

Methodological intersections in Communication research

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Abstract

This paper¹ places methodology at the center of the configuration of communication knowledge in terms of its investigative processualities. That is, methodology is not seen as a given but, rather, as a process in which the researcher, in configuring research, is likewise configured by it themselves. The focus is to discuss the processes of learning and teaching methods in Communications from the perspective of three intersections: epistemological, political, and subjective. Exploring these dimensions reveals that the methodological maturation of the field of Communications includes discussions on epistemic dependence, on the links between theory and methodology, on reflexivity, as well as on the encouragement towards epistemological curiosity and the configuration of places of listening.

Keywords: Methodologies. Communications. Teaching. Research. Reflexivity.

Introduction

Methodology is one of the founding instances of science, albeit this claim might not always lead to such dimension being assigned a privileged position in the production and reflection on communicational knowledge. From testimonials by early-career researchers, methodology is often verbalised as something that crosses the path of research: not exactly as that which bursts through the processual articulation around a given topic, triggering certain complications and evoking new findings but, rather, as an obstacle: *“I really wanted to look into this, but then there is the methodology”*.

The dilemmas imposed by these intersections are at the core of this text, especially with regard to the relationship between learning and teaching methods in the field of Communication. This is a dialogue that draws on Braga (2016), Barichello (2016), Martino (2016), Martino and Grohmann (2017), Martino and Marques (2018, 2019), Bonin (2011, 2012), Moura and Lopes (2016), Seibt *et al.* (2013), Barth (2018), as well as on conversations with peers and lecturers.

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These conversations provide detailed, yet disheartening testimonials from the field, from those who teach modules on Research Methods. Martino and Grohmann (2017) detect, in such instances, a certain lack of prestige around this kind of module; a perception that is close to comments from other lecturers and researchers about this issue. The situation does not seem to differ when it comes to academic conferences and fora, where methodological discussions are still few and far between (BARTH, 2018). Conversely, Seibt *et al.* (2013) highlight the hardships faced by lecturers in trying to bring methodology to the forefront, especially when students near the end of their programmes and have to work on their dissertations, something that was likewise noted by Lacerda *et al.* (2013). Hesitation in face of challenges posed to dissertations with regard to methodological and investigative practice is not exclusive to the field of Communication, equally emerging in other areas, such as Medicine (GUEDES; GUEDES, 2012), Accounting (SANTOS *et al.*, 2017), and Geography (PEREHOUSKEI; ANGELIS, 2011).

In order to approach this scenario, I will expatiate on the ways in which the methodological instance is inscribed in Communication research to then reflect on the countless intersections that take place in the classroom, of which I shall present three, namely: epistemological, political, and subjective intersections. Finally, this is about discussing how we can turn the teaching of Methodology into a productive instance for those involved in research.

The place of methodology

As the primordial space for reflecting on research as a practice, it is natural to assume the importance of methodology in parallel to research. According to Lopes' methodological model (1990), the methodological instance is the constitutive element of research practice, even when concealed or overlooked. In other words, the structure of any research project comes into being through a decision-making process in which the topic is refined, theories and the observation of reality interact – and intertwine – continuously. It is therefore up to methodology to reflect on the internal validity and coherence criteria amongst these elements, which are embedded in a scientific field and which help to configure and respond to the topic of each research endeavour. It is a process that is embodied in the concrete practices of any given piece of research, as synthesised by Bonin (2011)².

Methodology is largely taken here as a process towards building knowledge. Hence, it is reasonable to infer that a good methodological framework is fundamental to the condition, which anyone in our field has (LOPES, 1990), of producing knowledge. Through methodology, the subjectivity of the researcher is also rebuilt, in a constructive movement inherent to the

² That is, it is not about abstract reflection per se but one that is, rather, linked to the context within which research is conducted, as a “dimension that guides, steers the processes whereby research is constructed on all levels, as an embodied instance of practices, operations, experiments, and procedures that form the object of knowledge, inscribed in the rationale with which this object is captured and conceived of” (BONIN, 2011, p. 2).

very scientific praxis (MALDONADO, 2003, BONIN, 2013). This understanding is on par with Freire (2018, p. 25) when he claims that, in saying “I move as an educator because, first, I move as a person”. We move as researchers because, first, we assume our position in the world – which, in itself, is already a methodological process.

If a certain consensus is reached around the centrality of methodology as a way of *pondering the making* of research within our area’s production of knowledge, it is up to modules on Research Methods (and its variants) to constitute and stimulate this debate within the field of Communication, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Thus, a collective space can be born; one that shapes prospective researchers par excellence.

