

Reflexivity in Practice: Social Research for Planning

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Abstract

The paper aims to offer a reflection on the pragmatic and transactional nature of social research for planning. This is a condition for the initiation and participatory activation of reflective programmatic processes and, as such, respectful of the complexity and extreme social and cultural variability of policy implementation contexts. As a pre-condition for the reasonableness of a 'conscious' practice, reflexivity is effectively related to the need for intervention policies to be inspired by 'social relationality' criteria which combine the traditional welfare idea with the everyday life interpersonal exchanges and relationships of people. For this purpose, social research must be inspired by criteria of temporariness, contingency and circularity of the methodologies and techniques that need to be coherent and suitable for specific situations. At this level, the reflexivity assumes meta-theoretical connotations that imply, on the one hand, an implicit recognition of the need to adapt planning to specific contexts and, on the other, a tacit acknowledgment of the continuous opening of planning to reasoned dialogue with the stakeholders for evaluate intervenes opportunity and merits.

Keywords: Reflexivity; Social Research; Social Planning; Culture

1. Introduction

The dimension which, together with the theoretical and empirical one, qualifies and corroborates the scientific nature of social research is that of effective usability. That is, it is the ability of social research to produce knowledge predisposed to impact and measure itself effectively with real-life contexts. Implicitly, this suggests a transactional and pragmatic vision of social research for planning.

Synthetically, it is an expression of competence which is not merely speculative but is oriented to action, practical experimentation and social interaction. An adjunctive factor get stronger this argument is that the researcher is not an outside observer but rather a constitutive and integral part of a dynamic, complex and socially constructed reality, which is unfit for repetition of conceptual or investigation paths establish in advance.

On the contrary, the researcher's relationship with the investigation contexts is characterized by his "openness" and continuous transaction: the researcher assesses problematic situations, project and take actions, 'receive' the effects of her actions in those situations and, in case, respond to these effects by redefining problems.

On closer inspection, the reflexivity of an investigation lies just in this: it represents a methodological remedy to potentially self-referential approaches which seem to respect the subjectivities under study but are actually poor oriented to account for needs, value options, and interests at stake. Add to this a principle of reasonableness and final sustainability of the results closely connected with cultural factors which determine the start and development of a research process and influence methodological and technical options of an investigation: instead of 'assembling' results, the researcher actively participates in building relations that are ethically oriented towards the enhancement of the identity of the people under study.

In effect, the connotation of planning as a process of 'social construction' and the consequent need to find relational and appropriate intervention practices, subordinate the relevance of choices to a criterion of reasonableness.

Before programmatic scenarios that are ideologically inspired to a natural identity of interests and needs, this form of cognitive sensitivity postulates a culturally situated definition of planning which profoundly innovates the traditional architecture of policies and subjects 'technical' competence to the assessment of a community and its needs.

In this perspective, social planning answers the epistemological need to claim the same legitimation and authority for experience and 'non-expert' knowledge and to promote negotiation among alternative priorities. In other words, reasonableness calls for a principle of 'inclusive' pluralism, functional to an 'enlightened comprehension', of contexts (Dahl, 1998, p. 37).

Starting from the analysis of the arguments advanced in favour of new modes of governance for decision-making processes in which the hermeneutic capacity of social research for planning emerge as a prerequisite for that purpose, it will be attempted to analyse the reasons which make reflexivity as a distinctive value.

As a pre-condition for the reasonableness of a sustainable practices, reflexivity is related to the need for intervention policies to be inspired by 'social relationality' criteria which combine the integration of traditional idea of welfare with the real contexts of everyday life, in which interpersonal and cultural exchanges and relationships takes effectively place.

In particular, if social planning can be assimilated to a non-linear path for the search of possible solutions to complex problems, the reflective research produce a state of 'suspension of judgement' that excludes all attempts to permanently predefine the whole range of preferences and values that govern the legitimation of suggerite decisions.

2. Why reflexivity in social planning? Some observations

Synthetically, the social research oriented to planning characterise itself as a 'hermeneutic' practice, giving back its constitutive (methodological and technical) foundations to interpretational abilities and skills, to symbolic mediation and specifically cultural of researcher, compared to which 'the criteria of precision, generality, lexical definition *independent of context* are usually insignificant' (Giddens, 1979, p. 50).

