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## H. BLUMER'S METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM: ON THE NOTION OF "SENSITIZING CONCEPTS" IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** The research strategy called naturalistic, in the terms originally proposed by H. Blumer, is rescued in this article seeking to explore the scope of its contributions to contemporary Communication studies. Blumer's pragmatic conceptions about collective behavior, science and research methodology are often misinterpreted in the academic environment as subjective and unscientific. The argument of this work, on the contrary, is that Blumer's avant-garde thought deserves to be revisited to rethink the complexity of the processes and products of social interactions in the online world in the light of more flexible, dynamic epistemological perspectives, consistent with the empirical nature of new phenomena of social organization.

**Keywords:** Methodological naturalism. Sensitizing concepts. H. Blumer. Communication.

## INTRODUCTION

In a suggestive article published in 2003, Law summarized the tensions, contradictions and hesitations that the human and social sciences experience in contemporary times in order to analyze and understand the empirical world. Law, reportedly unhappy with academic methods of investigation as they are generally understood and applied, metaphorically likened them to a form of hygiene.

Do your methods appropriately. Eat your epistemological vegetables. Wash your hands after mixing them with the real world. This way, you will lead a good research life. Your data will be wiped. Your discoveries will be deservedly respectable. The product you produce will be pure. It is the guarantee of a long shelf life. (LAW, 2003, sp)

Law's trouble is that the methods traditionally used in social research do nothing more than reflect researchers' perspective on

social realities as linear, consistent, coherent and definitive. Although he recognizes that there are stable realities with which the natural sciences deal, Law notes that the world's social phenomena are, in essence, characterized by multiplicity, infinity, flux, and disorder.

This reflection, brought to the field of digital communication, is highly pertinent and relevant. A wide range of studies have been published since the mid-1990s, covering the most varied aspects of internet communication and online human behavior. The most diverse research methods associated with more traditional methodologies, from surveys to ethnographies, have been applied in an attempt to understand the complexity of these new social worlds, in their symbolic and cultural dimensions.

Only at the turn of the millennium did new lines of investigation emerge, concerned not with research on the internet, but with research on the internet (JONES, 1999; HINE, 2000; MANN & FIONA, 2000). The contribution of these pioneering studies was to show how researchers, from the most varied fields of knowledge, were using the internet as a locus of data collection and the types of methods applied, with a greater or lesser degree of adaptation to known traditional techniques.

At this stage, it is identified that the main motivation for using information and communication technologies in the human and social sciences are efficiency, costs (saving time and financial resources), and breadth of the geographic reach of informants (HINE, 2005). It is as if, for the first time in the history of science, it was possible to combine quantitative methods (increasing the scope of the number of respondents, independent of their geographical position) and qualitative methods (interested in the meanings of human actions).

A methodological framework was proposed by Hine at the time for ethnographic research

on the internet. After investigating several web sites and newsgroups related to the case of Louise Woodward, a young nanny accused of killing the baby in her care, Hine (2000; 2005) argues that it is necessary to understand the internet in its two dimensions, as culture and cultural artifact, rethinking the relationship between space and ethnography. In this sense, the notion of field research is changed – the “field” loses the physical characteristics of traditional ethnography, becoming a text on the screen, and the group of people in the new environment (the “natives”) is distributed worldwide. It is an ethnography about a field of mediated interactions, physically located, but inseparable from the contexts in which it develops.

It is important to recognize these early mapping efforts on online research practices. Gurak and Silver (2002, p. 230-231), for example, noted that “traditional research issues such as selection of an appropriate method, the need to obtain permission from subjects, and issues of privacy versus public information have become clouded.” New technological contexts require situated, flexible and practical methodological strategies consistent with the needs of particular situations. Thus, we ask ourselves: are traditional research methods sufficient to capture new forms of social organization online? Would the simple adaptation of traditional methods guarantee understanding of multiple, infinite, fluid and disordered social phenomena that occur in digital worlds?

