

# THE METHOD OF JAMES SPRADLEY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

EL MÉTODO DE JAMES SPRADLEY EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA

O MÉTODO DA JAMES SPRADLEY NA INVESTIGAÇÃO QUALITATIVA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper shows the Developmental Research Sequence Method developed by James Spradley. This procedure is among one of the most important global approaches in qualitative research. The strategy of Spradley was designed in a didactic way to guide the work of junior researchers whose main technique for the collection of data is the ethnographic interview. The fieldwork turns the observer into a research tool. Thus, there are necessary procedural recommendations for the proper study of the people in their life settings such as workplaces, neighborhoods, hospitals and schools, among others, spaces where individuals develop their daily lives. The basic orientations for the observation and the processing of the information are shown in a sequence of steps. The data comes from the study of phenomena, related to various branches of the social and health sciences, where people are studied in their life context. The steps in this method create frameworks that guide the way to perform the analysis of the information. Hence, the researcher receives suggestions that place him constantly between the analysis of data and the collection of information in the field work. The use of this type of recursive technique allows him to adapt the observation, based on the questions and objectives of the study that has been carried out. It is of great help for obtaining data to guide the research towards connected results in the process of knowing, describing and getting recommendations to intervene in the contexts studied.

**Keywords:** Interviews as Topic, Methodology, Qualitative Research, Semantics.

## RESUMEN

En el presente artículo se expone el Método de la Secuencia de la Investigación desarrollado por James Spradley. Este procedimiento figura entre uno de los enfoques globales más importantes en los estudios cualitativos. La estrategia de Spradley fue diseñada de forma didáctica para orientar los trabajos de investigadores noveles cuya principal técnica de recopilación de información es la entrevista etnográfica. El trabajo de campo convierte al observador en un instrumento de investigación. En

este sentido, es necesario contar con recomendaciones procedimentales para el adecuado estudio de las personas en sus escenarios vitales: lugares de trabajo, barrios, hospitales, escuelas, entre muchos espacios donde los individuos desarrollan su cotidianidad. Las orientaciones básicas para la observación y tratamiento de la información se exponen a través de una serie de etapas. La información procede del estudio de fenómenos vinculados a diversas ramas de las ciencias sociales y de la salud que estudian a las personas en sus contextos de vida. Los pasos de este método van creando esquemas conceptuales que orientan la forma de realizar el análisis de la información, obtenida del corpus de las entrevistas. El investigador recibe sugerencias que lo sitúan constantemente entre el análisis de los datos y la recopilación de información en el trabajo de campo. La utilización de este tipo de estrategia repetitiva permite adecuar la observación fundamentada en las preguntas y objetivos del estudio que se realiza, y resulta de gran ayuda para la obtención de datos que guíen la investigación hacia resultados atinentes en el proceso de conocer, describir y obtener recomendaciones para la intervención en los contextos estudiados.

**Palabras clave:** Entrevistas como Asunto, Metodología, Investigación Cualitativa, Semántica.

## RESUMO

Este artigo expõe o Método da Sequência da Investigação desenvolvido por James Spradley. Este procedimento figura entre um dos enfoques globais mais importantes nos estudos qualitativos. A estratégia de Spradley foi desenhada de forma didática para orientar os trabalhos de investigadores noveles que usam a entrevista etnográfica como principal técnica de recopilação de informação. O trabalho de campo torna o observador em um instrumento de investigação. Neste sentido, é necessário contar com recomendações procedimentais para o estudo adequado das pessoas nos seus cenários vitais: lugares de trabalho, bairros, hospitais, escolas, além de muitos espaços onde os indivíduos se desenvolvem cotidianamente. As orientações básicas para a observação e o tratamento da informação são

expostas através de uma série de etapas. A informação provém do estudo de fenômenos vinculados a diferentes áreas das ciências sociais e da saúde que estudam as pessoas nos seus contextos de vida. Os procedimentos deste método vão criando esquemas conceptuais que orientam a forma de realizar a análise da informação, obtida do corpus das entrevistas. O investigador recebe sugestões que o colocam constantemente entre a análise dos dados e a recopilação de informação no trabalho de campo. O uso deste tipo de estratégia repetitiva permite adequar a observação fundamentada nas perguntas e objetivos do estudo que se está realizando, e é de grande ajuda para a obtenção de dados que guiam a investigação a resultados pertinentes no processo de conhecer, descrever e obter recomendações para a intervenção nos contextos estudados.

