

Expertons as a proposal of collecting data in qualitative research: The example of citizenship

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Resumo

As ciências sociais têm alguns instrumentos diferentes de recolha e análise de dados em pesquisas qualitativas como são as entrevistas ou os grupos focais, bem como outros instrumentos utilizados na abordagem quantitativa, permitindo medir diferentes fenómenos sociais. No entanto, temos de considerar que os eventos sociais contêm um certo grau de incerteza e risco; dois elementos completamente ignorados, mesmo estando sempre presentes nas ciências sociais, porque não são preditivos. Em fenómenos reais, existem algumas questões específicas que os contêm numa intensidade mais importante, como são os sociopolíticos. Seguindo a ideia apresentada acima, o principal objetivo deste trabalho é apresentar um instrumento que inclui a incerteza, existente em todos os fenómenos sociais, para os temas das Ciências Sociais, com base no método expertons de Kaufmann (1987) e recriado pelo intervalo de condenação de Herman (2001). De modo a atingir o nosso objetivo, vamos dar, num primeiro momento, um exemplo de um assunto no qual o instrumento poderia ser utilizado num estudo empírico, e, num segundo momento, vamos descrever o método.

Palavras-chave: Incerteza, cidadania, expertons.

Abstract

Social Sciences have some different instruments of collecting and analyzing data in qualitative researches as are interviews or focus groups, as well as other instruments used in the quantitative approach, allowing to measure different social phenomena. Nevertheless, we have to consider that social events contain a certain degree of uncertainty and risk; two elements completely ignored even if they are always present in social sciences because they are not predictive. In real phenomena, there are some particular subjects that contain them in a more important intensity, as are the socio-political ones. Following the idea presented above, the main objective of this paper is to present an instrument that includes uncertainty, existing in all the social phenomena, for social sciences topics, based on Kaufmann's expertons' method method (1987) and recreated by Herman's conviction interval (2001). So as to reach our objective, we will give, in a first time, an example of a subject in which the instrument could be used, in an empirical study about it, and in a second time we will describe the method.

Keywords: Uncertainty, citizenship, expertons.

1. Introduction

There are some instruments used in qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect and analyze data. Nevertheless, both approaches have been limited to those instruments that allow researchers to know more about people's thinking about a specific subject, without considering that subjects present an important degree of uncertainty as well as a degree of risk, since they take place at unstable systems, or since their nature itself is uncertain, such as political transitions, citizenship or democracy for example. Nevertheless, in the qualitative approach there are not many methods containing uncertainty and risk in a nuanced way. This is why we think that uncertainty and, in an implicit way, risk should be introduced in a method that can provide a larger, deeper and more objective answer on reflection about themes as mentioned before.

The research question used here is: How can uncertainty be included in a method of collecting data in order to treat specific uncertain subjects as, for example, citizenship exercise?

The main objective of this paper is to present an option introducing risk and uncertainty in a qualitative method of collecting and interpreting data, for both, descriptive and explanatory studies, when they contain a descriptive phase. The importance of introducing them is to study uncertain subjects without ignoring these elements and with the will of providing a closer perception of reality due to their consideration.

Our work hypothesis is that uncertainty and risk are elements that can be included in an instrument of collecting data, reflecting the degree of uncertainty that people have in their answers, for uncertain subjects that should be nuanced, due to their own nature, as the case of citizenship exercise.

Following this, firstly we will present an example of an uncertain topic that can be treated with the method that we will describe secondly.

2. Citizenship: An uncertain topic

We will use the subject of citizenship and its borders between a “feeble” and an active citizenship to show how risk and uncertainty are present in a social phenomenon, and later we will introduce the method (*expertons*) to collect empirical data that can provide information in a descriptive phase. The subject was chosen considering that citizenship is exercised in democracies but these, because of their participative, plural nature and the results deriving from a decision making process, do not ensure a certain context. In this sense, we can even say that democracy is the most uncertain political regime in its *praxis*, due to its lower circumstances prediction level, while remaining the most certain one in terms of the security provided to citizens, about the respect of their participation and the rule of law. What do we understand when we talk about an uncertain regime? An uncertain regime is the one in which results of any process cannot be predicted, and they imply a risk taking. This is that even if the results of citizens’ participation cannot be known in advance, people take the risk of participating in public processes as are plebiscites, referendums, or elections among others.

