Using Interactive and Participant Methods: A Postmodern Shift in Political Science Research?

Georgeta GHEBREA¹

¹ Professor, Ph.D., University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania,
georgeta.ghebrea@fspub.unibuc.ro.

Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the main participant and interactive methods and their usefulness for the political science. These methods could provide a profound knowledge of social and political issues. Different target groups and experts hold this knowledge but it becomes accessible to researchers by involving persons belonging to those relevant groups in the scientific research. Therefore, it is not just the involvement of the researcher in the stakeholders' life, as in the case of the co-participant observation, but also the involvement of stakeholders in research. In addition to the potential increase in knowledge, these methods produce, as well, political, epistemological, and ethical mutations. Both researchers and other participants suffer a process of transformation, as not only levels and content of knowledge but also concerning their political attitudes and behaviours. Empathy is no longer an obstacle to science but an advantage. Thus, science is no longer a neutral, objective, and external approach to human beings, an approach accessible only to a restricted category (the researchers). The object of the study - i.e. people who are not necessarily scholars - also participates in the production of scientific knowledge. On the other hand, researchers have no longer the privileged position of those who know more and who remain unobserved observers. Scientific research becomes a mutual learning process. Hence, an important distinction of "traditional" epistemology, that of object and subject, is blurred or even erased. Consequently, participant methods are also democratic, eliminating the unequal distribution of power and authority between the two poles involved in scientific research (researchers and human "subjects"). However, there is a strong challenge to these methods, with both indisputable strengths and weaknesses. We will evaluate these issues through examples of using interactive and participant methods in the social research.

Keywords: *interactive methods; participant methods; political science, post-positivism, methodological shift;*

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1. Introduction

Our paper intends to analyse the possibility and the usefulness of applying participant and interactive methods in political science, assessing their strengths and weaknesses from different points of view. We consider this topic very important for redefining political science in our century and adjusting its methods to the present political and social changes.

Even if used from the beginning of social sciences, participant and interactive methods are, in our view, more appropriate to the contemporary realities than the “established”, positivist approach. Nowadays, there are movements searching new power balances, there are new technologies, accessible to everyone, and new political phenomena that should be approached by innovative ways.

Our main goal is not to address and analyse this paradigm shift at the ontological and epistemological levels, but on the methodological one, and, even more specifically, in the actual research methods and techniques that researchers apply on a daily basis. We consider this a first original aspect brought about by our paper. Analyses regarding the ontological and epistemological changes have been done, including in the Romanian academic environment (Sandu & Unguru, 2017). Still, those analyses do not focus on the methodological level, with concrete examples of empirical researches. We intend to fill this gap through our work. By presenting the specific interactive and participant methods (and the concrete researches that are using them), we outweigh the level of conceptual debate to get into the practice of research – and, especially, that of empirical research.

Of course, the levels of scientific research (ontological, epistemological, methodological, and that of the particular methods and techniques) are interconnected and have a probable logical sequence (Grix, 2001). For example, the ontological realism correlates with epistemological optimism, and the latter one with methodological positivism and quantitative methods. Technically, nobody and nothing can stop us, as researchers, to use what methods we want. However, the methods and techniques we are using are not completely neutral and independent of the ontological and epistemological choices we make, sometimes even without being aware of them.

The methodology considered in our paper is often referred to as “post-positivist”. In our opinion, this methodology has been gradually constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed, through various interactions: between individual scholars, between scientists and their scientific

community, between scientific communities, between academia and the cultural environment, as well as the broad social environment, convulsed by ideologies, social movements, and other transformations. When analyzing the progress of the post-positivist methodology, we cannot ignore certain realities: the democratisation process, the anti-oppressive movements, and the increased accessibility of the various technologies. Reciprocally, this methodology has social and political repercussions.

A second original aspect of our paper is that we will not consider this methodology as completely new in the history of social and political science, although it is celebrated as a new scientific revolution. It exists for some time and is, in our opinion, tied to perennial ideas subsisting since the founding of social sciences. We refer, for example, to the left-wing ideologies and the social-political activism shared by certain scholars. After the end of the cold war and the stigmatisation of Marxism, the neoliberalism became the dominant paradigm, in the political economy and public policies, for example (Hall, 2013). The post-positivist methodology has entered a shadowy cone but has been revitalized due to recent changes in technology, lifestyle, and values. Therefore, in our opinion, the "post" prefix is not always justified. Positivism and post-positivism are not successive but co-existing methodological paradigms.