As Martino (2016, p. 28) points out, alongside the module of Theories of Communication, Research Methods is the “[...] the core of epistemological debate in a Communication programme [...] and has the power to be a space for dialogue between theories and concrete investigation”. Such power might, at times, be reduced to an unrealised potential. Evidence thereof includes the common lack of the trajectory that based decisions made throughout dissertations and theses, which was identified by Lopes (1990) by analysing the constitution of the field towards the late-20th century and likewise noticed in other, more specific instances, such as *Meios & Audiências* project, which followed the academic production in Reception Studies from that same period until 2015 (JACKS; MENEZES; PIEDRAS, 2007, JACKS, 2014, JACKS *et al.*, 2017). Yet another piece of evidence is the low number of titles on research methods within the field of Communication when compared to theoretical debates. As Martino and Marques (2018) highlight, whereas there are 35 books on the theory/epistemology of research in Communication, there are no more than seven alongside a few journal articles on methodology. And these features nowhere near the most cited references in undergraduate and postgraduate module guides, as Moura (2016) as well as Martino and Grohmann (2017) point out³.

The roll call of names within methodology modules in undergraduate programmes is yet another issue, equally highlighted by Martino and Grohmann’s exploratory research (2017): they found 20 different names, which, far from bringing discussions to an end, might in fact indicate a certain lack of consensus in the field about the place occupied by methodology, as the authors point out themselves.

In addition to that – or, perhaps, as a result thereof –, methodology is often assigned an eminently prescriptive character in research, as a set of guidelines that imposes rules in small print about things such as the margins of a page or paragraph spacing. The methodological instance is thus reduced to a set of formal prescriptions that validate work as “scientific” and that are set far from the researcher, who, in fact, is the responsible for defining the path of their own projects. Here, the same distancing between subject and object that demarcates the

³ In studying theoretical references used in Research Methods modules from postgraduate programmes in Communication, Moura (2016) highlighted the title “Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound” (Bauer, Gaskell) as the most cited. Martino and Grohman (2017), in turn, looked into 33 undergraduate programmes in Journalism only to find that Lakatos and Marconi’s classic “Methodology of the scientific endeavour” [my translation] is the most used title. Both of those support reflections on methodology, but their relationship with Communication is, by no means, a straightforward one.

positivistic view of science says plenty of the distancing between the individual and their methodological practices. This state of affairs produces concrete effects in how methodology is perceived and lived in the education of new researchers – of which I explore three here: the epistemological effects, the political effects, and the subjective effects.

Epistemological intersections

Epistemological intersections are not a novel topic of debate, dating back to the very constitution of Communication as a field, its disciplinary boundaries, its statute, and its identity – all of which are debated at length in academia. In undergraduate programmes, the dichotomy between theory and practice is heightened – and research is often seen as an isolated act of theorisation that will contribute with little towards students' education. This duality characterises the study of Communication since its very beginning (LOPES, 1990) and is reproduced in research projects whose theoretical instance establishes little to no dialogue with their methodological choices, in an operative sense of the word (MARTINO, 2016, MALDONADO, 2001, LOPES, 1990), thus configuring a fragile relationship between these dimensions. In this sense, thinking methodologically means “applying” theory. Likewise, thinking of ways to appropriate theory turns into “drawing on” an author.

This landscape is becoming ever more complex given the amount of knowledge about communication, which is heterogenous, varied, and slippery. Martino (2016) argues that, if there is no consensus on who we are, what are perspectives and our preoccupations are, how can we possibly develop specific methodologies? In other words, how can we operationalise methodological strategies in the process of constructing theories in Communication?

It is a dilemma that permeates not only the field of Communication but of all Social Sciences at large, as Lopes (1990) points out. At the same that it is linked with the broad, generalist, and tributary methodological perspective of both a syntax and a semantics that are intrinsic to the scientific language, Communication, as a science, is also forced to elaborate its own methods, according to the nature of its concerns (its theoretical frameworks and its topics).

Having said that, it is necessary to consider, given the development of the field of Communication henceforth, if it would not be possible to connect, in a more explicit fashion, both methods within research (in their operative dimension) as well as research methods (in their epistemological linkage) from the perspective of communicational queries. This would not, however, mean a narrow view of communication⁴ but, rather, it would lead to an understanding of methodology as a living system that needs to be constituted against the backdrop of the “state of affairs”, with all theoretical constructs that have thus far been mobilised in the field.

