Discursive interview technique in qualitative research: experience report

Técnica da entrevista discursiva em pesquisa qualitativa: relato de experiência

Técnica de entrevista discursiva en investigación cualitativa: informe de experiencia

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Abstract: Objective: to describe an experience of study, reflection and practice of conducting the discursive interview. Method: experience report on the development and practice of the discursive interview technique, carried out between September and December 2019, during the discipline of Metodi Qualitativi per la ricerca sociale, at the Università degli Studi di Torino, in Italy. Three discursive interviews were applied to the members of an Italian-Brazilian association, using a valanga sampling (snowball technique). Results: the steps that precede the discursive interview were presented, such as contact with the research field and with the theme that was researched, the elaboration of the interview guide, its execution and its transcription. Conclusion: the discursive interview is a technique that allows the understanding of the action of the participants and their social context. By not applying predetermined questions, it values what emerges in the integration process.

Descriptors: Interview; Qualitative research; Methodology; Address; Nursing

Resumo: Objetivo: descrever uma experiência de estudo, reflexão e prática de realização da entrevista discursiva. Método: consiste num relato de experiência sobre o desenvolvimento e prática da técnica de entrevista discursiva, realizada entre setembro e dezembro de 2019, durante a disciplina de Metodi Qualitativi per la ricerca sociale, na Università degli Studi di Torino, na Itália. Foram aplicadas três entrevistas discursivas aos integrantes de uma associação ítalo-brasileira, utilizando uma amostragem valanga (técnica da bola de neve). Resultados: apresentam as

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Introduction

This text seeks to approach the discursive interview, with its potentialities and limits, as a technique for collecting data from qualitative research, starting from the context of an experience lived at the University of Turin, Italy, in the Piedmont region. The immersion in this context begins from the rescue of the concept of qualitative research and the discursive interview to present in detail the experience.

This type of research can be compared to an archipelago composed of several distinct islands joined by three strong methodological traits: the use of a form of observation closer to the object of study; sensitivity to the context, conferred by the harmonization of techniques and the characteristics of what one wishes to study; and writing multivocality. It is necessary to consider that the theoretical references for qualitative studies are diversified, such as interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and sociolinguistics. However, the representation of social phenomena, such as procedural and contingent, requires an adaptation.
of research techniques to the context under study. This harmonization of methodological procedures to the object of study reinforces the priority of the object over the method.4

The word “qualitative” refers to the emphasis on the quality of processes, the socially structured nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, the search for actions that value experience, meaning. Thus, qualitative research is a field of research, an interconnected complex of families of terms, concepts, theoretical approaches that have historically assumed the task of understanding the behavior in question and social processes.5-6

Its importance is understood to study social phenomena due to the pluralization of the spheres of life, with a diversity of environments, subcultures, forms and lifestyles, which require a new sensitivity to conduct research.7 Thus, it is configured in the field of description and understanding of meanings and subjective processes, conferred on daily practices and experiences, in a profound and complete way, in a logic of discovery, so that the focus is on the perspectives of the actors, taking into account their particular contexts, and thus interpreting the phenomena in their natural environment.7-8

When dedicating itself to the study of social phenomena, qualitative research makes use of instruments, among which stand out the discursive interview, approximate observation and naturalistic observation as shadowing (the observation of a social interaction in which the researcher follows the subject as a shadow).1-2 In the case of the first instrument, it is reinforced that it designates a type of social relationship, in which the dialogue between interviewee and interviewer is a game of sociability. For its development, the guide, the conduct and the transcription are distinct steps, but they must be in sync.1-2

The discursive interview is an excavation tool used by a broad group of social scientists.3-9 It is a form of conversation that whose characteristic is the fact that the contents, questions and the way the answers are articulated in the dialogue are not predetermined and are defined, at
each moment, throughout the interaction between interviewee and interviewer. Therefore, in the form of appropriate questions, due to the evolution of the conversation, the interviewer will request the production of answers that interest him, that is, his/her intention to obtain those that are pertinent to meet his/her objectives.

