Methodological challenges in studies on the family-school relationship: how to research an intimate space

Desafios metodológicos nos estudos sobre a relação família-escola: como pesquisar um espaço íntimo

Cibele Noronha Carvalho[a]
cibbelecarvalho@gmail.com

Maria Amália de Almeida Cunha[a]
amalia.fae@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Most sociological research on the family-school relationship uses interviews as a methodological tool. When carried out, observations tend to take place in educational institutions and not in domestic spaces, as this concerns the domain of privacy. However, the limitations that stand in the way of these choices have been increasingly discussed. On the one hand, discursive methodologies are restricted to accessing the information available to consciousness and memory. They are almost always centered on a single informant, disregarding the internal power relations of the family group. On the other hand, the fact that observations are almost exclusively held in the school environment hides family dynamics, which are fundamental to understanding family-school relationships. Based on bibliographical research on this methodological discussion, this article analyzes the extent to which distrust in relation to interviews to investigate family practices is justified and presents strategies to mitigate the limits of this tool. Furthermore, it identifies and analyzes the challenges and ethical-methodological strategies encountered by field researchers to undertake observations in domestic spaces, a privileged *locus* of the family unit and privacy.

Keywords: Research Methodology. Family-School Relationship. Family Socialization. Studies in Domestic Space.

RESUMO

A maior parte das pesquisas sociológicas a respeito da relação família-escola adota as entrevistas como ferramenta metodológica. As observações, quando realizadas, tendem a ocorrer em instituições educativas e não em espaços domésticos, por se tratar do domínio da privacidade. No entanto, as limitações que se interpõem a estas escolhas têm sido cada vez mais discutidas. Por um lado, as metodologias discursivas restringem-se a acessar informações que estão disponíveis à consciência e à memória e quase sempre são centradas em um único informante, desconsiderando as relações de força internas ao grupo familiar. Por outro, o fato de que as observações são quase que exclusivamente realizadas em ambiente escolar deixa à

ᵃ Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

sombra dinâmicas familiares que são fundamentais para a compreensão da relação família-escola. Partindo de pesquisa bibliográfica sobre esta discussão metodológica, o presente artigo analisa em que medida é procedente a desconfiança em relação às entrevistas para investigar as práticas familiares e apresenta estratégias para mitigar os limites desta ferramenta. Além disso, identifica e analisa os desafios e as estratégias ético-metodológicas encontradas por pesquisadores do campo para empreender observações em espaços domésticos, lócus privilegiado da unidade familiar e da privacidade.

Palavras-chave: Metodologia de Pesquisa. Relação Família-Escola. Socialização Familiar. Pesquisa em Espaço Doméstico.

Introduction

Charles Wright Mills (1975) said that neither the individual's life nor the history of a society can be understood if we do not understand both. Thus, social scientists, in general, warn us about the importance of relating public issues with private concerns and show us that new social dynamics also reflect important transformations in the most private processes of an individual's life, such as those mediated by family and school.

Hence, the family has always been present, in some way, among the objects that concern Sociology. However, the studies on the Sociology of Education from a European tradition, which studied families until the mid-1950s-1960s, did so through a more macroscopic bias, through what we nowadays call "methodological empiricism." Inspired by an extraordinary increase in national education systems, the first tradition of these studies was guided by an atmosphere of economic prosperity that became known as the "glorious thirty" [*les trente glorieuses*] after the end of WWII. The Sociology of Education studied the family through positional factors (income, occupation, education level, race) and its morphologic characteristics (number of children, family arrangement, child place among siblings, etc.), using them as "independent" variables to be statistically correlated to the "depend" variable of school performance (Forquin, 1995 *apud* Cunha; Alves, 2018).

Therefore, the Sociology of Education developed before the 1970s has already recognized the relationship between families and children's schooling, resulting from changes in broader society. Among them, we highlight prolonged schooling, family demographic relationships, and the centrality of school in families. It is no coincidence that the central theme of these studies is the correlation between the school system and social mobility/stratification (Nogueira, 2005).

During the 1960s-1970s, the so-called reproduction theories stood out, which, in reaction to predominant functionalist approaches that insisted on the social mobility role played by the educational system, treated it as a central conservation mechanism of an unequal society (Bourdieu, 1989).

Bourdieu's works put the idea of education democratization and school meritocracy under the spotlight. The critical perspective adopted by the author contributed to deepening the angle of analysis over families' schooling practices and their strategies[1], when highlighting the role of social

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1 According to Pierre Bourdieu, "strategies" refer to the conscious or unconscious actions that individuals and groups implement to reach their goals, considering their conditions and limitations in the social group they act. Thus, the notion

structures: the more differentiated these structures, the more dissimulated the mechanisms of domination. These mechanisms favor the mobilization of the reproduction strategies of people and institutions, such as family, school, religion, and politics (Ribeiro Valle, 2022).