Our third original contribution is assessing the relevance - for the political research - of the post-positivist methodology, in general, and of the interactive and participant methods and techniques, in particular. Our key thesis is they are useful and adding-value within this specific scientific field. We will discuss arguments, pros and cons, inside and outside the systematization of the literature review, in order to defend this thesis.

In Romania, the participant and interactive methods are less known and less used in political science research; these methods remain rather in the field of linguistics, semiotics, and communication sciences. We intend by this paper to promote the participant and interactive approach and demonstrate its viability in the Romanian field of political science, too.

Our fourth original contribution is to make a synthesis of the characteristics of these methods, rather than their inventory. Both methodological works and empirical researches inspire our synthesis.

2. Participant and Interactive Methods as a Distinctive Way of Doing Science

For some time now, there has been a tendency to challenge the "established" positivist paradigm in social science and to propose new

research paradigms. These relatively new paradigms are usually put together under the “post-positivist” umbrella. In our opinion, they have in common the defence of the specificity of the research in social sciences. The social research should abandon its complex of inferiority toward the natural sciences and the desire to imitate and consider the natural sciences as “the genuine sciences”.

Still, post-positivism does not constitute a homogenous camp because it has many expressions: interpretive, constructivist, transformative, pragmatic, discursive etc. (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

The interpretive positivism considers that the goal of science is not to explain or find causality, but to find and understand meanings.

The constructivist post-positivism sees the social reality as an inter-subjective artefact, a result of social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Constructivism leads to certain relativism because truth is defined and re-defined depending on the participants in social interactions. Each person, each social group has its own truth. Therefore, it opens the way for questioning the traditional binary codes (Carter, 1998).

For the discursive post-positivism, discourse plays an ontological role, especial in politics, contributing to the consolidation of the power in place or, on the contrary, to the political changes (Schmidt, 2010). Therefore, discursive post-positivism is linked to the transformative post-positivism, which abandons the Weberian objectivity and neutrality, promoting instead criticism and political action. The pragmatic post-positivism is an eclectic mixture of theories, paradigms and methods, continuously adjusted to the research issues (Gjelstrup & Sørensen, 2007).

In spite of all these classifications, the boundaries between the different post-positivist orientations are, from our point of view, blurred and osmotic.

There has been quite a lot of research, both in the world and in Romania, regarding the ontological and epistemological drift caused by the emergence and spread of constructivism in the social sciences. Au contraire, there is less research regarding the methodological consequences. In political science, as well, constructivism, in its many variants, represents a different perspective from realism, proposing to learn not how power is exercised but how it is experienced; consequently, new research topics and new agents are being considered (Wildemuth, 2016).

Our idea is that history (and archaeology) of the post-positivism are, in fact, quite old. We believe that, even if dominant, positivism was always contested by certain - sometimes marginal – researchers. For instance, we could discuss the prominent role played by the symbolic interactionists

(Goffman, 1962; Becker, 1963; Garfinkel, 1967). In their works, they were demystifying the power relations, oppression, inequality, and discrimination, through innovative concepts, such as labelling, total institutions, and stigma (Goffman, 1962). Other crucial contributions belong to the phenomenology of the political (Foucault, 1975), the “new” institutionalism (March & Olsen, 1989), political anthropology (Meyer & Scott, 1992), Actor-Network Theory (Bourdieu, 1980; Latour, 2005) and post-modern feminism (Butler, 1988).

The short descriptions above indicate the options of the post-positivism for grounded theories (instead of “grand” and universal theories), inductive (instead of deductive) manner to produce science, and case studies (instead of big samples). An illustrative example of methodology, that reunites aspects of different post-positivisms, is the critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1985).

Before moving to a deeper level of analysis, we think it is necessary to summarise, in an original synthesis, the main differences between the two approaches (Table 1):

Table 1. Comparison between “established” and participant-interactive approaches

“Established” approach	Participant-interactive approach
Distinction and separation between the status of researchers and that of human subjects in the study	Interaction between researchers and participants Mutual learning
Superiority of the researcher	The participants have a superior knowledge, they are able to carry out a research, and they participate in the gathering and the analysis of the data. They get awareness and self reflexivity during the research
Neutrality and objectivity of the researcher <i>Le regard éloigné</i> (Lévi-Strauss, 1983)	Researcher's empathy and commitment to participants in the research <i>Le spectateur engagé</i> (Aron, 2005)
Reality is given and objective Distinction between facts and perceptions	Reality is constructed, it is an artefact. Facts are perceptions, perceptions are facts
Impersonal style of writing	Personal style (“I believe”, “in my opinion”, etc.)
Rigor	Ambiguity

Source: Author's own conception

The novelty brought about by these trends in the political science methodology is that not only the researcher participates in people's lives but, equally, people are actively participating in the scientific research.