Moreover, this technique provides the chance to examine important methodological and epistemological issues that should be confronted by researchers who will use qualitative research in their studies. The potential of this instrument in representing experiences and interpretations of individuals about their realities stands out, and in the level of complexity presented.

The discursive interview allows the researcher to immerse him/herself in his/her object of study, including collecting signs or indications of how the interviewees perceive and signify their reality. For this, rules and assumptions that guide the performance of the technique must be respected in order to contribute to its reliability and accuracy. In order to collaborate with the use of discursive interviews, this study aimed to describe an experience of study, reflection and practice of conducting the discursive interview.

**Method**

This is an experience report on the development and practice of the discursive interview technique, carried out during the discipline of *Metodi Qualitativi per la ricerca sociale*, in the postgraduate program in Sociology, totaling 72 hours, developed annually in the months of September to December. This course is taught by the coordinator of the Qualitative Laboratory at the *Dipartimento di Culture, Politica and Società dell’Università degli Studi di Torino*, Italy. This study is based on the experience of participation in the discipline, from September to December 2019, as part of the sandwich doctorate abroad.
The contents addressed in the discipline covered the theory of argumentation, the design of qualitative research, the observation techniques of the participant, the discursive interview and the focus group, the analysis of empirical documentation and writing. At the end of the content development, the students were proposed an evaluative activity that dealt with the following themes: design or techniques of qualitative research and data analysis through the NVivo program. At this moment, the doctoral students opted for the improvement directed to the conduct of the discursive interview, due to the applicability in their theses, oriented in the systematic discussions of the guide, the conduct of the interview and its transcription.

Considering the Brazilian origin of the doctoral students, the professor of the discipline suggested to develop the discursive interview with the members of the Italian-Brazilian association. Its associates were interviewed using *valanga* sampling (snowball technique), which consists of a non-probabilistic sampling, in which the first interviewee indicates a new participant and this new participant indicates another participant and so on, until the proposed objective is achieved.\textsuperscript{13-15} That is, contacts are indicated by a key informant (privileged),\textsuperscript{16} based on their interpersonal knowledge networks.\textsuperscript{17}

The initial contact was made by phone with the president of the association. On this occasion, a meeting was scheduled to present the idea. In the second meeting, at the association’s head, the activity and the objectives were presented, and officially accepted to conduct the interview, which took place in a third meeting. It is noteworthy that the second meeting enabled the elaboration of the question that would guide the discursive interviews: “How does the association act in the integration between the Brazilian and Italian communities?” The main themes to be addressed in subsequent meetings and interviews also emerged, as well as the preparation of the roadmap to be used. It is emphasized that the interview begins already in the first contact before turning on the recorder.\textsuperscript{1} The indication of the other interviewees happened from the first interviewee (I1). The criteria for indication were:
the interviewees should be associated, have the Portuguese language as their mother tongue and be Brazilian or Italian-Brazilian immigrants.

Due to the restricted time of one week to perform the activity, three interviews were conducted. The execution of the interviews with the associates took place after telephone contact to schedule the appropriate day and place. Thus, all of them were developed at the head of the Italian-Brazilian association. The average duration was 53 minutes, all of which had the audio recorded and transcribed in full.

Fragments were used to illustrate the technique of discursive interviewing. Before its execution, the guide was discussed and adjusted according to the guidelines of the execution of the discipline. The experience was based on the following themes: preparation of the guide, realization and transcription of the interviews.