**Palavras chave:** Entrevistas como Assunto, Metodologia, Pesquisa Qualitativa, Semântica.

## INTRODUCTION

James Spradley was an anthropologist and a professor at Macalester College. He wrote 20 books among which are: "Participant Observation" and "The Ethnographic Interview". This author, as specialist ethnographer, devoted himself during his career to develop procedures for the design and implementation of scientific research using ethnosemantics. The purpose was to know the dilemmas raised by the study of the lexicon by combining and contrasting the information obtained through and mainly the ethnographic interview. Spradley's approach brings together the fieldwork, the interview and the analysis of the data obtained. Spradley is the founder of the Developmental Research Sequence Method (hereinafter DRS Method) one of the three global methods with greater tradition in the qualitative studies together with analytic induction and the constant comparative method. DRS Method displays the ethnographic work as a sequence where the origin is determined by the idea of research and it continues throughout the development of the process. Recursion between the analysis of the gathered data and the need of returning to the fieldwork is a remarkable feature of this approach. This feedback process is gradually developed until the researcher obtains the findings and conclusions.

The DRS Method focuses on the ethnographic research and it has been favourably applied to health studies, where it has been used as part of the methodological design in important scientific research in areas such as: breastfeeding in women with diabetes; traditional remedies in health promotion; experiences of families in the waiting room of hospitals, among others, where it has been shown its applicability (1 - 3).

It is important to emphasize the teaching style of Spradley's method. He conceived this method to guide the work of researchers initiated in the qualitative paradigm. It was, actually, a strategy understandable to analyse problems in cultural research (4).

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

There is still no consensus among social sciences scholars on how to define ethnographic interview, covering all aspects required in this qualitative technique. However, according to James Spradley, this type of interview is a kind of "speech event" to let people talk about what they know (5). This technique requires an interviewer, an interviewed and a topic or issue to interact through questions and answers. This particular way of ethnographic interview unfolds makes difficult to place it in the range of qualitative techniques to gather information. Some scholars consider it are a type of in-depth interview while others differ from them arguing that it is different because of the way they are conducted through the different steps, ranging from unstructured to structured interview (4, 6). In this analysis, we acknowledge this technique as a particular type of qualitative interview that involves a set of steps and that it can take one or more characteristics according to Patton's classification. This author identifies four types of qualitative interviews:

- Informal conversational interview: The interview is conducted in casual tone. The absence of pre-fixed questions and topics are among its features
- Interview guide approach: The interviewer has freedom to decide sequences and wording of questions during the interview but he must follow a script.
- Standardized open-ended interview: There is a list of questions determined in advance. All interviewees are asked the same questions in the same order; however, they are free to answer them
- Closed, fixed-response interview: All interviewees are asked the same questions in the same order but they are not free to answer them. They must choose from among fixed responses (7).

The two first types correspond mainly to the type of the ethnographic interview while the third is between qualitative interviews and the tools of quantitative designs. Closed, fixed-response interview are known as surveys and questionnaires.

Ethnographic interview is a casual conversation in which questions emerge in a natural way that is adapted to actors and to conditions of the context. An important feature of this type of interview is its flexibility. Interviewees have the freedom to elaborate on their answers. However, ethnographic interviews are not open conversations. There is a list of topics to talk about through research questions so guidelines are provided by the interviewer (7, 8). Another feature is the time involved in this type of interviews. In general, they are linked to the field work and to a set of tasks that take place in the informants daily setting. People provide informations about their daily life, the researcher becomes an individual participating in the dynamics of the informants in their context. Consequently, the researcher not only makes the interviews but participates as

observant in ceremonies, plays and so on. He takes notes and learn from people's relationships during a prudent time where the researcher has the opportunity to conduct interviews together with other observation techniques (5, 9-12).

Procedural manuals framed into rigid structures are not needed to conduct an ethnographic interview but the ability on the part of the researcher, to develop communicational skills. He has become the main tool to collect the data, it was mentioned before (5, 6, 13). There are notwithstanding, a sequenced set of steps in a pedagogical attempt to provide appealing procedural guidelines. The first step is when the interview preparation takes place and the organizational aspects are considered such as objectives setting, wording of questions, defining the target of the interviewee audience, scheduling time, duration of the interview, type-recording, among others. The second step begins with the interaction with the interviewee in the place of the appointment. This is the moment to request permission to record the process. In this regard, it is important to stress the use of digital voice recorders due to the benefit that they offer. Recording the interviews is a fundamental task of DRS Method since observing the speech and recording the idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, are part of the ethnosemantic analysis. However, the presence of a digital recorder could be an element of distraction, inhibitor, disrupting the communication and making difficult the interviewee to speak openly (6, 7, 14). To reduce that risk, a previous relationship of trust between interviewer and interviewee must be created to clarify questions concerning the purpose of the interview, without excluding the anonymity of the informant. The third step is related to the full development of the interview. The interviewer uses his communication skills to hold a fluent conversation without forgetting the questions that have to be answered. It should be kept in mind, that the interviewee is the subject of the dialogue though. Thus, the role of the interviewer should be limited to stimulating conversation, inserting questions in the process in a subtle way. The next and least step is the closure of the interview. The researcher in view of both, the time elapsed and the responses obtained during the development of the interview, encourages the interviewee expanding on what he/she has said before. Lastly, the researcher thanks the willingness shown by the informant by collaborating with the study, requesting his/her potential commitment to hold another session in the next future.