Even the use of word "subjects" makes a striking distinction between the two approaches because "subject" means a person who is dependent, lacks autonomy, and obeys to a superior power. In the alternative approach, there are no longer "subjects" but "participants". Moreover, "the interpretivist/constructivist researchers tend to rely upon the participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2003: 8).

Frequently, during the participant-interactive research (for instance, during interviews, focus-groups, observation, or nominal group technique), participants change their attitudes and positions. What was commonly perceived as a drawback - i.e., participants' maturation (the inner transformation process due to participation in research) - is becoming desirable, as a step to their empowerment.

The personal style of writing emphasizes the researcher's humanity - as well as his/her weaknesses - and opens the understanding of science to general audience. Ambiguity is also important because it fights clichés, banality, and the well-known paths. Ambiguity in science is no longer criticised; ambiguity is good because it increases flexibility and creativity, in order to find new ideas and strategies for understanding the social and political reality.

Triangulation is another example of viewing things differently within the two approaches mentioned above: the scientific tradition considers triangulation as a frequent research strategy for maximising accuracy of results. Still, in social and political sciences, the context is very important and, therefore, using another method means another observation, in a different context, resulting new findings. Triangulation is useless because it will produce new results for each new observation.

3. Epistemological, Political, and Ethical Mutations

In our view, the interactive and participant methods provide in-depth knowledge of the issues addressed by target groups and experts. Thus, science is no longer a neutral, objective, and external approach to people, an approach accessible only to a small category. The "subject of the study" - that is, people who are not necessarily researchers - is also involved in the production of scientific knowledge; on the other hand, researchers no longer have the privileged position of those who know more and who remain unobserved observers.

An important distinction made by the "traditional" epistemology - that of the object and the subject - becomes blurred or even erased. For instance, "critical theory rejects the 'three basic postulates of positivism: an objective external reality, the subject object distinction, and value free social science'." (Jackson & Sørensen, 2015: 232).

The distinction between facts (objective data) and interpretations (subjective data) disappears: the experiences, feelings, and attitudes of the researcher are considered facts. During the research, not only the researcher's level of knowledge is transformed but, also, his/her social and political attitudes and behaviours are. Empathy is no longer an obstacle to knowledge, but a benefit because it facilitates a deeper understanding of the studied topic.

Regarding the political and ethical mutations, we believe the science production itself is modified because science becomes a collective process where all citizens could democratically contribute.

Therefore, from our point of view, participant-interactive methods are also democratic, eliminating the unequal distribution of power and authority between the two poles involved in scientific research (researchers and human "subjects").

From our perspective, the democratisation of science is possible especially because the technological change. The Internet allows everybody to have access to all kind of information (documents, archives, statistics, databases, etc.). Skills and knowledge reserved in the old days for intellectual elites now are accessible to anyone. One can very easily carry on a survey online and process data using software available on internet. Anyone can make photos and movies with a cell phone for anthropological research and visual inquiries. Cell phone could also be employed to record interviews and group discussions.

4. Exemplifying the Application of Interactive and Participant Methods in Empirical Researches in the Field of Political Science

We found out that some of these methods have been invented relatively recently; others are redefining certain existing methods. For instance, most of the participant-interactive researches are, in fact, case studies, because they are focused on a single community, group, event, or situation, where the specific context is crucial. Other well-known methods that could easily be considered as participant or interactive are: participant observation, interview, focus-group, synectics, projective techniques,

brainstorming, Delphi, simulation (socio-drama, role-playing), nominal group and sociological intervention.

Other methods are quite recent in the political science. For instance, the consultative and deliberative methods (round tables, public debates, deliberative polling, open forum, consensus conference, jury of citizens, rapid assessment, participant monitoring and evaluation) are more and more used for studying public policies, electoral behaviours, and political communication. Other unconventional research methods are festivals, future community, visual (photo and video) inquiry and action research (Akambi, 1998; Konaté & Sidibé, 2006; Neuman, 2006; Sow & Hazgui, 2011).

