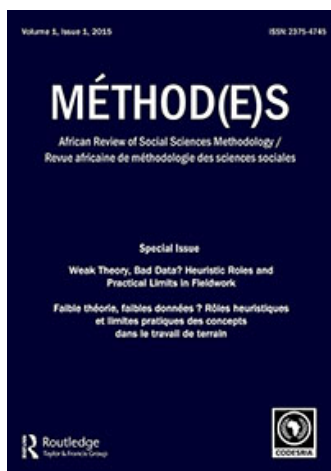


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Qualitative Research in Issues of the *American Journal of Sociology* during the Hegemony of The Chicago School

Juan Ignacio Piovani*, María Eugenia Rausky* and Javier Alberto Santos*

Abstract

By reviewing the articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology* between 1915 and 1930, this article explores the uses of terminological expressions characteristic of the qualitative approach supposedly developed by the Chicago school: case study, fieldwork, natural history, etc. First we present the intellectual and institutional aspects of the school. Then we examine a corpus of articles and reviews taking into account: the importance of the methodological reflection, the relation between the methods of the natural sciences and the social sciences, as well as the qualitative-quantitative antagonism. The main conclusion is that even if such expressions – as used in the corpus – cannot be regarded as qualitative in the current sense, particularly due to their epistemological foundations, we can observe a growing recognition of the important role of non-statistical methods in the social sciences, mainly among Chicagoans.

Keywords: Chicago school; sociology; qualitative methods; *American Journal of Sociology*.

Résumé

Cet article, à partir de l'examen des articles publiés dans l'*American Journal of Sociology* entre 1915 et 1930, explore les utilisations des expressions terminologiques caractéristiques de l'approche qualitative développée par l'école de Chicago : étude de cas, travail de terrain, histoire naturelle... Dans un premier temps, nous présentons les aspects intellectuels et institutionnels de l'école. Ensuite, nous examinons un corpus d'articles et de revues en tenant compte de l'importance de la réflexion méthodologique, de la relation entre les méthodes des sciences naturelles et des sciences sociales, ainsi que de l'antagonisme entre le qualitatif et le quantitatif. La principale conclusion est que, même si ces expressions – aux sens hétéroclites où elles sont employées dans le corpus – ne peuvent pas être considérées comme qualitatives dans le sens courant, avant tout en raison de leurs fondements épistémologiques, nous pouvons observer une reconnaissance croissante de l'importance du rôle des méthodes non statistiques dans les sciences sociales, surtout parmi les auteurs de Chicago.

Mots clés : Ecole de Chicago ; sociologie ; méthodes qualitatives ; *American Journal of Sociology*.

Introduction

The Chicago school is usually considered as having played a leading role in developing qualitative methods (Taylor & Bogdan 1989; Forni 1992; Vasilachis 1993; Denzin & Lincoln 1994). It is also recognized in American sociology that this school occupied a relatively hegemonic position approximately between 1915 and 1930 (Bulmer 1984; Cortese 2002), counting on the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS) as one of its main instruments to publish works and to spread its ideas (Abbott 1999).

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However, authors who have studied the history of methods used in sociology, particularly those developed by the Chicago school, have questioned whether they are really qualitative in the current sense. For example, Platt (1982, 1983, 1985) – one of the leading references in the study of the methodological aspects of the school – has disputed the above-mentioned interpretation and has analyzed the ‘origin myth’ of the qualitative approach in the Chicago school (especially through its supposed development of participant observation). Along the same lines, at least in some respects, are works by Bryman (2001), Bulmer (1984), Chapouli (1987) and Hammersley (1989).

With this set of problems as a framework, this paper aims to trace articles published in the *AJS* from 1915 to 1930, looking at the uses and meanings attributed to terms and expressions that usually denote a qualitative approach – ‘case study’, ‘fieldwork’, ‘field research’, ‘participant observer’, ‘natural history’, ‘ethnography’ – under the light of the retrospective studies of the methodological developments produced in the school. We resort to the analysis of these terms, since at that time the expression ‘qualitative methods’ was not in use. As suggested here, many believe that this concept was then expressed through the terms that we will explore in this paper.

