, but is just as difficult to do on a practical level.

And it is to respond to this problematic aspect that ethnomethodological research has come up with—the idea of *empathic orientation*: this approach derives from the open criticism of the traditional concept of the technique, in that it is able only to propose a reconstruction of social reality according to the researcher's narrow point of view, that is, from the point of view of the person who will always be described as an outsider in the actors' accounts. The empathic perspective means a full immersion into the social context being studied, which must be accompanied by the researcher's ability to identify with the social actor on an emotional level, so that the relationship established between the two is based not so much on the intellectual effort needed to gain access, but on the emotional contribution, in other words, the researcher's ability to intuitively understand the other's sentiments and interpret them, and to empathize with the subjective experiences. Here, empathy is the element of discontinuity from the classic approach: it allows the researcher to temporarily abandon their

own tacit knowledge to "go native" and become familiar with the subjects' behaviors, so that they can directly experience and empathize with the mental states and intentions of the people they are analyzing. If the classical view of participant observation rose from the necessity to reconcile the two points of view (conflicting but both valid) of the observer and the observed, in Ranci's (1998) opinion, this new concept of empathy helps to achieve this.

However, until we are able to identify the characteristics of dialogical participation in this approach, we need to abandon a naive romantic and idealistic vision which sees empathy as the only way to fully understand the other's point of view, and take on an additional new element[15]: that is, understand that the main objective of the research is not so much to reflect social reality as to build it socially; "it is not about producing absolute knowledge but interpretations [and constructions of reality].[16] Behaviors tell us something about how actors interpret their own actions. Research produces interpretations that try to give a sense to the ways in which actors try to give a sense to their own actions" (Melucci 1998:23).

The first example of a dialogical approach in participant observation is suggested by Whyte (1955). In his study on the Italian slums of Boston, he employed a special assistant who was a member of the studied street corner society. Thanks to this strategy, there

was an overturning of roles: Whyte, the observer, was temporarily enrolled as a member of the studied community, becoming one of the best friends of his main key-witness, while Ornandella, a native, was temporarily enrolled as an observer, assistant of the sociologist. The empathic involvement of Whyte's participation is also clear when he guided Cornerville members to organize public demonstrations to get City Hall to pump more money into the neighborhood. However, an idyllic view of the access to the information field is unrealistic. In the methodological annex, Whyte (1955) specifies that he always was recognized as a stranger and as a gringo.[17] The dialogical approach, in fact, does not eliminate tensions or difficulties; its peculiarity is the circularity and awareness with the possibility to open processes of common hermeneutic construction and overturning.

A preference for direct collection techniques, through interviews with the social actor, derives from a completely different source. Even though it is on the way to rediscovering interactional perspectives for the valorization of the social construction of the information base, this approach has its origins in behavioral concepts that still affect it today. Within this approach we can find three positions that we will call *mechanistic*, *critical*, and *interactional* (Sormano 1996), and which represent three different relational models between the actors during the direct collection stage: the researcher, the social actor, and the interviewer. This latter figure, in particular, is often equated to that of the researcher, and in many cases is seen as

a neutral mediation channel between the researcher and the social actor. When considering the roles of the single subjects who carry out the social interview, it is important not to neglect the specific role of the interviewer who has a fundamental position in the construction of the information base. In fact, this position should be given careful attention since if, on the one hand, in most social research, there is a long line of intermediaries between the researcher and the subject/object of the research, and on the other, the interviewer is often the only individual able to directly ascertain the actual impact of the data collection tools created by the researcher, and to obtain immediate feedback about the overall trend of the survey (Boccuzzi 1985).

In reality, in the first position I analyze, there is no great interest in the specific role of the interviewer: he is simply seen as the person who carries out the tasks assigned by the researcher, so that his primary interests are seen as being the passive administration of stimuli and the registration of the information gathered from the interviewee, avoiding at all costs any possible filter, influence, elaboration, or distortion. This is part of a basic theoretical framework which involves creating the stimulus-response design through the rigorous division of the work involved in the survey. It is the researcher's job to design and develop the stimuli that will most efficiently garner the greatest amount of relevant information, with the aim of accessing the deepest layers of the interviewee's personality; it is the interviewer's job to carry out instructions verbatim, without taking any personal initiatives; and it is the social actor's role to answer the questions immediately and mechanically, allowing the information that he already possesses

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[14] There are different ways for making this access possible, and they can be placed along a continuum which goes from an active incognito participation (concealed participation) to declared participation (unconcealed participation), but also along another continuum which goes from passive or moderate participation to active and complete (Gobo 2001).

