

Iulia Gheorghiu este masterandă în anul II în cadrul programului Master of Research in Sociology din cadrul Universității din București. Aree de interes: practicile sociale și modul în care sunt acestea pot fi cercetate, dar și strategiile de viață.

Motives and Rationalizations as Forms of Rationality

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The concept of rationality seems to be ineluctably linked to the idea of science and the scientific. When saying rationality, one says logic, method, rigor, reliability and the entire conceptual apparatus related to science and its products. But not only is rationality closely related to the realm of science, it is also considered to be a feature of common individuals, people living their everyday lives and making informed and rational decisions. Thus, theories in the rational choice area view the individuals as perfectly rational actors with a great ability of subtracting from their own milieu and making accurate decisions given their ability of foreseeing all the consequences of the said decisions (Vanberg, 2002). Rational choice theorists view agents as disposing of all the necessary information at any moment to make the best decisions for themselves and never be wrong. This approach has met serious critiques and entire sociological schools dedicated countless efforts in proving it wrong. Still, if actors are not fully rational, how do they make their decisions? And, most importantly for the sake of science, how can social scientists gain access to the processes and mechanisms of decision-making for individuals in everyday life?

Not denying that human behavior is purposeful (in the sense that agents might have already established projects of action), I argue that instead of consisting in a set of adaptive as well as instrumental practices, rationality is a world view residing on a taken for granted repertoire of shared knowledge and sets of practices and that irrational behavior is the one challenging the taken for granted character of everyday life and that human actions are imbued with rationality.

Working with this definition of rationality, I will try to explore the way qualitative interviews help in gathering socially relevant information and the processes through which interviewees provide the researchers with the information they require. Once we are good to go for a research based on qualitative interviews, there are a few things we need to have prepared: first, there is the fact that we need to be acquainted with the topic we are studying, so that we can understand what the informants convey toward us, then there is the importance of having some information regarding our informants (more or less general information, as the research situation doesn't always allow the researcher to closely know the respondents). Then, we need to set up a general framework of questioning, so that we know in what direction we take the conversation and we must make sure that the way we lead the discussion doesn't induce in any way the answers that the respondents provide us with. But what I consider very important when planning a research of these sort are the following: do respondents hold the knowledge we imply they hold, or do they create it as we listen to their story? Second, there are situations when researchers say: "this interview was a total waste of my time, I won't be able to use it". Besides the sampling process, by which researchers determine who they should listen to and who is not worthy of being heard, there are always situations when they assign competence to some interviewees, while denying it to others (Holstein, Gubrium 1995, 19). How does this happen? And, last but not least, as much as we try it, it is impossible to deny that, when conducting interviews, respondents meet the expectations of their interviewers and act on them, as it is shown in so many cases.

I argue that in the case of qualitative interviews not only is meaning constructed as the questions are asked, but also responses tend to reflect rehearsals or hic-et-nunc motives as well as rationalizations and justifications for actions or decisions made in the past and also for plans and projects for the future. The most important reason for this is the fact that the situation in which individuals find themselves has a great influence over the way they perceive the questions and how they give the answers. As Knudsen shows, narrative methods bear the problem of the co-authorship of the narrator and the one conducting the interview (Knudsen 1999, 124).

Given this situation, to what kind of information does an investigator have access? If a social scientist bases an entire research on qualitative methods – interviews, life histories, diaries and other narrative methods and techniques, what is the nature of the data they actually get? Resting on Charles Wright Mills' article (Wright Mills, 1940), I argue that the way the account of the self, whether biography, explanation, justification or rationalization is shaped is contingent upon the social situation in which it is given, as "institutionally different situations have different *vocabularies of motive* appropriate to their respective behavior" (idem, 906). Therefore, narrative methods asking from individuals to present their entire lives or only small parts of their lives, actually encourage a form of rationality that can make sense both for the individual narrating and for the one asking the questions. Put in K. Burke's words, when we present our thoughts to the world, we translate them into a "system of motivation that our audience can relate to" (Burke 1984, 24). This does not mean that the stories people tell are not accurate or that their accounts are fake. It only means that actors often provide events in their lives with explanations and motivations they might not have attributed to the events they accounted for, had they not been given that particular occasion of the interview or, even more so, that the narrative in itself might have been a "rehearsal" – an individual that repeated the story of a significant event in his/her life that had already been told who knows how many times and that the story acquired or had lost a bit in every act of recollection.

My paper argues that rationality, more than being a pursuit of goals is situational and it resides not in the actions themselves, but in the process of making sense of everyday actions and practices and it is this kind of rationality that social scientists easily have access to.

References

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