As shown in Table 1, these terms appeared in the title, abstract or main body of 165 articles and reviews published in the *AJS* during the studied period. However, the simple use of any of these terms does not necessarily imply a critical appraisal of them, nor does it designate a specific research strategy within a piece of empirical work. All too often the terms are introduced marginally, for example, when referencing other authors and with no further discussion of their meanings or methodological implications.

Table 1: Frequency of occurrence of qualitative method’s terms in articles and reviews published in the *AJS* (1915–1930)

TERM	ARTICLES		REVIEWS	TOTAL
	Title/Abst.	Main Body		
Natural history	1	23	41	65
Case study	1	12	26	39
Fieldwork	1	25	8	34
Ethnography	0	9	11	20
Participant observer	0	2	3	5
Field research	0	1	1	2
TOTAL	3	72	90	165

Source: prepared by the authors with data retrieved from JSTOR.

For these reasons, not all the 165 publications were scrutinized in detail. Instead, we have analyzed a corpus consisting of twenty-four texts: all the articles in which these terms are used either in the title or abstract (or in both), plus a selection of the most relevant papers in which the terms, if placed in their main body, are conceptually developed or refer to an empirical research strategy. In addition, we have included the reviews of books that deal specifically with methodological issues in the corpus. In this selection we have recognized several types of materials:

- a) studies that report the findings of empirical research
- b) papers that present the state of the art or literature review regarding different topics of sociological interest (on family, delinquency, rural sociology, religion, etc.)
- c) articles that focus on strictly methodological questions
- d) texts that address mainly theoretical or epistemological issues

It should be clarified here that the AJS was not the only periodical used by the Chicago school members to publish their works. At the same time, not all the contributions published in the AJS in the reviewed period were by professors and researchers of the school. In fact, given that many of the analyzed texts are not from the Chicago school, an interesting question that we shall consider later is whether among the Chicago scholars – as compared with authors affiliated to other institutions – can be found perspectives (uses and meanings of the analyzed terms) that come closer to qualitative principles as we understand them today.

But before turning to the analysis of the methodological problems addressed in this article, the fact that the questions raised here intertwine institutions, academic disciplines, publications, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and research trajectories makes a brief revision of some fundamental aspects regarding the department and the Chicago school of sociology, as well as the AJS, relevant. This introductory revision is crucial to frame the analyses that we will propose later and also to shed light upon some of the controversies that have been put forward when it comes to the appraisal of the Chicago school's contributions to the development of qualitative methods.

Institutional and Intellectual Aspects of Chicago Sociology

Albion Small, one of the key figures in the academic institutionalization of sociology, organized the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago – the first in the world – in 1892. Until the end of the 1920s, it was actually a department of sociology and anthropology – a fact that has to be taken into account when studying the particularities of the type of empirical research developed in that institutional and historical context.

The process of institutionalization of sociology at the university was accompanied, over time, by an increase in the levels of professionalization of research practice and training, which in turn underpinned a gradual acknowledgment of the role of theory and methodology within the discipline. According to Cortese (1995), by the 1910s the department's research activities, mainly in the field of migrations, had already become quite articulated theoretically and methodologically sound when compared to the much more 'amateur' practices of the foundational years.

From approximately 1915 and up to the early 1930s, in this context of development and consolidation of the discipline, the department played a leading role within American sociology, so much so as to define it as hegemonic. Under the intellectual guidance of Robert Park – who joined the department in 1913 – and Ernest Burgess – who did so in 1916 –, the sociology of Chicago not only acquired its hegemonic position, but it also evolved into a school characterized by strong collegial and social integration (Cortese 1995). Yet many scholars have questioned this ideal image, arguing that the department of sociology at Chicago constituted a rather heterogeneous academic ambiance (Platt 1996; Becker 1999), and that the 'so-called' school was not really such in the terms of a 'school of thought' (Becker 1999).