[15] An element recognized by Ranci (1998).

[16] To affirm this, Melucci (1998) adds the notion of plausibility. This, the author sustains, represents an important point in the methodological challenge that has been raised by qualitative research, a challenge that interests social research in its entirety. In fact, plausibility opens two relevant questions: the relationship, though mediated by narration, between observation and reality and the theme of interpretation criteria (Melucci 1998).

[17] Initially, he was observing, asking too many questions, and the relationship with natives was tense. When Whyte sat back and simply observed, he found his situation changed for the better: "[a]s I sat and listened, I learnt the answers to the questions that I would not have had the sense to ask" (1955:235).

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to come out, depending on its adherence to the requests. In the behaviorist ideal, in fact, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee must be completely neutralized in order to depersonalize the event and make it mechanical, so a mechanical situation is produced in which every uniform question receives an immediate reaction; if, however, the main concern of the interviewer is what Hyman (1954) calls *stimulus invariance*, the interviewee's concern must be to react to the stimuli he is given.

Implicit in this model is another basic concept which Sormano (1996) effectively calls the *simple extractive approach*: this derives from a meeting between behaviorist applications and information communication theories. Information is therefore considered as being at the center of the methodological construction of the research technique, and its conservation is the objective of many commonly accepted prescriptions: this leads to the study of the sources of data distortion, of the importance of an adequate transcription and registration of information, on the fidelity of the data collected. Information is hypostatized as if it were a treasure to be preserved within the interviewee and that already exists there in its entirety, and that, above all, corresponds to the actual state of the subject and what is being analyzed.

For these reasons, this approach to data collection through interview can be appropriately assigned to a research model based on an idyllic concept, or on a non-problematic relationship between the different actors involved in the research. The goal of the interviewer will be simply to explore the conscience of the interviewee and extract information with the help of certain tools: rhetorical devices that help him access the innermost thoughts of the subject; there are also vertical data collection techniques that make use of a funnel-shaped data collection tool that includes increasingly specific questions that penetrate more deeply into the research problem; finally, there are horizontal techniques for asking the questions in order of proximity, which permits an in-depth discussion of the main dimensions of the research. On the other hand, this model assumes that the social actor will be absolutely rational and that his answers will be mechanical, complete, and transparent: here, it is exclusively clarity of meaning that is valuable as it corresponds precisely to the actual state of the subject (Sormano 1996). Moreover, in this context, the social actor is exposed to the cultural, practical, and cognitive world of the researcher; and he is called on to temporarily detach his role from its daily context, so as to lessen any distances from the researcher. The way the data collection tool is structured helps the social actor to carry out this task: for the interviewee, this means the imposition of the researcher's specific way of thinking, reply categories, and behavior practices.

The second approach pertinent to the direct data collection technique derives from the mechanistic concept and represents its critical development. Specifically, it originates from the considerations made by Atteslander and Kneubühler (1975) who begin with an accurate analysis of the behaviorist position, and introduce several important innovations which open the doors to some future developments: in particular, their focus concentrates on the passage from a research choice that is based on the researcher's extractive capacity to another which underlines the social context of the interview (Sormano 1996). In this view, the actor takes on a psychological importance and becomes the creator of his own interpretations of the research, which has full repercussions on the progress of the interview and on the data collection process. The theoretical point of departure is, in fact, represented by cognitivism, according to which rather than finding that the interviewee represents an unformed terrain of mechanical reactions, or a *tabula rasa*, he is instead a fertile ground full of meaning where it is possible to flourish, acquire meaning, and consolidate past experiences. Thus, each reply does not correspond to an actual state that is ready to be extracted and made use of, but to a process of elaboration and construction which depends on many factors concerning the relational context and the statements of the interviewee. According to this approach, behind the traditional *distortions*, there is a truth and a cause that depend primarily on the psychological and social conditions of the interviewee. Indeed, it can be defined as a limitation characterized by three systems of normative reference, which together make up the interpretive framework for attributing sense to the communications results: the general social normative system, that of the reference group, and that specific to the interview. This means giving an active role to meaning for all the subjects involved. As expected from the institutional participation model, each person has a specific task: the social actor, the researcher, and even the interviewer, who, as a conscious subject, is able to evaluate the progress of the interview and to contextualize the contents. It is easy to understand why many authors recognize the importance of the interviewer's training, as it is the outcome of a thought process that shifts attention from information to the whole concept-variable-procedure process of data collection (Converse 1970).