As it is an exercise of the discipline, it was not necessary the approval of a Research Ethics Committee, however the activity respected the norms of the Università degli Studi di Torino because it is an exercise of the aforementioned discipline. It is noteworthy that the performance of the activity followed the precepts available in the “Linee guida per l’integrità nella ricerca/2019”,\(^\text{18}\) respecting its fundamental principles: dignity, responsibility, equity, diligence and honesty.\(^\text{9}\) The respect for the “Regolamento generale sulla protezione dei dati - Regolamento (EU) 2016/679 del Parlamento europeo e del Consiglio, del 27 Aprile 2016” on the protection of persons also stands out, as well as the processing of their personal data, understood as fundamental rights.\(^\text{19}\) Furthermore, to ensure the manifestation and science of the participants, the Informed Consent Form was presented and signed by them in two copies.
Results

Below is the guide, the execution and transcription of the interviews, as well as some fragments of the interview, which were transcribed according to the system of analysis of biographical transcriptions.1

Guide

It was agreed that the interview would address support for the integration of Brazilian and Italian-Brazilian immigrants in the Turin community, through the Italian-Brazilian association, and from this, there was the elaboration of the guide, which suggests the themes to be addressed, as well as the most convenient linguistic formulation to be used at the time of the interviews.20

Two guides were conceived, which were directed to the president of the association (Figure 1) and to the associates (Figure 2), in order to analyze the role of the association from both perspectives, and, above all, with the main objective of applying the technique of discursive interview, the theme of this experience report.

Figure 1 - Guide of the first interview for a study on support for the integration of Brazilian and Italian-Brazilian immigrants in the city of Turin, 2019.

1. Linking the history of the association with the history of your life. How did you get to Turin?
2. What are the main objectives of the association? Activities performed in the association.
3. Profile of the people that sought the association.
4. How do people get to the association? What are the reasons that bring them to the association?
5. Are the activities directed only to those inscribed? Who can participate?

In the second guide, one can observe the addition of questions, which arose from the first interview and, therefore, were introduced in the other interviews.

Figure 2 - Guide of interviews for study on support for the integration of Brazilian and Italian-Brazilian immigrants in the city of Turin, 2019.
Execution and Transcription of the Interviews

To conduct the interviews, the interviewers presented the questions when convenient and had to be on the agreed place and date in advance to avoid any setbacks.

According to the proposal of discursive interview and transcription adopted in this article, the interviews should be fully transcribed, always reporting the questions and answers, as well as all linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic aspects. Thus, it is possible to identify in the transcription the sentences that were pronounced in a more emphatic or ironic way or more paused.

The interviewers’ speech can be identified by writing in bold, while the interviewees will be identified by the letter I followed, respectively, by Arabic numbers 1-2-3 to ensure anonymity. The “shifts” (each line used in the transcription) of interlocution between interviewee and interviewer must be numbered and there must be a blank line between questions and answers. Likewise, the continuators (hum) are also considered shifts, justifying being numbered. With each new interview, a new numbering begins.

Repeated vowels indicate prolongation of a sound and ellipsis indicates a brief pause. When the pause is longer, it should be signaled in parentheses, for example: (long pause).
paralinguistic aspects are expressed with the use of the bars: // with the explanation in parentheses ( ) and the extralinguistic aspects (crying, sigh, cough, gestures) with the use of brackets [ ]. These aspects will be addressed again in the discussion.

The fragments presented here were intentional in order to portray some characteristics of how transcription should be performed according to the system of analysis of biographical transcriptions.¹

41) **What is the profile of those who seek the association?**

42) *So, the profile of people seeking the association varies a lot. Because we did not, we did not do it. Our strategy was starting from the guiding thread of cultural identity, which means that just having an interest in Brazil is enough. So, um, this is the profile that unites all of us, the people who come to us. In a second instance, the profile varies according to the proposed activity. So, the diversity of activities is also an attempt to promote diversification to achieve this goal, involving a wide number of people. For example: forró is aimed at a young audience, it is young workers who have just left university and who are interested in a social life, active and linked to Brazil. / So its dance, it is sensual, there is a lot of sociability and so on / (speaks slowly). Its children, middle-aged ladies, people who are interested, researchers, people who are interested in developing a social path, it is institutions, we already have something very close to the Brazilian consulate. The profile of the participants varies according to the activities and what we have structured. So, yeah ... from zero to ninety-five years, from zero until the end of life, even after death to tell the truth. (11)*