However, as Becker (1999) reckons, the very idea of a Chicago school of sociology during the 1920s is so rooted that even very well-documented pieces of research have not managed to destabilize it. All in all, one of the aspects more frequently revisited when it comes to defining the Chicago school is its alleged contribution to the development of empirical methods of research (Cortese 1995). As stated before, this is the core interest of this article and, as such, it will be addressed in following sections. Nonetheless, other facets have also been considered in order to convey the classical idea of a consistent academic school at Chicago. For instance, the strong link between theory and empirical research, particularly when investigating urban phenomena, has been underlined as an important aspect of the school's approach.

Not surprisingly, in a city that was experiencing rapid expansion and industrialization, the main topics of the research agenda of the school were related to the city of Chicago itself and other

phenomena that impinged upon the urbanization process – such as migrations, delinquency and deviant behaviour –, which in turn posed questions with regard to social order and control. The pioneering work by Park (1915) about the city was inspiring for a whole generation of young researchers. And it was precisely while investigating empirically into urban issues that many of the school's theoretical and methodological proposals took shape.

As Kurz (1984) points out, the Chicagoans were concerned with generating their own theories stemming from empirical research. However, it is also important to acknowledge that many European thinkers influenced their thought and research practice¹ – particularly Simmel, Tönnies and Durkheim whose concept of anomie was behind the Chicago's idea of social disorganization. In fact, Chicagoan sociologists customarily read, translated and disseminated the conceptual constructions of some European social theorists interested in urban problems (and in defining sociology as an autonomous discipline) often publishing their ideas in the *AJS*.

Moreover, when appraising the school members' approach to social research, it must be noted the links that existed – both intellectually and institutionally – with other disciplines, particularly cultural anthropology² and social psychology. W.I. Thomas, who had studied in Germany and then taught sociology and anthropology in Chicago and co-edited the *AJS* until 1917, was an influential figure through his ideas on the interactional character of social relations. Also significant was his emphasis on social change, on the interdependency between social organization and individuals, as well as his interactional and situational perspective for the study of the subjective dimensions of the social world.

Last but not least, special attention must be paid to the influence of philosophical pragmatism in shaping Chicago sociology. From 1894 onwards, and until the early twentieth century, John Dewey was a leading figure in Chicago's philosophical community. His ideas, as well as his political stance, were also very influential in the early configuration of sociology. On the one hand, his attempt to develop a theory of empirically-based knowledge provided an example for empirically-based theories in other fields. On the other hand, his advocacy for useful knowledge to resolve human problems became a model for a type of sociology concerned with solving the various issues found in the modern city (Kurz 1984). Pragmatism was particularly influential in G. Mead's development of the foundations of symbolic interactionism, which stresses the symbolic nature of social life, regarding it the result of the interaction among subjects.

Finally, before turning to the analysis of the qualitative terms contained in publications of the *AJS*, something has to be said about the *Journal* itself, since its history has to do with 'the constitution of a department and beyond that of a discipline and of a whole fields of discourse' (Becker 1999: 80). As an institution itself, the *AJS* was marked by the 'intersection of a number of social and cultural forces', and it was 'parallel but not identical with the department' (*ibid*: 81).

Albion Small established the *AJS* in 1895, only three years after organizing the department of sociology at the University of Chicago. It is the oldest American academic journal specialized in the field of sociology. Becker (1999: 81) maintains that the *AJS* has gone through three different phases, each reflecting 'turning points in the history of the discipline as well as of the Journal.' This periodization also has to do with changes in the disciplinary demography and with the consequent formalization of the internal procedures of the *Journal*, which became more structured and accountable over time.

The historical period that we cover in this article (1915–1930) coincides partly with the two first phases of the *AJS*: 1895–1925, when the discipline 'meant a loose collection of people who believed... that it was useful to apply formalized knowledge to social problems'; and 1926–1955, when sociology developed in academia, yet remained rather small (*ibidem*).

At the beginning, the *AJS* was run informally and therefore there are not many sources available to actually inform us about the criteria for selecting articles and other aspects of interest.