These are complex issues. If we start from the assumption that traditional research methods come from a conception of a relatively fixed object of study, tested in realities where values, attitudes and opinions are relatively stable, are we not transporting old conceptions of experience to emerging forms of social organization? Wouldn't the dynamic, changeable and unpredictable nature of new

forms of online social organization require a more flexible, innovative spirit free from the constraints of traditional social research?

Gergen (2003) remember that the concept of social research developed under conditions of relatively low technological saturation.

In this circumstance, the research subjects could undergo a detailed analysis without any major fears regarding its repercussions. Not only were their identities normally preserved, but reports of their activities (invariably full of values) were subject to a great delay in time, thus being shared with a small community of scientists. (GERGEN; GERGEN, 2003, p. 382).

Law (2004), when stating that academic research methods traditionally used in social research do not capture the confusing, chaotic and relatively disordered world of human experience, launches a provocation:

If the world is complex and disorderly, then at least some time we will have to give up on simplicities. But one thing is certain: if we really want to think about the disorders of reality, then we are going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to report, and to know in new ways. We will need to teach ourselves to know some of the realities of the world using unused methods or methods unknown in social science. (LAW, 2004, p. 2)

This work proposes a careful (re)reading of H. Blumer's thought. The proposal would be to reflect on epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions, without the constraints of preconceived models, theories and concepts, before entering the “field” to try to understand the diversity, variation and movement of the empirical world under study.

## THE BASIS OF BLUMER'S THOUGHT

The American sociologist Herbert Blumer (1900-1987) is commonly known as the successor to George Mead, a pioneer in making symbolic interaction a central theory in sociology. The foundations of symbolic interactionism laid by Mead in the 1920s, at the University of Chicago, mark the centrality of the concept of social interaction and had as their starting point the opposition to sociological perspectives, dominant at the time, which distinguished the concepts of individual and society.

Mead's social psychology, against the behaviorism of the time and under the influence of pragmatism, had as its main proposal to deal with the processes of social experience. Subjects in social interaction, building and being built by society, is one of the key points in Mead's thought. His theory of socialization is particularly concerned with men's ability to adjust within the social process. This adjustment occurs through the communication of significant symbols, which go far beyond mere stimuli. The central factor in this adjustment, for him, lies in meaning. Meaning, in this sense, is not a physical addition to the social act nor an "idea" as traditionally conceived. Meaning is constructed in the social act itself.

Mead's perspective had a great influence on Blumer's thinking about social life and, later, on the development of his methodological approach. Blumer created the neologism "symbolic interactionism" in 1937, to systematize Blumer's thought and go further Blumer (1969, 1980) denouncing the deterministic aspect of functionalism with criticisms of studies that consider meaning to reside in the objective structure of the element that contains it or those that claim that meaning is a pure expression of psychological elements.

Blumer emphasized that symbolic interactionism portrays the social world as generated by social interactions, an interaction that itself produces, and is shaped, the participants' interpretation of the world. This interaction process is formative and creative, it is not composed of automatic responses to stimuli. The social order, therefore, is unstable and contingent, perpetually reconstructed by actors. It is the temporarily institutionalized product of indeterminate interactions.

Blumer's three basic premises are that: 1) human beings act towards things based on the meanings they have for them; 2) the meaning of these things derives or arises from an individual's social interaction with others; and 3) these meanings are used in – and modified through – a process of interpretation carried out by the individual in relation to the things he encounters.