The action research originates in the works of the American psychosociologist Kurt Lewin (Gaffney, 2008) and was intended to ameliorate the equal opportunities in the American society after World War II. Similarly to the European Marxist sociologists, Lewin and other American sociologists (Lazarsfeld, for instance) believed that the scientific research should have pragmatic purposes and solve social issues (Konaté & Sidibé, 2006). Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (1992) have defined the research action as a participant and interactive method that reunite researchers and stakeholders in order to work together for finding strategies and solutions. The proposed changes are implemented and, afterwards, evaluated in a participant and interactive manner.

The following discussed examples of empirical researches demonstrate the applicability and usefulness of the interactive and participant methods in political science and open the debate about their replicability in the Romanian context. In addition, we have identified a few examples of participant-interactive researches developed in this specific national context.

We believe that the participant-interactive approach has determined new insights in many fields of political science, such as public policies, political organisations, political participation, international relations and politics, political communication, political culture and political socialisation.

We found out many innovations brought by the participant-interactive approach. For instance, the post-positivist orientations within the international relations (IR) are taking into consideration other perspectives beside the role of the states and international organisations. There are other actors (the NGOs) who are equally important and other topics, such as gender, race and ethnicity. For example, the participant-interactive methods are used by Moon and Chin: “Katharine Moon’s *Sex Among Allies* deals with national security policy, an issue central to IR, but through the lens of military prostitution, a subject not normally considered part of IR. Christine

Chin's *In Service and Servitude* deals with issues of development and global political economy, but it does so through an examination of the lives of female domestic servants in Malaysia and state policies with respect to regulating their lives" (Tickner, 2006: 30). In both cases, the researchers based their findings on interviews with women telling their life stories and their perspectives, giving us a chance to hear their voices. In our opinion, it is not only ethical but also very interesting and original from the scientific point of view. Moon and Chin succeeded to create a link between the international stage and private life: the relations between states are interconnected with relations between people.

From our perspective, the main innovation brought by the participant-interactive methodology in the public policy research is considering the role of "beneficiaries" and stakeholders, in general, in designing, implementing and evaluating public policies (Wagenaar, 2011). For instance, Ștefan Iancu (2016) tested his hypotheses - referring to the effectiveness of drug policies - on the basis of several type of data: data obtained through participant observation in consumption and distribution contexts of these substances as well as in the context of treatment of addicts and their interaction with the authorities; informal interviews with consumers, dealers and staff in the field of consumer assistance services (counsellors, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, social workers, etc.); data gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews with drug related experts and dealers of such substances. These different methods gave us the possibility to see, understand, and compare all the participants' perspectives.

In public administration, the "communicative practices" (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012: 2) between actors generates narratives that help researcher to better understand the functioning of public institutions (Marshall & Buske, 2007). Another example is involving stakeholders in policy reforms. For instance, a participant and interactive research (Saritas, 2010) prepared the reform of higher education in Romania.

Public policies are not anymore the Government's task only; equally important are the cooperation, deliberation, and social dialogue between many actors, at many levels. Many researches regarding the European Union (EU) share this new vision on public policies. In our view, European Union is an original political construction, unique in the human history and many of its evolutions are built on interaction and participation. For instance, The European Awareness Scenario Workshop (EASW) was launched in 1994 by the European Commission. The first workshop was "Sustainable Urban Living" intended to identify and find solutions for urban ecological issues (energy management, water treatment, waste treatment) (CORDIS, 1997).

Barriers to urban ecology have been identified and actions have been proposed.

Of course, not always the interactions between the European political and social actors are productive. The alchemy of transforming private interests in public interests at EU level is usually done through complicated influence mechanisms (Dür, 2008).

The urban and community studies are an appropriate laboratory for using interactive and participant methods (Barba-Lata, 2015). Identity politics are also a new research field where the participant-interactive methodology is crucial for studying the interaction between imagination and construction of political reality, as in the case of sexual rights (Richardson, 2000). Gender studies too are using the interactive and participant methods, in order to observe gaps and existing issues at the policy level and find out the target-group positions (Vasilikie & Texler Segal, 2017).

The participants are generally recruited from all social categories, for instance: students, public servants, experts in various field, workers, civic militants, political activists, and protesters - especially in the study of the new political mobilisations (Krastanova, 2016). Very interesting, from our point of view, is that sometimes, researchers and students participate in political mobilisations because of their own political opinions, but, later on, they use their own experience for researching the respective political mobilisation. It is a clear example of erasing the difference between researchers and "subjects".