Becker (1999) argues that for a long time the AJS was a one-man affair, even if the editor – A. Small – counted on an immediate circle of collaborators and consistently published papers by his departmental colleagues, such as W.I. Thomas.

The second phase in the history of the AJS is partly the result of a transition in sociology towards a more professionalized and academic-based discipline that left behind its foundational ‘religious sense of vocation’, typical of Small’s stance (Becker 1999: 102). In addition, if the early AJS was ‘the incarnation of a man’, this new AJS ‘was the incarnation of a department’ (*ibid.*: 104) under the intellectual leadership of R. Park, turning the journal into a ‘collective voice for its view of the world’ and ‘in many ways the maker of a discipline’ (*ibid.*: 137). This is because the members of the department of sociology, which also formed the editorial staff of the AJS, thought of the Journal as a collective ownership.

On the Importance of Methodological Reflection

Bulmer (1984: 89–90) claims that there were few explicit methodological definitions in the articles published in the period under scrutiny, which he attributes mainly to the lack of awareness on research methods. According to this author, methodology was not central in the Chicago school, and therefore the subject was dealt with in just a few works. However, it should be pointed out that the reading of the collection of articles selected reflects a growing concern about methodology, although this is directly related to the discussion on the scientific nature of the social sciences and the terms in which they should be defined (Park 1923; Boucke 1923; Nelson 1924; Blumer 1930; House 1926; Hoffer in Melvin 1927; Park 1930). Park (1923), for instance, highlights the importance of methods in the advancement of science and states that the question of method in social sciences was reaching a particularly important level at that moment. Melvin (1927) emphasizes that sociology was becoming a science, and therefore ‘the need to use scientific methods has been perceived in the process and is now widely recognized’. In his conclusions he points out that a defined body of methodological knowledge was being formed. By the end of the studied period, a critical review by Blumer (1930) shows the complexity and at the same time the confusion that existed in the field of social sciences: he believed not only that the fundamentals of methodology had not been resolved, but also that they had not yet been properly formulated and understood.

Although Bulmer (1984) is right in asserting that there were very few specialized studies on methodology prior to 1930, we can observe in the analyzed material an increasing appearance of texts (in the format of handbooks) looking to systematize methodological knowledge, which had been dispersed until that time. These texts appear recurrently in AJS in the shape of reviews and topical summaries (Cavan 1929; House 1926; Queen 1929; Blumer 1930; Kuhlman 1930)

At the same time and as evidence of the incipient status of methodological reflection, we find a lack of agreement in the use of specific terms, as well as confusion in the level of discourse (e.g., between ‘method’ and ‘technique’ in the sense of Marradi, Archenti & Piovani [2007]) or within the techniques between those for data gathering, coding, analysis, etc. For example, in reviewing a text by Crawford, Kuhlman (1930) critically comments on the list of techniques supplied by the author: experimental, historical, psychological, case study, curriculum, work analysis, interviews, observation questionnaires, measurement, statistics, tables, graphics and library classification.

The Relationship Between Methods Used in Social Sciences and Natural Sciences

As methodological knowledge became formalized, another relevant question arose: should the methods be ‘imported’ from natural sciences³ or developed autonomously? Should the proposals be *a priori* or based on the empirical investigation itself? These questions return again to the status of sociology (and social sciences in general). For Blumer (1930) the challenge was to critically

study the fundamental problems of the social sciences and derive the empiric origins of the most appropriate procedures. Faced with those who preferred using methods of the natural sciences (or adaptations of them) to ensure the scientific status of the social sciences, he proposed following Dewey's suggestions: the methods of social sciences should be indigenous, not imported. Methodology should take a new direction and develop empirically in the new fields. Boucke (1923) although not formulating the idea with total clarity, favoured the development of a specific scientific method for the social sciences that he calls reflexive: a combination of induction (which in his view was typical of the natural sciences) and formal deduction (probably identified at that time with philosophical perspectives that the empirical social and 'scientific' sciences were called upon to replace).

