

Introduction: The current state of social research methodology in Spain

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Abstract

This article introduces the papers published in the monographic issue dedicated to the current state of methodology in social research in Spain. It gives a brief presentation of each of the papers, which have been chosen to offer the widest possible overview, both in relation to their subject matter and in their methodological orientation and the research experience of the authors. It is notable that the articles presented show a special concern for methodological rigour and innovation, which connects them with the main concerns in current international methodological thought. In addition, the educational aim of all of them is emphasised, in that they offer recommendations of a practical nature, rather than mere abstract discourses and research without purpose.

Keywords: methodological design; data collection; data analysis; quantitative methods; qualitative methods; mixed methods; longitudinal perspective; Spain

Resumen. *Introducción: El estado actual de la metodología en la investigación social en España*

El artículo presenta los textos del número monográfico dedicado al estado actual de la metodología en la investigación social en España. El artículo realiza una breve presentación de cada uno de los textos, que han sido elegidos con el objetivo de mostrar un panorama lo más amplio posible, tanto en relación con las temáticas, como en la orientación metodológica y la experiencia investigadora de los autores. Se destaca que los artículos presentados muestran una especial preocupación por el rigor y la innovación metodológica, lo cual los conecta con las principales preocupaciones actuales en la reflexión metodológica internacional. Además, se subraya el propósito divulgador de todos ellos, al ofrecer recomendaciones de carácter práctico, huyendo de discursos abstractos y de la investigación sin aplicabilidad.

Palabras clave: diseño metodológico; obtención de datos; análisis de datos; métodos cuantitativos; métodos cualitativos; métodos mixtos; perspectiva longitudinal; España

This monograph is the result of a proposal from the Spanish Sociology Federation (FES)'s Research Committee on Methodology (RC01). The last few years have seen a significant leap forward in the quality and variety of methodological propositions presented at FES conferences. For example, there has been a significant increase in the number of papers and talks presented at sessions organised by RC01 at recent conferences: from 34 in 2013, to 41 in 2016, and 59 in 2019.

A growing interest in methodological issues has also been observed among both sociology practitioners and scholars in Spain. This is clearly illustrated by the number of members of the Research Committee on Methodology, which at the time of writing is 88, an unprecedented figure in the history of the committee. In addition, the editors and authors of this monograph increasingly often receive formal and informal queries on a wide range of methodological issues. It can also be stated that the methodological level of both quantitative and qualitative research in Spain is of the highest international standard, as shown by the rising number of publications by Spanish authors in high-ranking international journals. However, no monographs have been published recently in any Spanish journals to 'update' the most recent methodological approaches to sociological research in Spain. The most recent contribution on the subject, entitled "The Backroom of Social Research", was published by the journal *Política y Sociedad* (Politics and Society), and dates back to 2009 (vol. 46, nº 3, 2009). Although it was a monographic issue on social research, it presented a very different approach to that used here. It focused on what sociologists "do", on "reconstructing research processes", on "showing and explaining how the works were carried out" and on "the ins and outs, the kitchen, the backroom, the scaffolding" (Castillo, Valles & Wainerman, 2009: 8). Going further back, one can find a methodological monograph published in the *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (the Spanish Journal of Sociological Research) in 1985 by the most prestigious methodology experts in the country at the time. It is true that other disciplines such as opinion and

market research have sought to issue monographs along the lines of this one.¹ Nevertheless, rather than showing methodological developments, they have discussed analysis techniques developed by the companies and members of the association.

Thus, in the existing literature produced in Spanish there is no piece of work that has compiled and reviewed current approaches to research methodology in Spain. The objective of this monograph is to provide an updated overview of the different methodological developments that authors who publish in Spanish have produced in recent years. The monograph takes a ‘cross-cutting’ look at the richness and diversity in the current methodology developed in Spain, across different methodological perspectives and varied substantive contents. This richness and variety also reinforce the aim that the publications should be of interest to as wide an audience as possible. The common link between the articles is the methodological rigour used in all the issues covered, which must always be present in research. In fact, when de Heer, de Leeuw and van der Zouwen (1999) examined the dominant themes in 20th century social research, they argued that the first decades of the 21st century should be dedicated to increasing the quality of research.

