Benefits and Challenges of Qualitative Methodologies in Cross-cultural Psychology Studies

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Abstract

Qualitative research has been considered increasingly valuable for cross-cultural psychology studies, but its contributions and challenges to the field remain under discussed. This chapter does that by analysing a qualitative study which compares interpretive beliefs and behaviour of street-level workers from health, social, and law enforcement sectors working with policies for crack cocaine and heroin in the cities of Amsterdam, Netherlands, and Porto Alegre, Brazil. Challenges and contributions for the use of qualitative methodologies in cross-cultural studies were found in different research stages. Challenges were centred on how to balance empirical closure and analytical distance. Benefits relate to a wider variation in responses and a more contextual level of experiences, allowing for more grounded theorization.

Introduction

Qualitative research has been considered increasingly valuable for cross-cultural psychology studies (e.g Karasz & Singelis, 2009; Tanggaard, 2014). Yet, not many studies applying qualitative methodologies discuss its contributions and challenges to the field (*e.g.* Demuth, 2013; Mangen, 1999). Especially in studies comparing social policies on the 'grass-root' level, very little is written about methodological questions of cross-cultural research (*e.g.* Gómez & Kuronen, 2011). Contributions and challenges of qualitative methodologies to the cross-cultural field remain under discussed.

This chapter debates challenges and benefits of using qualitative methodologies inspired on a cross-cultural study (Rigoni, 2015) about behaviour and interpretive beliefs of street level workers. It describes how the use of qualitative methodology tools might shape the way a research is carried, and presents possible results arising from this approach. Firstly, a brief introduction to the research and its methodology are offered. Secondly, two perceived challenges and two benefits of using qualitative methodologies in cross-cultural research are debated. Conclusions are drawn focusing on the added value of qualitative methodologies for cross-cultural studies.

The research

The study inspiring this debate analyses and compares how street level workers from social, health and law enforcement sectors manage to implement policies for crack cocaine and heroin. It looks at how workers choose between different approaches towards drug use, ranging from public health to public order. The study compares two cities in very different settings. One, in a developing country, historically strict, but with a recent and growing tendency towards a more open drug policy, and the other, in a developed country with a historically liberal, but recent and growing tendency towards a stricter drug policy. These places are Porto Alegre, in Brazil, and Amsterdam, in the Netherlands.

The research is based on street level bureaucracy theories (*e.g.* Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), which states that workers at the street level (those working closer to citizens) transform the way public policies happen into practice. When trying to cope with the gaps between organizational rules and expectations and the reality they find in the streets, workers create strategies and take decisions to find possibilities for policy to happen. This is what street level bureaucracy scholars call 'discretion': a certain freedom in exercising one's work role (Evans, 2010). What this qualitative study does is to map the range of interpretive beliefs and discretionary behaviour workers have towards people who use drugs, developing an understanding on how these shape drug policies at the street level. By comparing two cities and three professional sectors, the study explores the impact of different cultural, socio-economic and historical circumstances on local approaches to the exercise of discretion.

Methodology

The research design complies two case studies (Yin, 1994): Amsterdam and Porto Alegre. A Grounded Theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Urquhart, 2013) and an ethnographic approach (Sumner & Tribe, 2004) are adopted to derive a bottom-up understanding of policy. A grounded theory method does not seek to impose preconceived ideas on the world, but to build theory departing from fieldwork data, focusing on how individuals interact with the phenomenon under study (Urquhart, 2013). These methods allow to respect the different 'social constructions' workers might have regarding drug use, and their possible choices on how to implement drug policies on a daily basis.

Following grounded theory principles (Urquhart, 2013), sampling, data gathering and analysis occurred sequentially. Theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin 1998) was applied to select participants, with analytical categories guiding places and people to sample for data collection and in turn being modified by the data. Sampling aimed at developing, intensifying and saturating emerging categories (Morse, 2007), taking into account their relevance and variability.