The last reference model in the interview category is the *interactional* one (Sormano 1996; Ranci 1998). It could be included in the practices that are connected to a pure type of dialogical participation deriving from a constructivist basis. This approach, more than being considered a school of thought or a consolidated research practice, should be considered an approach that is still being formed and defined and whose characteristics can be seen in some forms of interview and interview analysis that are slowly emerging in the social sciences. If, in fact, the main limitation of the other positions can be seen as their inability to recognize the distances that exist between the research subjects as representatives of different realities, in this new concept, which is still being formed, the idea of including social relations in the interview situation means taking into account that the different points of view—of the researcher, the interviewer, and the interviewee—all contribute in their own way to the design of the research project. In this sense, the data collection phase is a crucial moment of the research in which a system of relationships is created where all the subjects play a game of agreement/differentiation with the others, strategically using their identity references (Emerson and Pollner 1988). In fact, the input from each person is considered indispensable for the social construction of information, which, far from being data, is the result of these interactional relationships.[18]

To sum up, in this perspective, which is in the process of being acknowledged, we are very far from the first mechanistic model where the tool most

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[18] In this respect, Sormano (1996) proposes the use of contributions offered by new linguistic theories about enunciation and by studies on polyphony with the use of discourse markers.

suitable for reproducing collected data was the tape recorder; but, we are also far from the second model still based on a more elaborate scheme of the stimulus-response process. This latter direction can, to all intents and purposes, be traced back to a dialogical participation model in that all three figures typical of the data collection phase can be considered active in the processing and development of the data, thus producing a circularity of interpretive levels which intersect, blend, and redefine each other.

Participation Models and Practices in Data Analysis and Interpretation

In the classic imagery of social research, the analysis phase of the collected data and the interpretation of the results is the absolute responsibility of the researcher who, at a distance from the reality of the study or the location where the data is collected, is shut up in his study, seeking to record and process the available data. In literature, there are several ideas about the specific intervention of the social actor during this phase of the research. On the whole, these are tools that have been borrowed from anthropology and which show the need to obtain direct feedback from the *natives* through a generic *confirmation of the actors* (Gobo 2008). One aspect that appears in all the variations in this group of techniques[19] are meetings organized with the participating members

of the community being analyzed, where they are asked to give their own opinions about the interpretations made by the anthropologist during the various stages of the research. These opportunities for discussion make it possible to judge the mood of the research trend through direct contact with the protagonists involved in the research, so that extra information can be obtained and an immediate comparison made of the mood and the reactions elicited from the ethnographical interpretations (Spradley 1979). In many cases, however, it is considered as being an evaluation technique with the main task of validating ethnographical reports (Gould et al. 1974).

In hindsight, however, this application implies an idyllic approach in that, in addition to not taking into account the psychological and social importance of the existing relationships between researcher and social actor, it does not fully value the cognitive, cultural, and life differences between the different actors. The principal criticisms to this technique concentrates on this point: it emphasizes the existing difference in first level interpretations and second level ones (Moerman 1974), and the responsibility that the scientific community has to validate the assertions. Starting from this basis, Douglas (1976) and Schatzman and Strauss (1973) have put forward new variations in the technique that can help to steer ethnographical interpretations in new directions not yet considered by researchers.