41) **Have you ever felt discriminated for being an immigrant?**

42) *I feel discriminated almost every day here in Italy. Despite living here for twenty years, more than twenty years, I feel discriminated almost every day. They think that ... here if you are an immigrant // [coughs], they think the immigrant is small. (13)*
think there is fear, prejudice, resistance?

56) A lot. Look [cleared his throat] I am telling you something. The racist demonstrations happen every day here in Italy. Every day, at several levels, small, large. Yesterday, yesterday I was listening to the newspaper. Do you know that Balotelli football player? Mario Balotelli, who is a black boy, who was adopted, is Italian, and he has a daughter. And his daughter at school, had a child who refused to give his hand to his daughter, it was in the newspaper yesterday, yesterday. The child refused to give Balotelli’s daughter a hand because she was black. So I mean this is something that comes from home. (12)

1) And those points that you said were disconnected. What would they be? And did you manage to connect?

2) So, yeah, um. The points that I thought were disconnected yeah they are basically those axes that we were talking about. (11)

3) [long pause]

4) [silence]

5) So when we talk about axes, we talk about fields of society that I saw that Brazilian society... the Brazilian community present in the territory had no access. There was no critical mass around it. So, the only thing I want to remember is that when I started in 2014 I did not have that clear. It was not, it was, for me it was a journey of much more indignation, curiosity, not of what it is, of what I current see it. Today I have matured a critical mass, I can outline those points, I am able to formulate in a clear way now. But at the time, it was not clear for me. So, yeah, I knew that an association had the potential to be much more than what it was, but yeah, it was not that clear. So to answer your question, I was not able to connect those points yet, in the sense that we are developing processes to make this happen, yeah, but I believe that we have advanced a lot in the past few years. (11)

43) (Second interviewer): Do you also relate with other immigrants?
Yes, I do. A lot. I make a point to relate well, with as many immigrants as possible. Like Moroccans, Romanians, Africans, I am even part of an African association. Because I think it is important. We all live together, in a place where we need each other. (I3)

Hum

And it is a lot to know the culture of others. And I am trying to Brazil this group moment, a teacher of African percussion, to work with children in schools. If you are interested, visit a school that is interested I will send the project to you. Because it is a beautiful, beautiful project, and this teacher, he obtained all the funds, all costs for the project from the government of Senegal. It is just an accepted school. (I3)

Hum

It is very cool. I think that kind of thing has to be done. Because the more you know, the more you respect. (I3)

Hum

And what are the activities you have been performed here in Turin?

Activities? (I3)

Yes, that is right.

Look, when I got here in Torino, I am going to tell you, I was very shocked by the international image of Brazilian women. It is something I have never imagined in my life, that we had a so bad image abroad [we were interrupted by a boy that offered us a cup of coffee]. (I3)

So we gathered the documents to say: “look at the declaration, the marital status we have/all changes/[slower speed of talk). (I1)

I have already wondered if it was all worth it. And so, until very recently, I asked myself this in the sense of saying: I am going to quit
because it is too much project, I am lost (gestures putting the hands on the face), I am going to drown, and I am not going anywhere. (I1)

Discussion

Assisted by the professor of the discipline, the interviewers were given the task of defining the main theme of the conversation. This moment was opportune for both interviewers to become familiar with the themes that could be addressed, thus avoiding the commitment of the constructed material.

For the development of this article, some concepts about the discursive interview will be presented throughout the discussion, in order to contextualize the experience itself. Designated as a form of social relationship, a characteristic model of expression of sociability, this technique is the most widespread data construction tool regarding the construction of empirical documentation in the social sciences. It can be understood as a specific form of conversation, in which two or more people engage in a verbal interaction in order to achieve a previously established cognitive goal. Furthermore, it provides participants with the possibility of constructing their discourses in their own words.