Fieldwork was conducted over 14 months: in Amsterdam from February to July 2010 and in Porto Alegre from August 2010 until March 2011. The researcher was located in the respective cities during these fieldwork periods and, moreover, lived in Porto Alegre from 1994 until 2008 and in Amsterdam since 2011. Around 800 hours of participant observation and 80 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with workers from 40 different services divided among the three sectors and the two cities.

In-depth interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire and lasted around

1 hour. Interviews were done in English in Amsterdam and in Brazilian Portuguese in Porto Alegre. Forward and backward translation (WHO, 2009) was used to achieve conceptually equivalency of the instruments in each of the target countries/cultures. Interviews were voice recorded, and participants signed an informed consent. Approval of ethical committees was acquired when necessary. Observations and interviews were transcribed and analysed with Atlas.ti, a software for qualitative data analysis based on the analytical steps of Grounded Theory (Lewins & Silver, 2007).

Following pages debate challenges and benefits of using qualitative methodologies in a cross-cultural study.

Balancing closure and distance

In qualitative research, researcher's experiences and feelings are a main tool both to gather and to interpret the data collected in the field. Researcher's subjectivity is the main instrument to learn about culture, beliefs and experiences of research participants (Kvale, 1996). Rather than something to be suppressed, researcher's feelings are treated as data (*e.g.* Coffey, 1999; Demuth, 2013; Flick, 1998; Tanggaard, 2014), becoming an important tool to understand local contexts and processes. This require of the researcher to be honest and reflexive about his/her own assumptions and experiences, reflecting upon how they influence the research process.

A crucial point in the research debated here, which is extendable for other qualitative studies, is to establish empathy with research participants. Connecting with people is essential to understand how and why they think and behave in the ways they do. This requires not only listening and 'interpreting' people's thoughts, but also being able to make researcher's beliefs and preferences flexible in order to connect with a wide range of experiences.

Being an outsider in Amsterdam and an insider in Porto Alegre, however, raised the challenge for the researcher of making the unknown familiar in one place and the familiar unknown on the other. Local language, street slangs, cultural norms and behavior required an extra effort of interpretation in Amsterdam, while in Porto Alegre required a reflexive distance for 'denaturalization'. Besides that, being an insider in the health sector (as a psychologist) and an outsider in the social and mainly law enforcement sectors brought difficulties in empathizing with some participants, raising concerns about possible bias in the research. The researcher found it hard, for instance, to identify with some workers' interpretive beliefs and observe situations in which violence towards drug users was involved: sometimes it was difficult to understand the reasons the workers felt they had to think/act this way.

In order to assure empirical closure, while achieving analytical distance, reflexivity was used as a tool. A 'reflexive research process' is a continuous process of critical analysis and interpretation in relation to the research methods and the data, but also in relation to the researcher, participants and the research context (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). It is a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from the research and how that knowledge is generated (ibid.). Reflexivity assures rigor in the approach to reflect about possible biases in sampling, gathering and analyzing data (Bourgois, 2003).

The use of Atlas.ti software enhanced this reflexivity by allowing the recording of the analytical process through field notes and memos. 'Traceable' analytical steps and interpretations allowed revisions, reflections and criticism in later stages of the research. Asking for participant's feedback on first results and interpretations also increased reflexivity. Feedback was not only a confirmatory tool, but also a way of further improving the connection with participants and of giving them something back in exchange for their collaboration. A continuous process of reflexivity allowed to balance empirical closure and analytical distance, addressing possible influences from the researcher's background and feelings in different stages of the research.

Balancing similarities and differences

Another challenge found in using qualitative methodology in a cross-cultural research was how to compare very diverse contexts and experiences and find comparable patterns across countries and sectors without losing sight of local variability. One of the main benefits of qualitative research is to get very rich data related to local processes and context (*e.g.* Flick, 1998; Kvale, 1996), which comes from the closeness the researcher develops with participants and the field at large.