Uncertainty and risk are elements that cannot be separated. Both concepts hold negative connotations, but at the same time, as Bru and De Troy affirmed “tout est une question de proportion et du mélange” (1999, 4). Risk is implicit in an uncertain situation where there are too many variables affecting a situation and where nobody -making reference to intervening actors- can control them. “L’incertitude c’est qui n’est pas fixé, déterminé à l’avance (...)” (Bru and De Troy, 1999, 1). The action of participating or not is also uncertain to the government and to other citizens. It also depends on risk perception, in which the presence of fortuitous variables that can modify an event, also modify risk perception. Such perception seems to be inherent to human’s decision making processes, with a higher or lower risk, paired with the possibility of winning or losing. An assumption that people do when exercise or not citizenship, since “the uncertainty about a specific event (...) depends on multiple variables, but also on time” (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982, 517).

Nowadays, citizenship is a very common concept used everywhere, but it is important to define it before going further. According to Thiebaut (1998, 25), a citizen is an individual involved in the construction of his own environment; his community, his city, his country, his

State, by participating in State affairs. But the degree of participation and involvement will depend on the individual's degree of identification with the values that take place in those spaces and the possibility of involvement. The values settled in a State would also determine how people conceive an individual, in the sense that he owns rights and duties, and its conception will guide to respect them or not. But, as Trias said "we see in the City, the city, what composes our own and complex personal condition (...)" (2005, 22-23). This means that if a person is not considered as an important element for the State, because of her potential contributions, her rights and duties would be limited and even ignored, since they determine participation in society. Following this idea, to conceive citizenship as it is established, means that it can be graded, according to each context and even if it is considered to take place in all democratic regimes, the *praxis* of citizenship remains uncertain. We have to take into account that the exercise of citizenship implies risk taking and the disposition to risk taking equals the number of personal motivations, multiplied by the individual's potential gain of accepting it, considering the negative consequences of the choice, because of reality's misperception.

The practice of citizenship, as we have defined before, is uncertain since it needs people to be conscious of their role in the society where they are settled. And people must also consider that their participation and involvement is important for the society where they live in. Considering what we have just mentioned, citizenship can be classified according to the degree of citizen's involvement in the State affairs.

In this work we talk about "feeble citizenship" (Palavicini, 2014, 4) that means that there is a self-recognition of the population as "citizens," by covering the legal requirements. Nevertheless, their participation is often limited to electoral processes, and even then, not all the people participate. Besides, they are not involved in the task of decision making performed by the State, which should be the main purpose of people's involvement.

We make reference to "feeble citizenship" because its exercise does not depend on the possibilities provided by the State, as is the case of the passive one, which also depends on the context. In "feeble citizenship" there are the needed conditions to exercise it, but the will and the rationality of individuals play an important role in their decision making of participating or not. The decision making of participating or not in State affairs is also

influenced by the individual's degree of certainty about the results of his participation, as Rousseau's said in the Social Contract (1992); results that are not always clear and nor always recognized. In this sense, we can say that "feeble citizenship" takes place in a context where uncertainty about results of people's participation is questioned as well as its impact on the making decision process.

However, even if citizens' participation takes place according to the possibility of influencing decisions performed by the State, an uncertain context would limit individual's participation; this is the risk taking, as Herman said in *Risque et Société* "a lot of uncertainty kills risk (...), in addition, if risk is, in a certain way the uncertainty result, one can perceive that a lot of uncertainty kills risk taking. The risk taking needs a base of optimism and security" (1998). Nevertheless, under an uncertain context, the rule of law should reduce risk and contribute to individual's involvement. This shows that even if uncertainty exists, there should be conditions that motivate citizens' exercise to take place, thus obtaining a benefit derived from their participation.

The border between a "feeble citizenship" and an active one takes place in the capacity of the State of protecting citizens' involvement and to respect their decisions making, so as to influence the State duty, even if it is not favorable to the government. To talk about citizenship means to define it, but also to consider those means intervening in the possibility of being a citizen. Citizenship implies a political responsibility with its social consequences, but it can be exercised or not. This is also a possibility that citizenship allows, and this is another reason why its practice is uncertain, even if the State provides the needed means to its exercise. But, independently of the will of exercising citizenship or not, when there is a State used to pretend to listen citizens and that apparently solves problems without them, this is, a State that expands its power to multiple spheres, not necessarily in an efficient way, individuals do not even think about their political responsibility of being part of a State, and the "feeble citizenship" arises. There is not an interest of participating and even the political right of elections is nullified. In this sense, the benefit of practicing the "feeble citizenship" is higher than the one obtained in an active *praxis*. This would lead to think that while a citizen is not affected by the absence of his participation in public affairs and the State prevails over the social decision making about the State affairs, the interest of exercising the citizens' right would decrease, thus increasing government's power. In this sense, even if citizenship is

exercised in a different way in democracies, we can establish that the more the citizenship takes place in a State, the less the State is present. The presence of an active citizenship, implies a minimal State, defined as a State limited to its main attributed functions, and allowing the society to exercise its duties.