At the same time, the discussions around the development of their 'own' methodologies were linked to a certain consensus on the limits of experimentation in the field of the social sciences, the experiment being the method which was considered characteristic of the natural sciences (Boucke 1923; Holt 1926; Hoffer in Melvin 1927; Wood 1927; Zimmermann in Melvin 1927; Thomas 1929; Blumer 1930). The responses to these limits are of two types: on the one hand, the development of alternatives to the experiment, but in the sense of adaptations that perform similar functions and respond to the same basic underlying understanding of science as positivism (a posture strongly criticised by Blumer, 1930), or on the other hand, the proposal of substantially different methodologies, which lay outside those traditional canons.

In the first group are those who fervently promoted the use of statistical methods, for example, Hoffer and Zimmermann (both in Melvin, 1927: 206): 'the principal approach to exactness in the study of social phenomena should not be through a laboratory experiment, but by means of statistics.'⁴ However, here an interesting question arises. For those who favour statistical methods, their justification lies in the possibility of achieving cognitive objectives analogous to those of an experiment, frequently using terms such as 'objectivity', 'measurement', 'quantification', 'generalization', 'law', etc.⁵ By contrast, when faced with the limits of the experiment, we tend to think today that the promotion of case studies, participant observation, interviews, etc. should subscribe to the second – more radical – alternative, at least as regards the epistemological commitments that the experiment and the statistical methods imply. Nevertheless, when we look at the terms used in the literature of the time, we find that many authors tried to frame these 'qualitative' methodological proposals under the classical canons of the natural sciences and therefore promoted them as appropriate methods to investigate 'objectively', generalize, formulate laws, etc. Others, far fewer and generally in a latent fashion, saw in these alternatives ways to achieve other types of objectives in the frame of a different concept of science and claimed that they could not be applied or judged in the terms of canonic science. In this way they came close to some of the thinking behind the interpretive position in contemporary qualitative research. We can see the logic of these two positions by taking 'case studies' as an example.⁶

Holt (1926) defines 'case study' as a systematic method to approach the human personality, individual attitudes and the purpose of life of individuals; however, he defends it as a means to generalize and formulate laws.

Chaffee (1930), referring to Cooley, proclaims the advantages of the case study for the investigation of small groups and institutions. In the case he presents, the history, economic and political organization of the community, as well as objective and subjective aspects are covered. However, he believes that after studying various cases, generalizations can be established by comparing the conclusions derived from one case with other similar studies.

Focusing on criminal research, Wood (1926) claimed that the lack of opportunity to generate controlled experiments opens the door to subjectivist variations. Given the limitations of statistics

to reveal the criminal personality, it becomes necessary to use what he calls 'individual and community case histories' as the most pertinent means to interpret conduct, both in terms of organic impulse and social interrelations.

Burgess (1923b), following up on Healy, sees the case study as a methodological revolution, a substitute for statistical procedures and speculative theory. For Healy (according to Burgess' review), case study is an intensive study of individual cases and of conduct (note that he does not use the term 'social action') with an empirical and inductive base.⁷ Standard techniques of measurement cannot be applied since the phenomenon of interest requires – and will always require – a qualitative definition. The sociological case study, according to Burgess, recovers the idea of the subject as interrelating, for instance, with peers, the community, the environment, etc. The focus of attention is on the 'person' (as opposed to the individual and closer to the present idea of 'actor') as a product of social interaction with peers, which has acquired status, a position in a society or in the group of origin, as suggested by Park.