4 After all, as Ferrara (2019, p. 73) invites us to think, “it is not up to epistemology to offer correct and trustworthy answers to research in communication but, rather, to offer arguments that might support the empirical efficiency of potential doubts”.

Thus, the valuation of the methodological instance does not imply the establishment of the array of theories in Communication by which methodology must forcibly abide but, rather, the claiming of an intimate articulation between theoretical and methodological processualities in the praxis of research. Little by little, this consolidates a legacy of methodological interventions, propositions, and perspectives that might be questioned and improved by peers.

In order to avoid a new technical and prescriptive enclosure, it is important to sustain the argument that methodology is the place of scientific praxis par excellence; one where the process of objectivation/subjectification takes place, guiding individuals in scientific debates about concrete reality, in a Bachelard-inspired process of epistemological surveillance (LOPES, 1990, SODRÉ, 2003). Cultivating this reflexive and inquisitive posture in face of the formality and rigidity of methodology also helps to reveal a more positivistic and tradition in science, in which methods work as a sort of anchor for the maintenance of a much-needed objective and distanced posture on the part of the researcher towards the topic (SODRÉ, 2003). In understanding the methodological instance as a scientific praxis, we make room for debates around objectivation processes in which the object is not taken for its exteriority but, rather, as a system of relations that is explicitly built by the researcher along the research (LOPES, 2010) – that is, a space of epistemic reflexivity par excellence.

Far from solving these long-standing topics such as the identity and the object of Communication, I argue that these epistemological instabilities permeate what we know and, especially, what we feel towards methodology. They often extract from this discipline the power of being the place where researchers can discover new things in touch with the world, where they can ask questions, question what they see around them, refine commonplace perceptions of what constitutes research topics. This issue is certainly not exclusive to our field. On the contrary, it highlights the scientific paradigms, and their disputes, which will inform the subjective aspects of research, as we shall later see.

Political intersections

Before we do that, it is important to address the political intersections of how we teach and learn methods, which, in fact, cannot be detached from the other types of intersections. Drawing on the notion of fields, we know that the epistemological dimension always carries a political dimension as well (LOPES, 2003). Nevertheless, I highlight the “position” of the political as the ways in which the production of knowledge is considered, regulated, and evaluated inside and outside the field.

Beyond the walls of these disputes within the field, there are historical factors that relate to this lack of methodological tenacity, such as the fact that Communication was constituted only recently as a specific locus of reflections, the fact that it is a place “where instrumental practices of the technical know-how abound” (MALDONADO, 2003, p. 208), and the fact that it is geographically marked at its origin, born out of an intense relationship

with hegemonic political power (MALDONADO, 2003, SODRÉ, 2003). Epistemic dependence is also related to methodological dependence, such as in the acritical adoption of research techniques that are highly esteemed by hegemonic science (MALDONADO, 2012), which translates into obstacles or inspiration for research (MALDONADO, 2003)⁵.

This also relates to the objective conditions for the production and circulation of scientific knowledge (NAVARRO, 2019), which is often opposed to the duration of an investigation process not in the sense of how much time was spent but, rather, in the sense of time as a quality, a flow – experience, mobility, in the Bergsonian manner in which Rosário and Aguiar (2013) look at it.

It is importance to consider what the duration of the time that we have got actually entails as well as the ways in which the duration of research processes engage with and confront institutionalised time. It is in this process of objectivation of time that, often, prescriptive notions of methodology become petrified, as a mere checklist that needs to be run in time. Let us not forget the ABNT norms...⁶

Conversely, the conscience of this political notion within the field as it is activated in the classroom deepens the understanding that students have of the scientific praxis. In understanding science as a field of disputes, students increase their knowledge of the objectivations of their own research topics in the field of Communication. This leads them to questioning the reasons why certain topics enjoy more immediate prestige whilst others get little or no recognition. Thus, when one of students who took part in the most immediate analysis of the state of affairs says that “if there isn’t a lot of research on it, it’s because it’s not relevant”, a whole new process of constructive criticism emerges whereby the very constitution of this field is scrutinised: “Why isn’t there much research on my topic”?

Subjective intersections

Finally, we reach the point where we can explore the subjective aspects of teaching and learning methods, which are not isolated from the ones mentioned before, but which are constituted as well as constitutive thereof (MARTINO; MARQUES, 2018). It is the space through the early-career researcher can inscribed themselves in the world – both within and beyond academia. These elements have not yet been explored at length in our discipline when compared, for instance, to Anthropology, where reflexivity is a founding dimension of the methodological praxis.