Depending on the modalities of interaction between interviewee and interviewer, two interview models can be conceived: structured and discursive. In the latter, the relationship between researcher and interlocutor is formed in a reserved environment and in order to provide the acquisition of empirical material useful to answer a specific research question.

In this sense, the observation of linguistic behavior coming from the interlocutors is what will allow drawing the distinction that separates the two types of interview. Thus, at the time of the discursive interview, the interviewee can answer the questions addressed, using the own words, building the own argumentation in the own way.
The interaction that occurs between the interlocutors is determined in the contents addressed; however, the modalities in which the dialogue is shaped, that is, both the words that present the questions and those chosen for the answers to be articulated, are not predetermined. In this way, they are defined in the course of the interaction.\(^1\)

As for the forms of interaction, sometimes presented, can be understood as *tanden*,\(^1,22\) i.e., interviews with a pair of interviewers. In the experience lived, the support of the second interviewer in the three interviews allowed understanding various aspects of social interaction, such as the offer of emotional and cognitive support, in addition to contributing to the relevant observations (field notes) during the dialogue.\(^1\)

It is emphasized that, at the time of the transcription, the interventions of the second interviewer were identified with the expression “second interviewer”, in bold and in parentheses.\(^1\) The discursive interview can be understood as a conversation that provides absolutely different tasks and prerogatives. In this way, it takes two forms: free or guided. Thus, the guided form (through a guide) was chosen, in which there is the possibility of addressing topics on which answers are important.\(^1\)

It is important to point out that, when selecting the form of discursive interview, this choice will guide the type of analysis adopted and the transcription mode that should be submitted.\(^1\) In this sense, in relation to the interviews conducted, and sometimes presented, it was intended to confront not only the representations and values of the interviewees, but also their argumentative models, about a predefined set of themes among which answers were intended.\(^15\)

In this type of interview, the interviewees are the protagonists of the interaction between researcher and participant.\(^23\) This fact is evident throughout the interviews, observed at the moment of transcription, usually being characterized by short shifts referring to interviewers and longer for the interviewees.\(^1\)
During the elaboration of the guide and in the dialogue, an important aspect observed is the one that concerns the role that the interviewee has in the production of discourses. This is how three roles are assigned: protagonist (when telling the story of the own life), observer/witness (when telling events that happened/happen in the own life context) and expert (when telling remote or future events in space and/or time). The questions Have you ever felt discriminated because you were an immigrant? and From the point of view of the Italians do you think there is fear, prejudice, resistance? two roles are attributed to the two interviewees: the protagonist and observer/witness, respectively.

The interviewers sought to collaborate with the interviewees in the free construction of their discourses. Thus, they directed questions in order to stimulate them towards a critical observation of oneself and about the particular way of acting, besides providing the articulation of discourses so that the results of this analysis could materialize. The interviews were conducted using the techniques of silence and use of continuators, which together with the echo technique form the three pillars for conducting the discursive interview.

The echo or mirror technique consists in reproducing the last words spoken by the interviewee, before interrupting the speech, for a moment of embarrassment or inhibition. With this technique, the interviewer lets understand that he/she continues to listen to the interlocutor, letting him/her continue. Regarding the silence technique, an example of its use can be verified in the excerpt of the interview conducted with I1 when a question that had not been well explored in the previous speech was resumed and that the interviewers offered long pause and silence for the interviewee to follow with the narrative.