Park (1930) offers the most radical definition of the case study in terms of distance from the canons of natural science and therefore closer to the contemporary qualitative concept. By describing the methodological proposal of the Swedish psychologist Bjerre – which he considers to be similar to that of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) – he defines the case study as a form of research that implies association and intimate conversation with the subjects. For him, this methodology is based on the need to progress from statistical methods – more general, indirect, superficial and uncertain – to direct observation, thereby penetrating deeply into reality, the personal life and the life history of individuals. Direct contact and personal observation will advance social science, making reality intelligible through understanding subjects and their behaviour. The scientific case study, according to the work of Bjerre (cited by Park [1930]), requires doing the same as in daily life (observe and converse), but in a more conscious and persistent way. By means of conversations or interviews, subjects' enunciations are identified, which give evidence of things that are taken for granted. This is to be done by the social scientist without ever influencing or inducing the responses: interviewers in case studies should allow the subjects to speak freely, and even encourage them to do so. On the other hand, the 'confession' of a subject should not be received uncritically, as if it were certain (objective) evidence of something. Facial expressions, gestures, etc. are very important and sometimes even more significant than verbal discourse. In response to the objection that this method is neither systematic nor impersonal, Bjerre's words are: the scientist must rely on the subjective, but they can recur to different types of sources and achieve a high level of objectivity.⁸

It is not surprising to find that the most articulate definitions of the case study were given by the prominent figures of the Chicago school (Burgess and Parker), since it was a central theme in their university courses on field research during the 1920s and played a key role in their empirical research strategies. So much so that when Vivian Palmer systematized Burgess and Park's methodological teachings and wrote her classic textbook on field studies in sociology, she managed to provide the most comprehensive and methodologically-sound treatment of the case studies of that time:

The term Case Study is commonly used to describe two different types of investigation: (i) in its broader sense it is considered as an all-inclusive study of an individual case in which the investigator brings to focus upon it all his various skills and methods of research; and (ii) in a narrower sense it is conceived as a distinct method of research, a limited stage in the investigation of a research problem in which the investigator makes an exhaustive study of a case as an interacting whole. (Palmer 1928: 19)

In its broader sense, case studies are related to four techniques of data collection (observation, interviews, diaries and social research maps) and follow a strong inductivist approach. The data collection process should emphasise the access to personal documents, as they were regarded as the best expression of subjectivity, as opposed to the more limited and external quantitative data. The case study should allow for generalizations, but not in the nomothetic sense of standard science. Rather than searching for laws in the context of the Chicago school's case studies, generalization meant the formation of social concepts and typologies through insight into the case as a whole (Palmer 1928).

On the Quantitative-Qualitative Debate

Continuing on from the previous discussion, the question on the use of methodological terms during the hegemony of the Chicago school could also be written *ex post* in the framework of the classic quantitative-qualitative debate. We emphasise here the retrospective – and in some sense untimely – character of this analysis, since at that time the terms 'quantitative methods' and 'qualitative methods' were not commonly in use (as indicated in the introduction) and neither was there a clear clash of antagonistic methodologies.

Canalizing texts in the light of this debate allows us to underline two aspects that we have effectively revealed and that have been constantly mentioned in sociological literature: the use of terms that we currently define as typical of a qualitative focus to sustain a radically alternative perspective with respect to statistical methods (see above), or to think of them as practical methods that are not inherently antagonistic to statistical methods, but can be seen as complementary.

Analyzing the development of quantitative methods in North American sociology in the period of 1920 to 1960, Lundberg (1960: 19) maintains that the first signs of a battle between the approaches (qualitative and quantitative) emerged in the 1920s and 30s, but it was expressed in different terms: statistical methods and case studies, respectively. The Chicago school was generally considered the advocate of case studies method while the school of Columbia was regarded as the bastion of statistical methods. Along the same lines, Alvira Martín (1983) claims that the first major methodological confrontation arose from the publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918) by Thomas and Znaniecki – classic referents of the Chicago school.