The data collecting from the ethnographic interviews does not finish when interviewees has not more information. In general, the interviews terminate when the set time for the fieldwork runs out, when the objectives have been achieved or when, both, the economic resources are depleted or the researcher patience runs out (15). It is usual, nevertheless, that ethnographic interviews are conducted with the same interviewees in more than one session. This applies in particular to research projects designed for DSR Method.

## JAMES SPRADLEY'S RESEARCH SEQUENCE METHOD

Spradley's approach encompasses the scientific processes of meeting people and groups and getting to know them during a period of time by means of observation people in their natural setting, and interviews as the main techniques to collecting data.

This strategy establish four fundamental tasks to process the information gathered in the interviews, namely: "Establishment of domains", "Taxonomy" "Components" and "Themes"

"Domains" are categories of cultural meanings. They include subcategories semantically related (4, 16). The task of identify domains is performed on the basis of the knowledge of cultural terms which involve lower ranking related concepts. In other words, the domain has terms that have been included through semantic relationships. To establish the concepts of Spradley's method, he suggests not to ask the meaning of a term to create a domain, but the use of it in the culture. It can be illustrated by a category identified in a Cultural Nursing Study about breastfeeding in women with diabetics. In this study, the researcher pinpoints established domains when women respond to questions related to breastfeeding. Thus, when the question was related to the meaning of feeding the baby, their answers made a brief reference to what they perceive at that moment. However, the domain was established when the interviewers referred to the use of the concept. In this sense, feeding the newborn baby was included by using the following terms: "breastfeeding", "nursing the baby" "feeding the baby" and subsequently, "giving the bottle". It became a subcategory alluding the replacement of breastfeeding by many diabetic women due to medical complications to produce milk (1).

"Taxonomies" are conceptual constructs obtained through the establishment of semantic relationships. "They show the relationship among all the included terms in a domain. A taxonomy reveals subsets and the way they are related to the whole" (5). In the research carried out by Calvo et al, about the meaning of respect and care as moral dimensions of nursing practice, taxonomies reproduce the relationships of domain with their respective terms included. As part of "to treat with respect", terms such as "voice tone", "caring attitude", "simple words" and "good answers" emerged (17). The establishment of taxonomies progressively generates a proper structure for a good analysis.

DRS Method main task is "the analysis of the components". It emerges from the establishment of domains and taxonomies and provides a frame to carry out the activity. The procedure is based on a reflective activity that allows us understand the meaning of a term to the extent that differs from the other. In the words of Spradley "knows the meaning of a term depending on what does not mean" (5). Continuing with the examples provided by the study about breastfeeding, the interviewer can

ask about the ways a mother feeds his/her newborn baby. It is likely that the answer not only contains terms related to nutrients but that our informants add additional data or attributes about the term. In the Sanmiguel & Guerra study, an answer obtained was ... *"I breastfeeding him because is the only good thing I can offer him so he cannot get sick like me"* (1). The data we can obtain from this sentence is not related to a single taxonomy, more than a semantic relationships can be identified in the fragment above. The analysis of the component is presented as a clarifying activity that guides the representation of the data contained in the interviewees answers (4, 5).

"The Theme Analysis" is the last fundamental task required by the DRS Method. It contains a set of procedures. In this stage an attempt to describe the observed culture, is made, highlighting its general and specific features. The objective is to identify the cognitive elements that constitute a culture, that is what its members believe and recognize as real. The development of this stage is considered as one of the most demanding regarding the researcher deployment of personal skills. There is a lack of clear suggestions on how to implement it, and makes it an intuitive activity. Spradley, nevertheless, proposes some recommendations mixing general actions to ethnographic studies with specific actions for this DRS method stage. Among them, the following stand out:

- Immersion
- Componential Analysis of Cover Terms for Domains
- Identify Larger Domains
- Production of Conceptual Maps
- Search for Universal Themes

Immersion is a common action in ethnographic studies. Its main feature is the researcher prolonged exposure to the observed contexts. The participant observer spends time in the settings, conducts interviews, dedicates long hours to listening the interviewees, takes notes in the work field and identify cultural themes. There is no agreement regarding the amount of time needed for the immersion. However, the researcher has to be aware of the long periods. It is not possible to describe the cultural complexity in a short period of time. Nor it is to determine the necessary subjects to meet the aspirations for this stage (4, 11, 12).

In "Componential Analysis of Cover Terms for Domains", the observer notices a comprehensive list of domains. These need to be contrasted in the work field to determine similarities and differences by viewing their relationships. This is the only way to know the common themes of the culture.