In this closer look, variations within countries, cultures and conceptualizations of phenomena such as drug use present much more nuances than large-scale quantitative studies can reach. The variation provided by qualitative approaches allows an in-depth understanding of local processes. An excessive focus on variation, however, risks to overshadow possible cross-cultural similarities. Different from large-scale quantitative studies, small scale qualitative research do not dismiss 'outliers': deviant patterns assume an important function in the explanation of the phenomena at stake (*e.g.* Demuth, 2013). In a qualitative researchers' mind, experiences and behaviour of participants are valued for their differences. The main objective in these approaches is to explain *how* the processes under study happen and, for that matter, focusing only on main patterns is not enough for an in-depth understanding.

In the study mentioned here, an interesting example relates to workers' interpretive beliefs around problems and solutions for drug use. Comparing the main patterns of beliefs in the different countries and sectors brought outstanding differences across cultures. Interpretive beliefs of workers from Amsterdam tended to be similar across sectors and to combine public health and public order to justify approaches to drug users. In Porto Alegre, on the other hand, the main pattern showed social and health workers sharing similar interpretive beliefs mostly around public health, and law enforcement workers having a different position by focusing mostly on public order.

Differential main patterns, however, carried a stereotypical image of workers' be-

havior in the studied cities, which were far from representing the full range of responses workers have. A closer look into the experiences and processes of the 'outliers', who formed the deviant patterns found in each city and across sectors, revealed similarities across the ocean. While holding main different standpoints regarding drug use, workers from both cities and across the sectors shared the fact that they combined –with various nuances and meanings- public health and public order approaches in their interpretive beliefs and responses towards drug users. By respecting and including the variations found, a broader explanatory and grounded theory could be built around common patterns across cultures.

Accounting for variation: theoretical sampling

Despite the challenges, the use of qualitative methodologies in cross-cultural research has valuable benefits. Reaching a higher degree of variation of participant's responses is one of them. An important tool in this point is the concept of theoretical sampling from grounded theory, which is defined as: 'Data gathering derived from the evolving theory and based on the concept of "making comparisons", whose purpose is to go to places, people, or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 201).

In practice, theoretical sampling means that sampling is not completely defined before the start of the fieldwork, but evolves during the research process. In the study mentioned here, initial categories coming from previous studies were taken into account, but were broadened according to the first analyses. Previous literature (*e.g.* Brener, von Hippel, & Kippax, 2007; Forman, Bovasso, & Woody, 2001; Humphreys, Noke, & Moos, 1996; Miller & Moyers, 1993) contend, for instance, that workers' sex, age, and years of experience working with drug users are important factors impacting workers beliefs and activities. These features, thus, were considered as starting points for sampling stratification, but the investigation was open to new factors coming from primary data.

According to the categories being produced by data analysis, specific groups of workers were added to the sample. Years of experience working with users, for instance, influenced police workers' behaviour and beliefs both in Amsterdam and in Porto Alegre, but in very different ways. More experienced police workers from Amsterdam held, in general, more liberal approaches towards drug use than less experienced ones. This was regarded by workers as an effect of experiencing the failure of strict approaches in practice. In Porto Alegre, on the other hand, having more years of experience usually meant that police workers held stricter beliefs and practices towards drug users, which was attributed to being closer to the type of policing during the military dictatorship in the country.

Variation achieved with theoretical sampling also allowed to map factors influencing workers' beliefs and behaviour in similar ways across cities and categories. One emerging category (Morse, 2007) for care workers was being outreach or office based. Outreach workers (whom search for drug users in users' environment, instead of waiting inside their offices) tended to use more bonding techniques in their relationship with users than their office based counterparts. These last ones tended to focus in managing and negotiating rules as a way to build their relationship with users. This influence across cultures led to adjust the sample to include and balance workers who were both office based and outreach. Balancing sampling according to emerging analytical categories allowed to gather more variation of behaviours and to achieve a deeper understanding of workers beliefs and behaviour.