The contributors to this monograph are remarkably heterogeneous in terms of their experience. They include recognised leading researchers in the field of methodology, such as María Ángeles Cea, Carlos Lozares and Miguel Valles, and others from younger generations, such as Oriol Barranco and Juan Antonio Carbonell. Given their diverse levels of experience, they provide a comprehensive selection, while also serving as a reference point and inspiration for novice researchers. All the approaches are characterised by methodological rigour and seek to appeal to an audience that is not necessarily specialised in methodology.

The monograph begins with an article by Miguel Valles in which he reviews the production of qualitative research in Spain in recent years, focusing on *backroom* and *archive* processes. These two notions, which the author links to the concept of *quality*, have been part of his scientific production for a long time (Valles, 2005); hence, the article has an unescapable autobiographical component, but also gives a general overview of the qualitative research conducted in Spain over the last thirty years. Valles argues that the notions of backroom and archive are both central to the profession of social researchers and inseparable from the essential exercise in reflexivity that social scientists must engage in regarding their practices (Piovani and Muñoz, 2018), which is seamlessly linked to Bourdieu’s work on reflexivity (Baranger, 2018; García de León, 1993).

The central proposition of the article, which could easily be entitled “The backroom and the archive as forms of reflexivity”, argues that backroom tes-

1. See, by way of example, the journal *Investigación y Marketing* (Research and Marketing) (2021) of the former AEDEMO, an organisation that became integrated with ANEIMO to form the current *Insights + Analytics España*.

timonies and archival practices have been key aspects of qualitative sociology in Spain in recent years. These testimonies and practices are exemplified by two notable recent cases, namely, the book dedicated to Alfonso Ortí (Duque and Gómez Benito, 2020) and the initiative taken by José Luis de Zárraga to donate his sound archive and written materials to the Department of Sociology: Methodology and Theory at the Complutense University of Madrid. Valles's contributions can be extended beyond qualitative sociology, and undoubtedly contribute to transmitting good sociological work to younger generations.

Secondly, the article by Barranco, Lozares and Muntanyola moves from a qualitative methodology towards a mixed analytical approach. It takes as a starting point the qualitative text analysis tradition, more specifically, the Network Discourse Analysis (Lozares et al., 2003), to propose a quantitative analysis of the networks obtained using *factions* and *cliques*, procedures typically employed in mathematical analysis of social networks. It is therefore a specific example of what has been called “quantitative data conversion” (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011: 231-232) or “quantitisation strategy” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) in the mixed methods literature.

The role played by the software used for qualitative data analysis is central to the approach presented in this article. It highlights how versatile most of this type of software is, and in this particular case ATLAS.ti, as it makes it possible to link not only qualitative and quantitative analyses, but also seemingly distant perspectives such as the analysis of semantic frames (Fillmore, 1985) and the theory and analysis of social networks (Lozares & Verd, 2015). In this sense, the article shows how the use of different types of software is expanding the possibilities of quantitative-qualitative integration, as is often indicated by Bazeley (2018).

Thirdly, an article by Verd is included that addresses the use of hybrid tools to obtain sequential data. The term ‘hybrid’ is used in the paper to denote that the same tool produces both quantitative and qualitative data which later, in the analysis phase, can be analysed either together (by using a data integration procedure) or separately (by applying purely quantitative or qualitative procedures). Consequently, the article is framed within the methodological multi-method and mixed methods research (MMMR) literature, although the use of tools that enable both quantitative and qualitative data to be obtained has rarely been addressed in this literature. In fact, well-known authors such as Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011, 2017) have acknowledged that there has been very little reflection regarding mixed methods data collection procedures, except in relation to sampling strategies.

The paper specifically addresses the use of two types of diagram (Varga-Atkins and O'Brien, 2009) within research inspired by the life course perspective, namely *biographical grids* and *life satisfaction diagrams*. Both were initially conceived as instruments to obtain quantitative information. However, their use in obtaining qualitative information or as a stimulus for subsequently formulating biographical questions has shown very promising results. While these tools are still rarely employed in Spain, there are some interesting uses for them.