By considering the production of meaning as a process resulting from the communication and interaction of individuals with objects in the outside world, with other individuals and with oneself, Blumer shed new light on the problem of the plural relationships of human beings as individual and social beings. For him, the process of human interpretation has two distinct phases:

In the first, the agent determines himself the elements with which he relates; needs to specify for itself the elements possessing meaning. The execution of such designations constitutes an internalized social process, in which the agent interacts with himself. This operation amounts to something quite different from a combination of psychological factors; This is a situation in which the individual engages in a communicative process with themselves. In the second, due to this process of self-communication, interpretation becomes a matter of maneuvering meanings. The agent selects, moderates, sustains, regroups and transforms meanings from the point of view of the situation in which he finds himself

and the direction of his actions. Therefore, interpretation must not be considered as a mere automatic application of existing meanings, but as a formative process in which meanings are used and worked on to guide and form actions [...] meanings play their role in action through of a process of self-integration. (BLUMER, 1980, p. 22)

Blumer's contribution goes beyond a clear explanation and systematization of the theory of symbolic interactionism. While Mead did not address the applicability of his theory to social research, Blumer dedicated himself not only to showing its value but also to criticizing methods that ignore the basic principles of human thought processes, motivation, action and interaction. In his body of work, Blumer (1935, 1936, 1939, 1940, 1954, 1955) argued that when accepting the precepts of symbolic interactionism, certain methods of investigation are necessarily vindicated, while others must be discarded.

Against the trend of the time, the author rejected positivist epistemology, especially the belief in the uniformity of human nature, the desire to seek universal laws for the social world and his impetus to apply the methods of natural sciences to other areas of knowledge. Although he shared the positivists' commitment to the empirical science (as opposed to intuitiveism) of social life, Blumer disagreed with the positivists regarding the pre-scientific character of everyday experience and common sense and criticized the excesses in the use of quantitative methods for the study of phenomena social.

Before entering into the heart of the methodological strategy proposed by Blumer – naturalistic research – it is appropriate to consider, in general terms, the origins of the scientific attitude that led him to the conception of empirical science. This is the part of history that until now has been little explored in social research and, therefore, Blumer's conceptions are often misinterpreted

and considered as subjective, vague, ambiguous and unscientific (HAMMERSLEY; ATKINSON, 1995; HAMMERSLEY, 1989; MAINES, 1989).

Although his conception of empirical science was influenced by Park, Dewey and Mead, at the "Chicago School", its origins are rooted in the University of Missouri, where he obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees in 1922. The central idea of Blumer's methodological naturalism (1969, p. 60), "respect for the nature of the empirical world", was strongly influenced by his work and courses with physiologist Max Meyer, who many consider to be the father of behaviorism.

Blumer's naturalistic research proposal, however, is quite consistent with symbolic interactionism due to its flexible relationship with the social world. His emphasis is on discovering the perspective of the participants and observing the process of social interaction, capturing the complex and fluid character of the world. As Hammersley (1989, p. 193) notes:

In this type of research, like other forms of social interaction, the researcher's behavior is not governed by rules (such as the protocol of the hypothetical-deductive method), but develops as he proceeds, responding to the changing situation by modifying himself. same.

## **BLUMER'S NATURALISTIC RESEARCH**

One of the central aspects of Blumer's research strategy is that "reality" for empirical science exists only in the empirical world, can be sought only there, and can be verified only there. It is respect for the nature of the social world. Blumer (1969) contrasted naturalistic research with a number of other strategies such as laboratory experiments, studies concerned only with products and not processes, survey research, and those that seek to measure

attitudes or personality characteristics.

For Blumer, the researcher's spirit must avoid all forms of philosophical generalizations and preconceptions about the nature of phenomena. This implies two things, in his view. First, despite agreeing with the traditional position of idealism that the "world of reality" exists only in experience and that it appears in the way in which human beings see the world, Blumer criticizes the solipsistic position of idealism that reality must be sought in independent images or conceptions of an empirical world (BLUMER, 1969, p. 22).

The other implication is that the recognition that the empirical world has an inexorable character, with which one has to come to terms, gives ample justification for the realists' insistence that the empirical world has a "real" character. At this point, Blumer argues that it is necessary to avoid two conceptions that contaminated traditional realism and hindered its advancement. One such conception is that the inexorable character of the empirical world is fixed or immutable in some definitive form whose discovery is the aim of empirical science. The second conception, which he calls "sterilizing," is that the reality of the empirical world has to be seen and thought of in terms of the discoveries of advanced physical science.