Thus, the silence added to the appropriate body expressions (e.g.: head balance, search for eye contact, inclination of the trunk towards the interlocutor) is the simplest modality of interaction, and it is convenient to resort to this technique as much as possible. The
continuators (hum), as well as the silence, point out to the interviewee the participation of the interviewer in his/her speech.¹

After the end of the interviews, another stage began for its conclusion: the transcription of the constructed discourses. One of the doctoral students made the transcriptions, while the other was in charge of making the reviews and placing the texts that were generated within the system of analysis of biographical transcriptions.¹

At this moment, the notation guidelines of the analysis of the aforementioned biographical transcriptions were met: signaling the questions using bold, placing numbering in the “shifts” of the interlocution between interviewer and interviewee (1, 2, 3), and adding a blank line between questions and answers, in addition to distinguishing the second interviewer (tanden). After these activities, the discipline professor was interviewed to appreciate the empirical material produced through the transcription and to discuss and evaluate the technical development of the discursive interview by listening to the audios of the interviews.

Regarding the transcription, this moment required an active listening for its content to be faithfully reproduced. This step plays the function of communicating the aspects of the context of the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer, since it considers them related to the linguistic dimensions of both involved, in addition to analyzing the interference of the presence or passage of other people in the place where the interview takes place, and that can produce significant changes in its plot.¹

When performing the transcription, other information from the interview can be inserted and that is hidden from the audio recording, for example, when the interview was interrupted by an outside person. It is also added that when this activity is performed by those who performed the interview, it is already possible to start the analysis of the material, since the transcription is an analytical exercise based on the theoretical expectations of the researcher and by a communication model that is not restricted only to linguistic dimensions.¹,²⁴
Regarding the modalities of communication specific to the interviewee and the interviewer, they can be related to three levels: linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic. The words that compose the excerpts presented correspond to the linguistic content. The locutions that the spell checker will ask for correction, such as those with duplicate vowels, are associated with the paralinguistic dimension and, in this sense, should be expressed at the time of transcription.

The observation of the extralinguistic dimension concerns observations that go beyond verbal communication and the meaning of words, for example, speech speed (decreased speech speed), gestures and body expressions (hands on the face). The extralinguistic dimension was recorded in field notes during the interviews and increased in the transcription.

The field notes enrich the transcriptions and can be made during the interview or shortly after its execution. In this exercise, field notes were chosen to be used during the interaction between them and the interlocutors. The transcriptions were made shortly after the end of the interviews and underwent a conference of reliability, which corresponds to the audio conference accompanied by the text transcribed in hand, which allowed correcting mistakes in subsequent interviews, such as avoiding the realization of more than one question at the same time, reevaluating the directions of the investigation, among others.

The transcription must be based within a methodological procedure chosen by the researcher, since there is no universal rule to perform this activity, which makes it an eclectic, varied task. However, at the same time, it requires researchers to understand to establish and take on a set of principles and practices in order to harmonize such transcriptions.

Transcribing the interviews required the interviewers to compromise time, physical and human resources. Although the average of the interviews was 53 minutes, the detailed transcription of what was said and the insertion of the field notes comprised an average time of eight hours. During this exercise, it was possible to recognize the importance of performing a
quality transcription, since the analysis of empirical material already begins during this process.\textsuperscript{25-26}

The interference of other people during the interviews and the use of two languages by the interviewees (although the interviews were conducted in Portuguese, two of the three interviewees, used Italian words frequently) were the challenges faced during the transcription.

**Conclusion**

This specific form of conversation, when used in qualitative research, should be guided by strict criteria in order to attribute reliability and accuracy. This technique allows interviewers to organize the guide according to the theme to be investigated that can be adapted during the interviews, as to the form and time, but without losing the focus of the main objective.

The technique of discursive interview does not predetermine right or wrong answer. In addition, it allows the interviewees to have an important place of speech. Guided by the interviewers, the participants had the possibility of developing an analytical and reflective look on the subject.

The use of this technique required a theoretical and practical preparation in the construction of empirical data. The transcription required active listening of the audios of the interviews and in-depth knowledge of the methodological guide. In this sense, participating in the discipline helped understand its assumptions and experience its conduct.

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