5 “Sociocultural and political effervescence is a contextual factor that intervenes greatly in the structuration of the conditions for scientific production; both in the generation of systemic obstacles as well as in the inspiration and energy towards problematising world and communicational conceptions” (MALDONADO, 2003, p. 209).

6 At risk of being unjust, it is important to highlight the importance of the establishment of norms for the constitution of this “common ground” within which scientific production has to be contained. Methodology cannot do without this dimension, but it certainly cannot be reduced to it.

The opacity of subjectivity is the result of a formalist view of methodology or, from a critical perspective, of its colonial dimension⁷ (BORSANI, 2014), based on some fallacies. The first of which is the impersonality of research accounts, in which often lie a purported neutrality. Yet another fallacy is that of objectivity not as a reflexive inscription of the researcher in the process of researching but, rather, as an externality that, when not obeyed, is at risk of “contaminating” the project.

If there is no interest that is *a priori* uninterested, the greatest risk is that of not highlighting the interests of any research project (OROZCO GÓMEZ, 2011). In this process, we have to objectivate subjectivity, taking experience – stemming from a specific social location – as one of the conditions for the scientific endeavour (MARTINO; MARQUES, 2018).

The question here is thus: from the moment we assume subjectivity as the starting point of any research, how can we stimulate it as we teach methods? At the same time, how can we avoid transforming subjectivity into a sufficient condition for the validation of any research – which would ultimately mean the very rejection of scientific knowledge?

Often, undergraduate students’ first contact with research is through modules on Research Methods. In these cases, the initial setting around a specific topic can be a privileged place for raising awareness as to subjectivity itself in a process of objectivation that can meanwhile constitute the very scientific praxis (BRAGA, 2005). There are here then elements to these processes of teaching and learning that support the consolidation of research, the understanding of dialogicity of relationships within the classroom, where both lecturers and students might come across as epistemologically curious, as argued by Freire (2018).

It is up to the lecturer, as they exercise their curiosity as individuals, researchers, and educators, to help the students as these take their first steps in transforming their spontaneous curiosity about the world into epistemological curiosities by stimulating questioning – and the questioning of questions themselves. In this context, it is not enough for the lecturer to encourage students to question things, to be curious about phenomena if they themselves, as educators, do not practice that in relation to the knowledge that is being shared.

The epistemological curiosity that is shared in the classroom becomes an important element in how the scientific praxis might be learnt, practiced through specific exercises and teaching strategies, but also by summoning the recognition of and the encouragement towards imagination, intuition, and emotion. The dimension of intuition, pre-reflection, is a process whereby an individual enters the topic, sees it from the inside, not from its constituting exteriority (ROSÁRIO; AGUIAR 2013). In practice, intuition builds a sensitive-aesthetic dominion over the topic (MALDONADO, 2001), for “without emotional and aesthetic intelligence, it is impossible for there to be a talented researcher; at most, we would have

⁷ “The problems lies in the very condition of being colonised, which is to say that it is the result of a colonial imposition in accordance with Eurocentric standards of knowledge. This imposition responds to a standardisation of knowledge with the intention of universality and neutrality, according to a reduced universe of problems that the Humanities and the Social Sciences recognised as relevant in accordance with Western principles. For that reason, our drive, disgust, or discomfort can only be sustained within the colonial dimension of methodology, in realising that it is yet another of so many other areas that have been established on coloniality and remain so to this day” (BORSANI, 2004, p. 152) [my translation].

a hard-working individual who deals with ideas and procedures” (MALDONADO, 2001, p. 61). This is a process that, methodologically, can be likened to paying close attention to multiplicities (ROSÁRIO; AGUIAR, 2013) or to an anthropophagic gesture (MACHADO, 2018). Such a gesture can be equally associated with the image of the intellectual craftsperson presented by Mills (2009), when the author rejects the fetishism of method and technique, inscribing the personal in the how concepts and procedures are engendered.

The exercise of intuition in science is a tempting process, limited by concrete experience itself. Drawing on Martino and Marques’ ideas on the “orientation clinic” (2018), we could think of the opportunity to listen that is offered in the classroom with “the permanent availability on the part of an individual who listens openly to what the other says” (FREIRE, 2018, p. 117), which is not to imply “self-cancelling” or the lack of disagreement but, rather, an open and respectful position towards differences through whose listening one might equally learn.