This is how Blumer states that methodology must refer to and cover the principles that underlie and guide the complex process of studying the inevitable character of a given empirical world (BLUMER, 1969). In practice, he identifies two phases of naturalistic research: "exploration" and "inspection".

The purpose of exploration is not to construct rigorously defined theories or test hypotheses. The aim is to feel the sphere under study and produce detailed descriptions of events and patterns of activity. This phase can employ the most varied research strategies, from observation, interviews, life stories,

official and personal documents, etc.

Exploration is by definition a flexible procedure by which the researcher changes from one line of inquiry to another, adopts new points of observation as the study progresses, moves in new directions previously unthought of, and changes his or her recognition of what they are. relevant data as he acquires more information and better understanding. (BLUMER, 1969, p. 40)

The inspection phase works with "clear, discriminated analytical elements, and the isolation of the relationships between these elements" (BLUMER, 1969, p. 43). Blumer pays special attention, at this stage, to clarifying concepts. It is important to note that Blumer developed a very specific and original view of the role of concepts in social research. For him, concepts have the important function of "raising awareness" of important aspects of the social world, which is very different from the traditional way in which concepts are thought of as definitive. He contrasted "sensitizing concepts" with "definitive concepts".

The development of "sensitizing concepts" and their integration into theoretical propositions, through the exploration and inspection phases, is the central issue in Blumer's conception of naturalistic research. Only this way, for him, can the researcher apprehend the empirical world outside the constraints of preconceived theories and models. It is letting the enigmas of the empirical world reveal themselves spontaneously.

A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, through the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed reference marks. This definition, or references, serve as a means of clearly identifying the individual instance of the class and the character of the instance that is covered by the concept. A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or references and consequently does not allow the user to go directly to the instance

and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of the reference and a guide for approaching empirical instances. While definitive concepts form descriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts suggest directions of where to look. (BLUMER, 1954, p. 7)

Blumer, this way, situates the function of scientific concepts in a dialectic between realism and idealism, which is at the basis of the pragmatism that “there is a world out there”, as Mead referred to. What he means is that concepts have a course and that they can become increasingly sensitizing as propositions can be empirically substantiated and useful generalizations can be made. This path does not happen only through the search for refined methodological procedures, but, more importantly, through asking the right questions and adopting new points of view (BLUMER, 1931, p. 528).

## **FREE OR CHAINED INVESTIGATION?**

Blumer’s naturalistic research, to this day, has not received due attention in the field of Communication studies. This work aimed to rescue its contribution and possibilities in research practices in contemporary communication interfaces. It was assumed that understanding the forms of social interaction that emerge and multiply online, as extensions of the offline world, are configured

in new empirical worlds and are legitimately naturalistic terrains.

The assumption of this work is that these new online social environments need to be observed, studied and understood as spaces of meanings that lead agents to act as they do in their own contexts in localized processes of social interaction. This way, the act of research must necessarily adopt an open, flexible, inductive stance, and sensitive to the relationships that appear before the researcher’s eyes and not as a space that is reached with the mechanical and reductionist stance of simply testing theories and preconceived hypotheses.

Blumer’s “sensitizing concepts” perspective can guide our scientific outlook in which directions to take. There are no magic formulas and no better or worse methods. All have advantages and disadvantages, and what Blumer taught us is that understanding how social meanings are formed, sustained, weakened, strengthened and transformed, in different contexts and situations, must involve the researcher’s commitment to a spirit of free inquiry, or naturalistic.

Included in this sensitizing nature is the process of discovering and describing common experience, classifying that experience, determining its properties, combining properties with concepts, and applying those concepts back to common experience. It is letting the reality of the empirical world “speak back”.

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