3. *Expertons*: A collecting data method

Taking into account all that has been said about citizenship, we consider that it could be analyzed, in a descriptive phase, by the *experton* method that we will describe below. In an empirical application, it would consider expert's point of view about citizenship exercise, based on an instrument that includes the inherent uncertainty to the *praxis* of citizenship.

The reason that makes us believe that this method reflects the best way to treat this complex theme is because it is based on Fuzzy Logic principles, centered on fuzzy systems (Cox, 1994), recreated with Herman's concept of "conviction interval" (2001). Fuzzy systems are the ones which data are fuzzy even if mathematics used to treat them are rigorous. Fuzzy logic makes reference to general categories, it does not restraint some elements to a specific category. For fuzzy systems the degree of belonging or not to a whole unit is determinant to understand reality, because to belong or not, in this theory is a matter of degrees. It is the intensity of the membership that allows nuances in the analyzed reality. And as Kaufmann said "between the truth and the false of the binary logic, there are middle positions to give a closer description of reality" (1988, 35), enabling the identification with specific and multiples wholes. This is why this theory becomes useful to an empirical study about an uncertain subject as is citizenship, as well as to all others inscribed in social sciences, considering that a not determinant reasoning is more useful to analyze this kind of topics. At the same time, the Fuzzy Logic allows to express an opinion in its own nature, this is "to grant degrees to knowledge and also following our subjectivity" (Kaufmann, 1988, 38).

The way in which this method works taking into consideration intervals and not binary answers, allows the nuances that reality presents, it indicates by itself a graduation, and in consequence "it does not disappear the expertise particularities", as Marques-Pereira indicates (1995). Hence, *expertons* allows to be closer to the collective knowledge. This method implies a field work, helped by surveys and an instrument built including multiple

cells, in a way that it presents different scales and different levels, so as to include uncertainty degrees.

One of the problems that social sciences face is that multiple variables intervene, affecting radical decisions. In this sense, an approximate reasoning would allow decisions to be closer to reality without forcing someone to adopt a radical position about a specific subject. There are examples of the application of this method in the case study of the Mexican transition to democracy (Palavicini, 2001).

As an example, take a hypothetical question of a survey about citizenship: do you think that the electorate trusts the vote? Experts would answer favorable or not in the *experton* instrument.

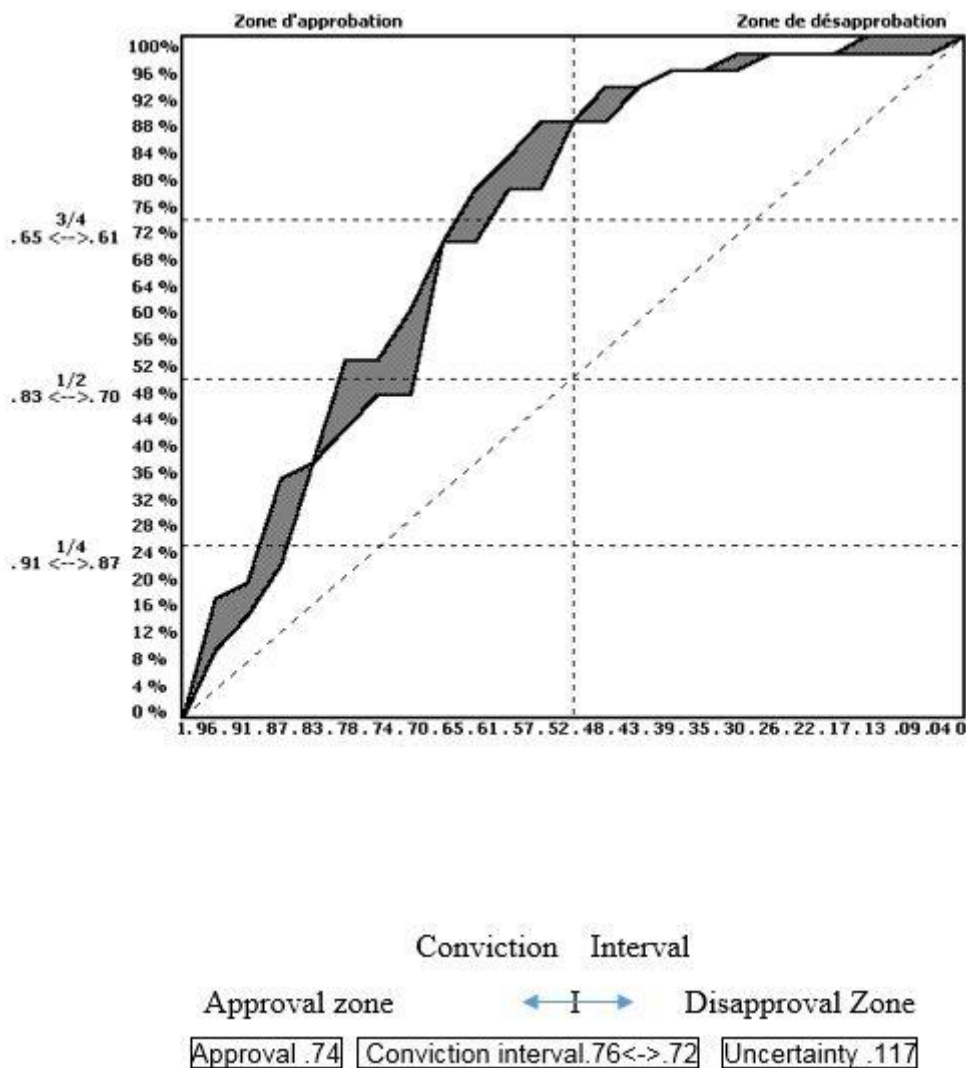
An *experton* is presented in a “cartouche” of some positions as shown below:

1								2								3							
1				2				3				4				5				6			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24

The *experton* was conceived to get answers in different levels of certainty, from the least to the most precise one. The upper level, with three cells, indicates the lower conviction level of the person choosing it. In this first level, the middle position is the one with the higher level of uncertainty concerning the answer to a question. It is the only level where we can find a “neutral” position. The second and the third levels are intermediate levels. The last one is composed by 24 cells and it indicates the finest scale and the higher conviction level of an answer given. To offer 24 possibilities is aimed at getting the most precise level in uncertain studies as are the political and social ones and to offer a larger rank of possibilities in more complex situations.

The importance of considering an instrument of expert’s data collection in social sciences topics, is that firstly, it considers that nobody has certainty in all of his provided answers and in all the topics, even if the person is an expert on a specific subject. Secondly, it considers that topics in social sciences are also uncertain, because of the number of participating

variables. To consider both uncertainties, the expert’s one and the one of the studied topic, allows a closer perception of reality so as to increase objectivity. Answers would be done depending on the security of the expert about his answer. In graphics, for each answer, results would be presented as follows:



The “ogive” indicates the graphical representation of the sum of frequencies. When the majority of cases is situated in an interval, getting both lines closer, the slopes are stronger and the conviction interval is high, indicating a low degree of uncertainty. It is very easy to use this method since the sample is constituted by real experts about a specific and uncertain subject. According to this, the *experton* method can be applied in an empirical

analysis about economic, political and social transformations, reflecting in this way, the uncertainty contained in their own evolution.

4. Last reflexions...

It is impossible to conclude about a theme as the one presented here. Nevertheless, we can say that reality is uncertain and it presents risks for people in their individual aspect, as well as in the collective one. To force people to use binary instruments to answer questions about different social sciences topics reduces reality to radical positions and forgets that social phenomena present nuances since some variables intervene. These qualitative instruments of data collection can become more precise if abstract elements as uncertainty and risk are considered in social sciences topics, in a descriptive phase. Its inclusion will allow the real perception of experts without forcing them to choose between binary options in topics that cannot be radically classified, and to consider their nuances, as well as expert's own uncertainty in all the topics.

We must take into account that the fact of considering experts as the sample for using this instrument allows expertise to provide a more specific knowledge about different social topics, as well as the possibility of taking them into consideration in a more nuanced scale. In this sense, we get a better grasp of reality and of expert's answers, increasing objectivity.

At the same time, the *experton* allows the collective knowledge about a specific subject and it helps to determine in which aspects the topic studied is more uncertain, and in which ones is not, with the possibility of making proposals to increase certainty in themes as the one presented here.

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ⁱ This method was born in 1950 at the Rand Corporation. It is used to build data considering experts. Its main point is the anonymous reference face to a dynamic debate, but acting in an iterative way, with a "feedback" system, so as to reach consensus.