Indeed, if the social planning serve to highlight and solve real problems and not limit itself to mere theoretical-cognitive or methodological cases study, the pragmatic connotation of research requires an attentive analysis of contextual elements that are intrinsically unstable and strongly specific from a sociocultural point of view.

In fact, these elements do not simply represent 'mental figurations, pleasant yet unfounded hopes, quick and tentative impressions' (Dewey, 1961, p. 62) of stakeholders and planning places, but contribute to define a state of permanent and collaborative learning, which 'approximates signification convergence' (Schön, 2006) and invokes the social dimension of sense as a 'continual actualization of possibilities' (Luhmann, 1990, p. 153).

On this matter, the most recent acquisitions of the specialist literature show some important findings: the "rules" for planning do not consist in setting out objectives to be met without a clear explanation of the necessary means. They are not algorithmic, perfect or inclusive of such detailed information as to use up for any decision-making choice, nor are they excellent in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Rather, they more often tend to direct and orient the research path to be followed, and are strictly limited to the specificity of the programmatic "game" to be played.

In other words, it is the context of use that clarifies their meaning and, conventionally, defines their legitimacy. They 'are promoted by the problems encountered by research and are instrumental to their solution' (Bruschi, 1996, p. 33).

In this perspective, reference to the fertile and creative 'combination' of ideas, beliefs and hypothetical forms of knowledge, call by John Dewey for support the reflexivity of thought, is central. Here, reflexivity is considered as an instrument for the research of value and the attribution of meanings and multiple, diversified and, not infrequently, hostile indications, which constantly threaten to alter the planning scenarios (Bourdieu et al., 1992), and describe its scope as intrinsically 'doubtful' and problematically 'crucial':

'Reflective thought, unlike the other operations which we call thought, involves: 1) a state of doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, mental difficulty, in which thought has its origin; 2) an operation of research, of investigation, in order to find the materials which will clear the doubt and provide a solution and decision to uncertainty' (Dewey, 1961, p. 72).

The precariousness perception that this perspective seems to assign to the planning process does not represent a limitation but rather 'marks the difference between reflexive thinking and a bad way of thinking' (Dewey, 1961, p. 77). The cultural *naturalism* (Dewey, 1938), which causes its uncertainty and transitoriness, triggers new investigational processes that are functional to a careful recognition and interpretation of planning contexts and to the potential re-conceptualisation of interventions where these do not suitably meet the needs to be faced (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 2007).

It is now of common knowledge that social planning cannot be assimilated to a 'monolithic block of axioms' (Brand, 2007), still less to a 'neutral technique' or 'cold and safe calculation' (Scaglia, 1999) of means that are functional to the satisfaction of abstractly and universally defined values. In the same way, the diagnosis of a need and the preparation of a technically efficient performance do not automatically result in the quality of an intervention.

On the contrary, any development policy may be assimilated to a 'discursive event' (Studer et al., 2010, p. 253) in specific territorial contexts with a self-organisation capacity. This requires going beyond the concept that assimilates 'spaces' and 'times' of planning to mere geometrical coordinates or to 'external receptacles' of social life. Although characterised by 'fragmentation, uncertainty and complexity, often on the edge of chaos' (Booher & Innes, 2003, p. 10), the 'places' of planning are 'social constructs' and 'surfaces of identity in relation' (Hillier, 2001).

Thus, as well as triggering fiduciary and participatory mechanisms which demolish competence monopolies and recognise the huge potential of 'lay' knowledge for the advancement of knowledge, reflexivity gives back to policy-making a 'creative fertility', essential for the contingency and contextual rooting of intervention measures.

Perhaps, in this regard, Max Weber would have also recommended to go 'beyond a merely formal consideration of social subsistence standards' and to convert the underlying language of technical rationality into the 'language of life', through an 'accurate use of interpretation in the analysis of social phenomena and cultural processes from the point of view of their conditioning and their scope' (Weber, 1958, p. 84).

And, from this, probably derive at least two elements that seal the importance of reflexivity in social research for programmatic purposes.

The first is what that conceives reflexivity as minimum prerequisite for an intelligent and perceptive research intending to be scientific and functional to comprehension, always partial and tolerant of dissimilar or alternative representations of the phenomena under study.