For Blumer (1930) this tension took place in the context of the increasing hegemonic vision to convert social science into a natural science by means of the application of statistical procedures. Given that – according to the dominant vision of the time – the success of the natural sciences comes from the objective nature of the data and their statistical processing, social sciences should follow this same path. One of the major supporters of this line of thought was Lundberg, whose book on social research was reviewed by Blumer (1930). For Lundberg (1929) the fundamental principle and first step in the scientific method is precise and objective observation; however, without standardized instruments the scientist is exposed to bias and prejudice, for which it becomes necessary to develop mechanical methods of observation. Lundberg criticizes case studies and life histories because their data cannot be treated quantitatively or generalized, which makes them of little value to science. Blumer (1930) does not deny the importance of precision in observation, but doubts that this can be achieved through standardized instruments alone, especially in fields where it is not known with absolute certainty what exactly should be observed. Hence, forms of observation are required that can be re-directed and re-defined in the frame of an open perspective: he therefore proposes flexible investigation guided by sensitive imagination. Submitting the observation to statistical procedures can only be justified, according to this author, if such proceedings were the only possible synonym of the scientific method, which is highly controversial. Blumer believed that case studies, life histories and interviews can be useful because

they allow generalizations, which are not of a statistical nature, and to force them into traditional scientific canons – as many other authors proposed – would strip them of their virtue and destroy their value.

With respect to complementary methodologies – one of which is recognised today as triangulation –, it should be noticed, first of all, that the so-called ‘quantitative’ studies appear not to have been excluded by the Chicago school: Forni (1992) and others have illustrated the importance of statistics in this institution and especially the advances that were produced along these lines after Ogburn’s arrival at the end the 1920s. It must be noted, for example, that Chicago’s understanding of the case study methodology, as defined by Palmer (1928), was not restrictive. In fact, it could accommodate different approaches, techniques and sources of data, including statistics. Ogburn himself, often regarded exclusively as a tough advocate for statistical methods, was a complex character with a known interest in ethnography and psychoanalysis, and a true interdisciplinary approach to the study of social issues (Murray, 2007).

But perhaps the most interesting point is not just the parallel use of both methods, but their combined utilization. In this sense, Cavan (1929), for example, suggests that statistics could be used to overcome the weaknesses of life histories. Chaffee (1930) proposes that case studies be complemented by life histories – which permit the recuperation of subjective aspects – and by statistics. Hoffer, in his comments on Melvin’s article (1927) also proposes a plurality of methods in social investigation. But if Chaffee assigns more relative importance to the case study, which in his proposal occupies a central role, Hoffer, on the other hand, underlines the superiority of statistical methods. Anticipating an idea that will later become typical of the canonic methodological views, he claims that case studies only have an exploratory function, providing clues for subsequent recourse to the more robust – and scientific – statistical methods.

All in all, the emphasis in the complementation of research methods was typical of the Chicago school. This reflects its openness when approaching the empirical study of social phenomena.

Final Comments

In this work we have analyzed the meanings and uses of methodological terms, which are currently associated with the qualitative approaches, in sociological papers published during the hegemony of the Chicago school. Although several authors⁹ have questioned the qualitative character of those terms, if compared with the present day definitions, the results of this study tend to suggest that their appreciation should not be understood in an absolute, rigid fashion since we can observe in the written evidence of that time some incipient advances along the lines of what we consider today as distinctive of the qualitative approaches.

Although there were few explicit allusions to methodology (as affirmed by Bulmer [1984]), this does not deny the existence of a concern for methods and of a defined body of specialized knowledge in the process of development. In this sense it should be noted that the analysis of the selected papers shows a growing interest in methodological questions (even though these are more linked to the debate on the scientific status of the social sciences), which is reflected in the increased appearance of manuals that sought to systematize methodological knowledge.

With regard to the status of sociology (and the social sciences in general) and its relation to the natural sciences, a clearly methodological concern is shown in the form of a discussion on the relevance of ‘importing’ methods from natural sciences or the need to generate their own. As concerns the latter, there was an extended consensus on the limits of experimentation (the characteristic method of the natural sciences) in the social sciences. This scrutiny also allowed us to identify two types of responses to those limits: on the one hand, the promotion of alternative

methods to experiments while searching for similar functions, and on the other hand, the proposal of radically different methodologies outside the traditional scientific canon. However, references to methodological terms such as ‘case studies’, ‘participant observer’, ‘interviews’, etc. (which today we tend to associate with interpretive standpoints) appear in some cases, defined under the classic perspectives imported from the natural sciences (as attempts to investigate ‘objectively’, to generalize, to formulate laws, etc.), even among Chicago sociologists.¹⁰

In the frame of this discussion, and as an evidence of the incipient advances in the direction of what could be defined as characteristic of current qualitative approaches, the article of Park (1930) appears to be particularly relevant. He defines the case study as a form of research, which implies association and intimate conversation with the subjects, thus questioning the central role of objectivity, as valued within traditional views of science.