However, in our opinion, the interactive and participant methods are very useful for studying inequality, social exclusion, and marginalisation. Therefore, they could target different vulnerable social groups, such as: elderly, minorities, prisoners, drug users, unemployed, physically or emotionally abused persons, prostitutes, victims of trafficking, immigrants, rape survivors and others.

5. Strengths and Weaknesses of Participant-Interactive Methods

In this section, we will present our pros and cons against this methodological approach.

In our view, one of the most important benefits of the participant-interactive approach is providing in-depth knowledge and understanding of the studied topics. In our opinion, the most important thing is giving people the chance to tell their stories. Equity, democratisation of science, flexibility, creativity, and using multiple sources and techniques are other strong points.

These methods “are particularly well suited for studying uncharted, contingent, or dynamic phenomena” (Charmaz, 2008: 155).

From our experience, the interactive and participant methods help scientists to avoid and fight preconceptions and taken for granted approaches. The interactive and participant methods can also create a sense of involvement of the community directly linked to actions at the grassroots level.

Moreover, we think this approach promotes methodological pluralism and liberation from the positivist myths. The positivism is not the sole “narrative” for understanding the science and the world, in general; the “postmodern” narratives are equally entitled to exist and to explain our world.

However, we believe there are weaknesses, too. The ethical and deontological issues are rather frequent. These methods present a high risk to influence the participants, to change their attitudes and behaviour, even to manipulate them. Researchers also are influenced by experiencing close contacts with participants and they could totally lose their neutrality and objectivity. Still, universities have made progress lately regarding the participants’ protection and improving ethical standards, in general.

Sometimes, interactive and participant methods are accused to be “unscientific”, even “anti-scientific”; to represent “the end of science” or, at least, a mean to weaken the science, to cultivate distrust in science and in its capacity to know the world and to improve it (Lodge, 2011). In fact, the way of conceiving science was almost the same - beginning with the Enlightenment - and we think it is only natural that challenging this persistent view is provoking hostile reactions.

The interactive and participants methods reveal a multifaceted social and political reality - uncertain, unexpected, diverse, and relative to the points of view of the participants - but which, however, in our opinion, can be understood and improved through communication and co-operation.

6. Conclusions: old and new

Are these methods really useful for the political science? We hope that the examples we have provided above are convincing in order to illustrate the usefulness of the participant-interactive approach. This approach finds relevant understandings, especially for new and emergent political phenomena: new political organisations, new social movements, new political actors, new public policies, etc. Therefore, certain social groups and their issues were ignored by the established approach but they are now

in the centre of political research, for instance: women, LGBTQ, youth, alternative families and marginal communities. As we showed above (in section 4), the interactive and participant methods are very strong tools for studying excluded and marginal social groups that were almost nonexistent in the mainstream of political research.

New perspectives – such as network policy analysis and fringe policies – were possible because of a more flexible approach. The influence of political anthropology and ethnology is growing while the influence of the political economy (essentially based on rational choice) is weakening.

In spite of certain obsessions (such as the fetishes for language and power), we believe that the interactive and participant methods represent a legitimate way of doing research in political science.

We hope that our paper gives strong reasons for the political science in Romania to begin increasingly use the participant-interactive approach in researches.

We consider these methods as “new” but, in fact, they continue important traditions of the social and political research. Many new developments are based on the traditions of hermeneutic, interpretive and qualitative research. In addition, these methods inherit elements of Marxism and neo-Marxism (the critical sociology), with regard to the desire to improve the social and political arrangements.

We also have explained the role of new technologies (Internet, cellular phones, and digital cameras) in making scientific research accessible and open to anyone.

In our view, these trends relate to postmodern social and political mutations. We witnessed the failure of traditional methods to understand the new generations and new political phenomena. Recognising the limits of human comprehension means, also, that there are no independent, neutral and “competent” experts to provide “rational” and “scientific” knowledge. Therefore, the “scientific truth”, rigor and univocal concepts are becoming relativistic.

We believe that the study of politics is, inevitably, consciously or not, an integral part of the political game. Therefore, there is no agreement on problems or solutions that deserve to be studied. Political issues have a curious way of reaching the public agenda: not by gravity, urgency, or opportunity, but by political interplay.

Usually, as a case study on a particular context, the results of the participant-interactive research, even if based on a large quantity and quality of data, are difficult to generalize; but, in fact, we think this inference is no longer the purpose of science, from the perspective of recent trends.

Although the interactive and participant methods pose problems both in terms of internal and external validity, we can say that these methods are also a step towards liberation from the model of natural sciences, at least a symbolic release, concerning the language and perspectives used in research.

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