The second element is that the study of contextually restricted realities, therefore characteristic of typical and distinctive cultural fields, cannot rely on the impulsive or imaginative casual rush, or even worse, on clumsy or careless improvisation of researcher.

In the following paragraph we will try to argue some reasons.

3. The culture: a not negligible element for research reflexivity in social planning

Beyond a certain semantic abstractness and redundancy which, on an analytical level, would seem to complicate the stipulation of a homogeneous and as far as possible univocal and definitive meaning, the concept of social planning mainly assumes the connotations of a "historical" practice and, as such, inseparable from the concreteness of the social contexts to which it is addressed: social planning is exclusively or centrally concerned with social reality and social practice.

In fact, based on a general agreement, the planning (even without adjectives) is always social, in that it has social effects, intended or otherwise (Kirk, 1980).

Although, "social is one of the most ambiguous of the adjectives that can precede and define planning, the descriptor 'social' can imply both public interest, people's interaction and participation and suggest a distinctive sphere of interest or activity, different from the economic" (Prior and Harfield, 2009: 5). In addition to this, it should not be overlooked that social planning is a question of "policy choice and programming in the light of facts, projections, and application of values" (Kahn 1969: 15).

Actually, as Gordon and Mundy say, "any development policy must be deeply sensitive to and inspired by culture" [2001: 5]: the simplification of the complexity of the planning contexts, carried out through "technical" definitions and only apparently objective of the notions of "well-being" and "common interest", it soon leads to the unmasking of the ineffectiveness of regulatory approaches to planning and evolves to new ways of governance that reflect the strategic, critical and ethical values of culture [Young, 2008].

The impression is that these assumptions draw copiously from the epistemological and methodological indications of the qualitative sociological tradition: the admonition to the interpretative wisdom of planning; the unpredictable complexity of reality and the consequent impossibility of uncritically transposing analogous methods and measures of intervention from context to context; the renewed attention to the ethical implications of planning; the researcher's aptitude for understanding; the need to replace the institutionalized practices of homologation of needs, typical of traditional decision-making processes, through the exercise of a "situated rationality" that deeply innovates the traditional architecture of social policies and subordinates technical competence and specialist knowledge to cultural specificities.

In this perspective, social research processes oriented to planning of measures of intervention provide added value to institutionalised practices and refers to "concrete" life situations that reject whatever objectification or predefined criteria of assessment and restricts aims, preferences, actions and impacts to the specificity and temporal contingency of real circumstances.

Furthermore, this cultural-based approach to planning is strictly connect to necessary interruption of *routine* guiding principles for research and supports processes that are mainly involved in the activation of mutual exchanges and the structuration of a context which, due to 'relationality' of social research, favours reflexivity of research itself as much as people participation.

If, as Geva-May (2002) claims, the culture represents a 'crucial' dimension of social planning, is essential that research transform and reinvigorate its theoretical orientations and corresponding practices. This caution leads, on one side to re-conceptualises the local community as a "storage" and "tank" of symbolic meanings that increases and intensifies the local assets of reflexivity and, on the other, to identify culture with significant social practices, regardless of formally established precepts and of any presumption of systematicity.

In sum, culture tends to develop as an indefinitely open sequence of 'construction of meanings', based on interpretation of perspectives, aspirations, topics and actions of all stakeholders involved in the interventions, in relation to the organisational, social and institutional context in which programmes are implemented.

Indeed, the call for the 'production of sense' as a key element for planning models inspired by a reflective governance of policies is not coincidental, since: 'governance merges elements that cannot be defined as proper to instrumental rationality, and are those elements of value, connected with feelings or interests populating the complex symbolic, material, immaterial and somehow motivational world of a society, a world which we call culture' (Scaglia, 2004, p. 44).

This meaning of the culture notion is well present in the dedicated literature.

While the "normative" notion refers to culture as a *stable* and homogeneous system of values, standards and beliefs, which are deeply shared and influence individual choices and motivations to act, the perspective of the so-called "cultural welfare" conceives culture as: "the relevant ideas in a given society surrounding the welfare state and the way it is *embedded* in society. It comprises the stock of knowledge, values, and ideals to which the relevant social actors, the institutions of the welfare state and *concrete* policy measures refer. These can be ordered or logically inconsistent. The cultural values and ideals which predominate in the welfare culture *restrict* the spectrum of possible policies of a welfare state" (Pfau- Effinger, 2005: 4).