Another necessary activity to determine themes is "Identify Larger Domains" which results in the identification of domains covering different cultures. It also allows the establishment of categories that transcends the context studied and can serve as a reference for other researches through actions of wide contrast.

"Social conflicts" emerge as the first universal theme that can be identified in any observed context. We acknowledge the fact

that our setting has an experience that influences in the the formation and maintenance of ties among its members and it gives a broad vision to identify conflicts. Interactions among members of groups within a given culture can be influenced by the conflicts between individuals widely regarded as leaders.

"Cultural contradictions" are recognized as another universal theme. They are related to the inconsistencies in the beliefs, the assertions and ideas of many cultures. This theme can be illustrated in the report of a research on cultural contradictions expressed in the practice of the Pharmaceutical Care Hospital in Cuba. These contradictions are related to the concepts of integration and teamwork promoted by the idea of family health that prevails in health professionals in this country from their University years. In the research, the contradictions described are related to the recognition of the professional pharmacist by the rest of the health care team, mainly by the doctors and nurses. They are unaware of the practical evolution of the pharmacy profession and they link it with its origins of clinical pharmacy in the decade of the 60. At that time pharmacy profession was associated with American academia instruction. The study gives account of a set of strategies to overcome the lack of motivation and the problems that represents for pharmacists the ignorant of its work in the Health Centers in Cuba. Mediating behaviors are used to trying to disseminate the potentialities of these professionals to avoid slowing down the participatory processes practiced by the members of the Health Care team (18).

"Informal techniques of social control" They are a third universal theme mentioned by Spradley. They are related to the learned behaviors, accepted and shared by the members of the culture. These techniques have a major influence on people's behavior and they remain as practices to maintain the culture within an implicit order, but they are of great influence among the members. In the analysis of Madriz on the perception of crime in the daily life of women, it is described how the technique of informal social control, that resulted from the citizen opposition to the realization of crimes, was declining because of the fear of women to suffer physical damage on the part of criminals (19).

"The relational strategies" They are universal themes. They refer to the ways in which individuals are linked with others who recognize close to them and to the strategies deployed to deal with people who do not know (4, 5).

"The Status" is related to the cultural whole and also to individuals as members. It is associated with the prestige. It is considered an important source of motivation for the behaviour that requires attention of the researcher. In a cultural study on health practices of indigenous communities atacameñas from the North of Chile, it is evident the importance of health for the maintenance of the status. They conceptualise health as a state in which the person can be devoted to working the land without getting tired and without physical obstacles, which allows them to maintain harmonious social relations (20).

"The solution of conflicts" is the last universal theme. All cultures have different levels of conflict and they solve them fol-

lowing particular strategies that the researcher must be able to identify. At this point Spradley is clear in pointing out that the informants do not express directly conflicts. These must be carefully observed through descriptive questions that enable us to access gradually to direct data related to the problems and solution strategies. Asking about conflicts between neighbours can only bring evasive answers. However, a broad question such as: what is life like in the neighbourhood?, will enable us to open up spaces for details that characterize these issues (5).

Once that the knowledge is acquired on the setting and the cultural issues are recognized, it is advisable to make a "summary of the status of the scenario studied". This represents the last strategy of the analysis of issues. It consists of the drafting of a summary with the most significant features of the context as a letter of introduction

for other researchers who might decide to carry out a study in that place. Thus, a potentially useful document is established as a first approach to the culture. This includes the most important parts that provide a summary description of the context.

The stages mentioned above represent the basic structure of the DRS Method. However due to space constraints it is not possible to develop in detail each one of the original aspects that covers and which are exposed in the texts bequeathed by James Spradley.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The above strategy guides the researcher in the process of knowing and describing what he observes. It becomes a practical advice of great value at the time of carrying out the fieldwork. The development of an ethnographic study seems to rest on a lack of methodological rules, however, the open style carries some risks necessary to contemplate. The absence of guidelines would leave the ethnographic work as an exclusive exercise of experienced researchers in cultural studies, and on the other hand, the risk that represents for people to be observed by the researchers lacking methodological training, could damage the contexts, risking the closure of these for future studies that seek to deepen phenomena of scientific interest.

James Spradley's Developmental Research Sequence Method is the needed guide that covers broad aspects that must address the cultural research. The use of the described method is in harmony with the recommendations of Strauss when he points out the advantages of the use of conceptual structures for planning work. This would be a significant step forwards for the clarification of the research problems.

The present paper did not intend to show the detailed development of a method, but rather to point out the main structure of one of the most important and clear qualitative strategies for researchers from different areas of knowledge. The DRS Method has been used in important studies produced in the social and health sciences, showing its potential to develop research

that aims to understand the cultural aspects that are explained from the daily life of people.

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