In learning methods, the space of listening is gradually delimited by the combination of tones, views, and positions in the world – and becomes ever more powerful as it is shared collectively. A space in which not only the lecturer but also the class become responsible for listening to their peers’ projects, as seen, for example, by Braga (2016). The responsibility to listen is, thus, an important issue here as well. As Martino (2016) argues, the idea of responsibility is already somehow linked with the possibility of answering. Through this dialogue emerges an environment where participants can share fears, doubts, and intuitions, igniting creative sparks that can lead to the constitution of research projects.

Therefore, encouraging epistemological curiosity, creating spaces for exercising intuition as a key element of research, and encouraging the establishment of collective spaces of listening seem to be possible ways to work with the subjective dimension of a methods training.

In this context, the social and individual inscription of the researcher comes through, but it also need to be placed – objectivated – within the field of Communication. That is, it needs to be likewise inscribed in the course of the history of how this knowledge was produced. It is in that moment that fears, questions, and intuitions all meet with historicity and the demands inherent to the field’s objects of knowledge, which are likewise epistemological and political.

In this dynamic process, research on researching itself (state of the art) is an interesting gateway to the objectivation and the inscription of interest as an epistemological as well as a political movement (MALDONADO, 2003) of looking at the canons, at the field’s paradigms, and understand their internal constitution, deconstructing them and pushing through them in accordance with the project’s interests.

In sum, research on researching means inscribing oneself as a localised individual in the field of Communication, establishing dialogue with peers, placing them historically within the process of constructing knowledge (BONIN, 2011). Such strategies can respond to the need for rationality on the part of research on researching (MARTINO; MARQUES,

2018), without which, as the authors claim, we are at risk of pursuing a project that is based on nothing more than affective premises, doomed to a path leading our sight only to what we wish to encounter, making us blind to other possible directions.

Final remarks

The centrality of the methodological instance for inscribing researchers in the world seems to contrast, due to the reasons on which this paper versed, with the minor role that these practices and reflections around research currently have. The problem is not the episodic but, rather, the historical – and it informs the weaknesses and potentialities of the field of Communication in the construction of scientific knowledge.

At the undergraduate level, where modules on Research Methods are often the only space dedicated to research as a practice, the situation is even more sensitive. The space for presenting the logic of the production of knowledge par excellence, the space for training new researchers, and for encouraging a constructively inquisitive posture onto the issues pertaining to the field of Communication as well as to the world at large might as well turn into spaces for reiterating methodology as a merely bureaucratic and technical instance of academic life. Or worse still, a space for cultivating a certain “epistemic cynicism” (BORSANI, 2004), where convictions themselves are sacrificed in the name of formalities that are imposed by a bureaucratic view of methodology, thus accepting that it must be experienced as protocol, not as a possibility for sharing the ways to make and think our own research.

On the very first day of class, I use to tell students that I hold no illusions even though I would like to. I know that they certainly did not decide to go to university because they say that, during their third year, they would have a module on Research Methods in Communication. My confession is received with laughter from those who often seem to identify with this pre-conceived image.

It is not uncommon for students who have no desire to pursue an academic life to feel discouraged from taking this module as they do not see how it relates directly to the professional practice that they desire (which highlights, yet again, the dichotomy between theory and practice). Furthermore, if modules on research methods are offered as students are about to finish their degrees, this somehow confirms that their undergraduate journey is coming to an end – and nothing could be more symbolic at this point than their dissertations – thus reinforcing the need to bring forth the subjective aspects that are inherent to research in its practical terms.

In this sense, seeing the methodological instance through wider lenses as the connections – epistemological, subjective – that are established by the researcher in their decision-making processes becomes ever more necessary for the production of knowledge. However, it is also a challenge that is more likely to be overcome collectively.

This means assuming the methodological dimension as a formative space for students and lecturers alike; one where, “experienced through practical research, methodology can

thus be reflected upon and taken as a formative dimension for individuals both in terms of research as well as their own lives” (BONIN, 2012, p. 44). This is a continuous process, in which students and lecturers are all embedded, thus accepting it as a never-ending journey.

When conceived of from the perspective of subjectivity, the inclusion of the practice of methodology in the classroom from the perspective of subjectivity demands the establishment of another place for teaching as “lecturers who expect students to share confessional narratives, but who are not themselves willing to share their own exert power in a potentially coercive manner” (HOOKS, 2013, p. 19). We might thus find an ally in methodology in what concerns contact with alterity, not its contrary, in the ways in which methodological debates are often seen as precisely that which stands in the way of research itself.

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