In sociology, this tool is used in order to supply further sources of information and precious additional materials which can enrich the researcher's wealth of knowledge when his work is done, and possibly refocus his analysis (Gobo 2008; Cardano 2011). In particular, on this subject, sociology literature mentions

an interesting operation that involves the social actor during the data interpretation stage; this is a reflexive practice carried out by Lanzara (1993; also mentioned by Cardano 2011), which, when the monitoring of the project was at an end, involved all the participants in a presentation of the dialogical and constructive results. This was called *backtalk* to underline the conversational nature and the linguistic content that was typical of this form of interaction that is established between observer and social actor.[20]

In the field of research practice, creativity has given rise to other applications of this type which are also mostly unknown to methodologists. For example, the use of discussion groups or actual *focus groups* in order to bring out new interpretations by making the most of the synergic effect (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990), or to widen the field of research and new themes connected to the research object (Bertrand, Ward, and Pauc 1992; Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub 1996), or again, to identify the perceptions and the attitudes of the participants in data collection (Brown and Heller 1981).[21]

The interesting aspect of all these applications, more or less familiar in the field of sociology, is that in the attempt to clarify the results obtained, they can spark ideas that can involve:

1. the technical-operative dimension, aimed at analyzing the tools used in the research, especially

in relation to how they were perceived and how they were used by the subjects being analyzed;

2. the information-assessment dimension, aimed at clarifying values, attitudes, tacit knowledge, experiential assumptions, and mental connections of those contributing to the creation of the research information base;

3. the theoretical-interpretative dimension, aimed at stimulating, redefining, and eventually refocusing the considerations during the analysis and interpretation.

If the institutional participation point of view sees the involvement of the actors through reflexive techniques as mainly concentrating on the adequacy of the tools chosen and on the quality of the data (with specific attention to distortions), the constructivist point of view sees the possibility of refocusing the research and of recreating, through open dialogue with the actors, new possibilities for the discussion of motivations, relational mechanisms, and the reasons why all those involved gave a different reading to the same event problem and were more interested in certain aspects rather than others.

Final Considerations

To conclude, we can ask if and how a dialogical participation model can be a prelude or a contribution to a democratization process of the social research.

At this point, I would like to highlight that a real equal relationship between the social actor and the researcher is not only a utopia but also a great

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[19] Traditionally, this consists of a particular form of validation of ethnographic reports and provides for the involvement of the actors in order to obtain from them either confirmations or denials about specific data collection or data interpretation. In literature, this is spoken of as *a member test of validity* (Douglas 1976), of *host verification* (Schatzman and Strauss 1973), of *member verification* (Gould et al. 1974), of *respondent/member validation* (Bloor 1978; Emerson and Pollner 1988), which mean the convalidating function that this technique, in its many forms, carries out on the output from the intellectual and creative activity of the ethnographer.

[20] The idea of *backtalk* derives, above all, from the hermeneutic sphere, where interaction regards the relationship between the observer and his research materials that are not necessarily alive, but that are in a certain sense able to *talk* to whoever is appropriately questioning them, such as happens with a text.

[21] Brown and Heller (1981) have used a variation of this technique called *Group Feedback Analysis* (GFA).

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misunderstanding. The hermeneutic circle requires two different levels of analysis and two different points of view on the social reality. In this sense, not considering the different status and roles of the two main actors of the social research can be a misconstruction[22]: every democracy requires organic solidarity and a strict division of work. On the other hand, a unilateral way of doing social research is not simply the result of a legacy from positivist scientism, but more a negation of the social character of sciences, especially human ones.

In order to create a way to democratize the research, it is important to consider three questions.

First of all, the non-exploitation of the relationship between researcher and social actor, which in practice means recognizing the specific contribution of each person towards the co-construction of the research.

Secondly, it is important to try out new forms of participation for the social actor by valuing his competent contribution during the research activities. Three key words, borrowed from the field of industrial relations, should be taken into consideration:

- information,
- consultation,
- participation in decision-making processes.