In the context of these proposals, the concern of certain researchers for the complementary nature of the methods used in empirical research should also be noted. Indeed, for many of them the different methodological proposals do not represent antagonistic models but rather approaches that provide a complementary function, mainly case studies and statistical methods.

Finally, it can be noted that at the time when statistical methods began to be proposed by many sociologists as superior, from the point of view of their scientific qualities, critical voices also commenced to appear, especially among the researchers of the Chicago school. In the texts of Park, Burgess, House and Blumer we find, even if in an embryonic way, epistemological and methodological arguments more distant from the canonic visions. By contrast, we also encounter colleagues belonging to other institutions who defended methods that are today considered qualitative in terms of traditional quantitative science. It is clear, however, that the ‘qualitative’ proposals of the Chicago researchers were not based on interpretive alternatives, centred on the Weberian concept of *verstehen* (as indicated by Platt [1985]) and even less on phenomenological theories, in other words, the theoretical currents that have most influenced the contemporary development of qualitative methods.

Notes

1. Note that many of the foundational members of the department of sociology at Chicago had been trained in Europe (mainly in Germany) and had kept direct links with European thinkers and their intellectual circles.
2. The impact of anthropology becomes evident, for instance, when considering the use of the term ‘ethnography’ in many articles published by sociologists in the *AJS*. This methodological term, as used by Small (1916), Wirth (1927) and Znaniecki (1927), refer to diachronic studies of ‘primitive cultures’, usually from an evolutionary standpoint.
3. The uneasy relationship with the natural sciences was not limited to the methodological spheres. In fact, the examination of some of the Chicago school’s contribution to sociological theory has also shown points of contact between the social and the natural sciences. Kurz (1984), for example, argues that the human ecology, which was very influential in Chicagoans’ research activities, was rooted in the appropriation and adaptation of biological ideas, mainly in the fields of zoological and botanical ecology.
4. The quote corresponded to a passage written by Hoffer in the discussion of Melvin’s article (1927).
5. One of the few critical views in which the promotion of these methods is complemented by an emphatic call for careful application and detailed examination of what can and cannot be offered in terms of the construction of knowledge, as well as the need to take responsibility

- for the consequences of this application and an explicit epistemological base can be found in the work by Thomas (1929).
6. This same tension is shown in the use of other 'qualitative' terms. In terms of the interview, for example, Cavan (1929) presents attempts to develop similar functions to the experiment and proposes the design of 'tests' to establish the best ways to achieve this. Chapin (1924) uses the term 'fieldwork' within the frame of statistical research – a fact that, at least in appearance, distances it from a meaning exclusively related to qualitative research. It is worth noting that it is not exclusive today either, as the term is frequently used to refer to the collection of data through surveys. However, there are those who simply use it to replace qualitative research (although field research or field study are more common), as proposed by Burgess (1986).
 7. House (1926) emphasises in the same way Healy's contribution to individual case studies.
 8. In this sense, House (1926) suggests the existence of a certain consensus among sociologists on the use of subjective evidence, but he thinks that such evidence could be objectively managed. He claims that no sociologists who call themselves scientific have attempted to oppose the idea of basing their generalizations exclusively on objective information.
 9. See Platt 1983, 1985; Bryman 2001; Bulmer 1984; Chapouli 1987; Cressey 1983; Hammersley 1989.
 10. In early works by Park (1915, 1921), for instance, natural history is defined as the narration of the sequence of events related to the phenomenon under study in order to advance general laws of human nature, irrespective of time and space. Similar definitions are provided by Kozlowski (1928).

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