Beyond top-down models: grounded theorization

Finally, a major benefit in using qualitative methodologies in cross-cultural research relates to the possibility of producing more grounded theorization. A theory that is closer to local actors is powerful to understand the processes they go through. The analysis of the interpretive beliefs held by social, health and law enforcement workers towards drug use is an interesting example for debate.

Previous studies in the drug field propose the use of 'models' of how to understand and tackle drug use in order to identify and analyze workers' interpretive beliefs. Quantitative studies have produced scales to measure health workers' values and feelings towards users (Brener *et al.*, 2007; Phillips & Bourne, 2008) and workers' beliefs about drug treatment (*e.g.* Humphreys *et al.*, 1996; Miller & Moyers, 1993; Queiroz, 2007). Their large-scale survey methods allow to isolate variables, contributing to generate models and scales to assess beliefs. The main models proposed are the medical, coercive, moral, psychosocial and harm reduction. The medical model, with beliefs of drug addiction as an illnesses and total abstinence as a solution, is usually associated with the medical field. The coercive model, with beliefs that drug use is a criminal issue which deserves punishment is usually attached to the action of police. The moral model reflects a judgment of drug use as being essentially bad and requiring a character reform; is usually connected to religious workers. The psychosocial model connects ideas that the environment is important in determining drug use, and is associated with actions of social and health workers. The harm reduction model, finally, is associated with human rights for people who use drugs, and workers from social and health fields (*e.g.* Acselrad, 2000; Humphreys, Greenbaum, Noke, & Finney, 1996; IHRA, 2010; Pauly, 2008; Queiroz, 2007).

Despite the benefits of the use of models in assessing workers' beliefs, they have limitations to understand how workers behave and take decisions daily. The wide range of interpretive beliefs and behaviour of workers found trough a qualitative methodology showed that the adoption of different models were not necessarily associated with specific working sectors or professions, as contended by the literature. Also, instead of adopting only one of the models proposed in their interpretive beliefs, most workers

combine different models to justify their actions. In Porto Alegre, for instance, many care workers believe users have to be sent to in-patient drug treatments in order to become drug abstinent (medical model) and be protected from a non-supportive environment (psychosocial). In Amsterdam, most workers from care and law enforcement fields believe in providing users with methadone (as drug substitution treatment - medical + harm reduction models) and user rooms/shelters (psychosocial) to keep them away from the streets and prevent nuisance and crimes (coercive). (For a more detailed discussion, see chapter 3 in Rigoni 2015).

Assuming the variations found on the local context, the study proposes to see combinations of models as strategies workers use to transform drug policies into practice, rather than as 'implementation problems' or 'eclectic behaviour' of workers (*e.g.* Humphreys *et al.*, 1996; Miller & Moyers, 1993) as previous studies did. By combining different models and approaches, workers manage to balance different and contradictory goals and expectations they receive from organizations and users, and the ones they hold as professionals, with the resources available on the ground floor. Accounting for the nuances of main and deviant patterns of workers' beliefs across cultures allowed to produce a more grounded theorization to explain workers' experiences and decision processes, complementing the work previously done by other studies.

Concluding remarks

Overall, the main challenges found in the use of qualitative methodologies in this cross-cultural study relates to balancing empirical closure and analytical distance in stages of data sampling , collection and analysis. As main benefits, the study brings the richness of a wider variability of patterns and in-depth understanding of local processes. Overcoming the challenges of its use in cross-cultural comparisons require a close attention to researcher's possible biases and a serious account of ethnographic reflexivity. The benefits of the approach, however, compensate these efforts. Qualitative methodologies bring the possibility of reconciling complexity, detail and context. They provide valuable insights and a clear comprehension of how the processes under analysis occur. At the same time that they reflect local and particular experiences, they allow to build explanatory constructs and relationships that explain the perceived and reported experiences beyond the local level. The result is more grounded theorizations to explain cross-cultural similarities and differences.

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