All other articles, except the last one, are related to the survey as a research method. This is one of the most commonly used methods in social research, as it can be easily applied and can yield multiple results. García Ferrando and Llopis highlight that the survey is not “only the most widely used social research method but also the most debated” (2015: 360), while for Mayntz et al., “it is the most suitable procedure for the investigation of verbalised subjective phenomena, as well as being the most widely used social scientific method.” (1976: 134)

The articles related to this method are ordered from the most general, which deals with survey quality and reliability, to the most specific, regarding a method for measuring opinions and attitudes. María Ángeles Cea D’Ancona believes that living in the era of big data means that it is time to address the quality of the tool, in line with the proposals made by de Heer et al. (1999). However, she makes it clear that the concept of *quality* is different for those who generate the data and for those who use those data. The article begins with an exhaustive review of survey quality studies, from the earliest research by John Lewis Gillin in 1915 to the most recent contributions, and highlights the multi-dimensional nature of this concept. Considering that the image that society has of surveys influences participation, she addresses the second topic of the title, survey trust, using the responses of a barometer conducted by the CIS for the year 2017. After employing several multi-variate analysis techniques, she concludes that the variables that most influence trust are the degree of usefulness attributed to a survey, the belief in the representativeness of the population, the validity of the results, the consideration that it is beneficial for people, and the belief that respondents provide honest answers.

Vidal Díaz de Rada takes a more specific look at surveys, and focuses on an increasingly used method, the electronic survey. Some experts (among others, Daileker et al, 2019) have argued that it is the most popular mode of survey in the world. This was also found to be the case in Spain, in the latest edition of the Insights + Analytics report on private opinion research and markets. In 2020, 35% of surveys were carried out online, compared to 25% of interviewer-administered surveys (face-to-face or by telephone). Interviewer-administered surveys have been gradually reduced compared to self-administered surveys.

However, this type of survey also has low response rates, which means that certain strategies must be used in order to maximise collaboration. Díaz de Rada’s paper discusses five strategies that have been found to be effective in increasing response rates. These are: planning in detail how to first contact potential respondents, informing them in advance that they have been selected to participate in the survey, persistently contacting the target population (more than once), increasing the time used for data collection, and using rewards.

Juan Ignacio Martínez Pastor and Irina Fernández Lozano address a suitable method for measuring opinions and attitudes, especially when it comes to sensitive issues. In addition to the ‘usual’ measurement of opinions and attitudes in surveys, this tool seeks to find how and why social events happen, and to identify

their causes. With the vignette technique, study subjects evaluate fictitious scenarios, normally included as part of a questionnaire; indirect answers (to research questions) are deemed to eliminate social desirability biases, which is essential in surveys on sensitive topics (see, among others, Tourangeau and Yan, 2007; Ehler et al., 2021; Yan, 2021). After outlining the basic characteristics of the technique, the authors detail the different phases of the design, focusing on the advantages and disadvantages involved (particularly the latter). They briefly mention that the situations in which research subjects are involved may be manipulated; that the technique has high internal validity; that it has no ethical implications; and that it avoids subjects' self-selection problems. The strong point of the article (in the authors' view) is that it thoroughly discusses the drawbacks of the technique (as more than half of the article is devoted to this). It is a reasoned and critical vision that is put into question in the section entitled "Possible solutions or submissions" in the last part of the article (before the conclusions).

This monographic issue ends with a paper by Juan Antonio Carbonell Asins and Carles Xavier Simó Noguera that focuses on the analysis of trajectories and uses the example of employment trajectories. Under the title of "The quantitative analysis of labour market trajectories", they provide a vision of the different methodological perspectives that can be applied in the study of employment trajectories. This methodology has undergone rapid growth in recent years, notably expanding traditional sequence analysis. The paper is structured in two parts. The first describes sequence analysis, including its most recent developments, and the second focuses on multi-state models, paying attention to compartmental models, latent class analysis and Markov-chain models. The most interesting aspect is that each method is presented, including its advantages and disadvantages, followed by an engaging discussion about the new challenges and boundaries that arise from the rising specialisation in quantitative sociology.

As can be seen, a wide range of perspectives, methods and techniques are addressed in this monograph. The articles are not only varied in terms of quantitative, qualitative and mixed perspectives, but also in terms of the specific techniques or procedures covered. In addition, they review and focus on various stages of social research, including methodological design, data collection and data analysis. All of them also offer practical recommendations, avoiding abstract discourses detached from applied research. The objective is that potential readers can incorporate these perspectives into their research. For all these reasons, we hope that this issue will raise interest among researchers from different areas and approaches to sociology, both in and outside Spain.

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