There is no perfect formula that can be adapted to all cases, and some of the reasons why it is not possible to impose a standardized direction are: sensitive issues, peculiarities of the research group and/or the clients, and the characteristics of the social actors, et cetera. At each stage of the research, it is necessary to bear in mind that the social actor is the real investigation partner and co-constructor. Therefore, in principle, he should not be kept in the dark about the research objectives, or about the goals and the procedures, or even about the results. In general, he should be kept well-informed in an open way. As far as consultation is concerned, the support (therefore, not simply the recruitment) of key-figures for consultancy is also valuable, and as regards participation in decision-making processes, experiments are in progress to also include representatives from the social world in the research groups.

Thirdly, democratization means being brave enough to open the black box of the research process. This means that, on the one hand, the researcher cannot disregard the economic and structural restrictions of the research, or its social collocation, and the cultural and professional role of researchers (Melucci 1998); on the other, it means that reflexivity must not fall back only on analysis and self-analysis, but must be able to seek out new practices which—as Gouldner would say (1970:489)—transform sociology and make the sociologist more self- aware, both as an expert and as an agent of change.

In my opinion, this is precisely the challenge that all social sciences are called on to face: it means both recognizing the social and historical characteristics

typical of every research practice, and also planning forms of participation that represent, most importantly, a common space of trust and integrity.[23]

Democratizing social research, in fact, responds to two particular needs. Primarily, there is a functional reason which sees the optimization of the information base as central to the question. Starting with the premise that states that researchers have great difficulty understanding and representing the social actor's point of view,[24] this motivation sees participation as a tool that allows the researcher to obtain the social actor's consensus, and this is an effective contribution capable of improving, in a functional sense, the successful outcome of the research. And this is the reason why, in traditional manuals on social research methodology, it is not difficult to find proposals for conscious interaction (Corbetta 1999:176), engagement (Marsh and Keating 1996:126), and the adoption of a participatory style (Arcuri and Arcuri 2010:108).

But, there is another, more significant reason that advances the idea of democratization in our discipline at the moment: the historical-social reason. This sees participation as the result of the eman-

cipation of civil society, which originates from the crisis in human values in our industrialized society and which has brought about the dawn of a new pluralistic era. Far from being made up of passive and indifferent subjects, this new era is characterized by subjects who are increasingly active, competent, and conscious, able to interpret and assume a critical vision not only of reality but also of social research itself.

To this end, in particular, I hope that the thoughts presented in this study will: offer some suggestions as to how we might bring about the application of a dialogical participation model, and also change the way research is done.

It is an ethical necessity, as Burawoy (2005) points out. Social sciences need to return to their origins, but also need to undergo some reconstruction so that they can pose new questions about their mission. It is possible to state that the dialogical proposal also embodies the characteristics of a bet: this means backing a sociology that is both a service to humanity, with emancipatory aims, and the ability to listen, but is also a means for highlighting human dignity.

It is also a historical necessity. As Heron (1996) maintains, the time has come for a proposal that expresses the importance of today's man and woman, and the time has also come for an elite vision of science to give way to a popular, democratic, and—above all—dialogical concept. In this way, proposing participation makes Touraine's (1984) invitation more credible, to return to the social actor, not just as a historical subject, but also as a new reference point for the renewal of social sciences and research practices.

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[22] An example is the dialogic ethnographic reporting introduced into anthropology after the Santa Fe Congress in 1984. Although fundamental for a critical turn of cultural studies, this experience resulted in substituting the observer's monological account, written in the first or the third person, for ethnographical accounts, recounted by many voices and difficult to read and understand, where the transcription of the natives' discourses had an equal role that irreverently questioned the interpretations and the notes of anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

[23] At this point, the statement contained in art. 14 of the Code of Ethics of the British Sociological Association (2002) seems significant: after specifying in art. 10 that during their research sociologists enter into a personal and moral relationship with the subjects they are studying, that is, people, families, social groups, or bodies, art. 14 explicitly states, that "[b]ecause sociologists study the relatively powerless, as well as those more powerful than themselves, research relationships are frequently characterised by disparities of power and status. Despite this, research relationships should be characterized, whenever possible, by trust and integrity" (see: http://www.britsoc.co.uk/about/equality/statement-of-ethical-practice.aspx).

[24] Cf. the so-called legitimation crisis in scientific representation (Palumbo 2009).

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