The "contextual" scope of this approach is significant.

It seems to return to the characterization of culture as a "vital world" in which means and objectives merge into courses of action. In addition, it seems to suggest the already mentioned "relational" connotation of social research, in which the process of understanding this socially constructed world is 'dialogic'. It allows individuals to communicate their experiences within a shared framework of cultural meanings and conceives the researcher as a 'reflective partner'.

As Pfau-Effinger says, "The cultural values and models which are used as a basis for discourse by the social actors, with which they wish to exert an influence on welfare state policy represent a level of welfare culture [...] Welfare state policy has a special mutual relationship with the cultural dimension, with key institutions of society, with structural dimensions, and with the actions of social actors in the given 'welfare arrangement' [...] Values and models are a basis for policies: policies are embedded in cultural values and models, with which they are justified and legitimised. The relationship between culture and welfare state policies is embedded in a specific societal context: depending on the space/time context, one and the same type of policy can be based on different cultural values and models. For this reason, similar policies also can have different effects [...] The effects of concrete political measures are therefore a reflection of cultural values and ideals, which influence the degree to which policies are accepted by the population and their impact on social practices of individuals" (2005:7-9).

4. Conclusion

The long quote just reported allows us in some way to summarize the meaning of this contribution, leaving open, at the same time, the possibility of deepening future reflections on the topic.

There is no doubt that, in the context of social planning processes, the researcher must take on a *neutral* role between people of various degrees interested in developing meaningful interactions aimed at protecting singular, peculiar needs and requests, and therefore not mutually substitutable.

Beyond strictly compensatory or "restorative" purposes, social research aims, in particular, to devise the most suitable ways to build new social bonds or to the possible regeneration of social networks torn by previous indifference or conflict, in terms of a *relational reorganization* that leads to a qualitative transformation of community relations and restores, to each, the autonomous ability to legitimately represent and negotiate their respective requests.

If this were not the case, social research would be inspired by criteria of complete and linear rationality, classically based on the ideology of the natural identity of everyone's interests. Furthermore, its results would tend to arbitrarily construct and distort the *sense* of the contexts studied, to transcend the indeterminacy of those contexts and to assimilate culture to an anonymous and unrepresentative product of existing social relationships.

It is on these bases that the reference to reflexivity finds solid foundations.

Compared to abstract and standardized logics of classification and homologation of needs, reflexivity configures the ability to define and manage those needs in a *relational* sense. The operative logic that presides over and determines its effects is a *comparison* logic that also takes on a *transformative* value; in other words, the reflexivity does not immediately seek the resolution of a problem nor does it take on an emergency value, but is systematically concerned (through methodologically and technically adequate and relevant procedures) with the enhancement and mutual recognition of "parts" distinctly characterized by multiple cultural codes and locally specific.

Properly, to paraphrase Gadamer (1987), it leads to a harmonious *fusion* of interpretative horizons of situations as well as to the art of building concepts by elaborating together what the interlocutors (social researcher and stakeholders) think of the issues in question, looking together in the *same* direction.

In this perspective, the reflexivity of social research for planning does not take on the characteristics of an exclusively technical or "specialist" practice but is systematically aimed at devising and implementing ever new intervention strategies (at a conceptual and operational level), functional to capacity to suggest solutions that often intercept tacit, latent or unanswered "questions".

Opportunely, the reflexivity of the research is a privileged place for the experimentation of "variable geometry" interventions, based on responsible and contextual actions of deconstruction of consolidated practices, generating an operational logic of *social comparison*. Moreover, it represents an "intelligent" way (from the Latin *intus lègere*: reading inside) to test the usability sustainable of the results with respect to complex, different, and constantly evolving needs.

Since it's: critical reflection leads to the search for new directive horizons for actions; arrives at the dialogical and evolutionary use of knowledge; generates new ways of representing phenomena; prefigures possible scenarios; rediscovers the authentic meaning of the relationality of social research.

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