Bourdieu and Passeron's (2014) analyses point out that when valuing the culture of privileged classes, the school reproduces and legitimates social inequalities. Moreover, Boudon's (1981) works show that this perspective justifies the inequalities of success through the strategies used by families – whose resources vary according to the social class. These macro-sociological perspectives are gradually substituted by more micro-sociological interpretations.

Hence, after the 1980s, a theoretical-methodological re-direction highlights the microscopic dimension of social reality, mainly expressed in the interest in what became known as the school's "black box." The "black box" study followed a paradigm change, in which the investigation methods of the Sociology of Education shifted from the macro to microstructures and turned their eyes to the "small units of analysis" (Forquin, 1995).

The book *L'école primaire au quotidian* by Régine Sirota (1994) reflects the result of empirical studies undertaken by the author throughout the 1980s for her doctorate thesis under the guidance of Viviane Isambert-Jamati. In this work, we can observe this shift in the field of Sociology of Education. The author is interested in the everyday life of an elementary school and, from this object (the classroom), will analyze the creation of school failure and success through social interaction processes between all subjects that compose a pedagogical situation. These reflections show how the theoretical problem seems to be amalgamated with the methodological problem (the constitution of school routine into an observable fact). "That is, within a system of social relations, school routine crystalizes itself in the pedagogical situation, where a social interaction is produced creating a certain type of communication system, in which each one participates through their form of intervention" (Sirota, 1994, p. 12-13).

Hence, taking the classroom as a heuristic object, Sirota (1994) seeks to unveil the processes still veiled that are within the school's black box when analyzing how these processes are guided by socialization strategies, with more or less adhesion to the rules of the games by the students. Furthermore, in the interaction processes experienced in a pedagogical situation, students are also positioned depending on their social origin, which situates them in different relations with others and school norms.

According to Sirota (1994), the universe of classroom interactions encompasses much more than the physical space, that is, where the interactions between teachers, students, and didactic material occur. The classroom also means a symbolic space in which the actors represent norms, values, expectations of the school institution, teachers, and students' families and, because of that, is a space of negotiation where teachers and students build meanings and establish power

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of strategy would not be associated only with the idea of intentional calculation through conscious and planned action. To Bourdieu, strategies are mostly at the pre-reflexive or infra-conscious level, therefore, the result of the *habitus*. Bourdieu frequently uses the game metaphor to explain his view of the social action logic and, in particular, the strategies as the product of the practical mastery of behaviors in the different spaces of the social world. This mastery is explained by the *habitus*, which can be understood simultaneously as a game and the game itself incorporated individually by every agent during time (Seidl, 2017).

relationships, permeated by dynamics of authority, obedience, and resistance. Hence, the strategies established by the actors are shaped in the classroom, also guided by their social properties, in a clear connection between the micro and macro-sociological perspectives.

Thus, it becomes clear that socialization practices are vital to understanding the universe of family-school relationships and the different schooling strategies families use. If the reproduction theory, as we have seen, showed a certain area of shared interests between schools and more privileged families, as the latter can manage the best strategies to better use the school. At the end of the 1990s, we witness the publication of the book *Tableaux de famille: Heurs et malheurs scolaires en milieux populaires* by the sociologist Bernard Lahire (1997), the argument that low-income families are not void of parental strategies concerning school, in a clear criticism to a type of *sociological doxa* that there would be a parental omission among underprivileged families.

In this way, since the 1990s, continuing the micro-sociological perspective, we can observe a tendency in the studies about the family-school relationship, which highlight the importance that low-income families attribute to their children's schooling, stressing that this importance is not generally expressed in the standards expected by the school, which follow the typical patterns of middle classes. Nonetheless, popular families also participated, in their own ways, in building their children's school success, though they might do it in a heterodox fashion, within the limits of possibilities. Their strategies would not always be explicit and evident, but neither would be absent from socialization practices and parental mobilization.

This opens a new "black box", the family, a theoretical-methodological project that favors the return to privileged groups that aim, this time, to offer empirical evidence to understand the formation of the *habitus*, a highlighted informative but little explicit concept (Barthez, 1980). Ultimately, it refers to empirically knowing the practices, interactions, and intrafamilial dynamics that participate in the precocious and daily construction of dispositions to help explain how the intra-family transmission of cultural capital and a consonant *ethos* to the school culture occurs.

By briefly restituting the scenario of family-school relationship studies in the area of Sociology of Education, we call attention to the need to investigate the contributions and the ethical and methodological challenges that appear in qualitative investigations on family-school relationships conducted in domestic environments, considering that, as we have seen, these studies have used a tendency based on the microscopic perspective, mainly grounded in a qualitative approach.

Among the challenges in this investigative endeavor, we highlight the exercise of a reflexive attitude by researchers, people, and investigated institutions, in an attempt to distance themselves from a more objectivist posture that predominated in Social Sciences, as well as the difficulty of having families' acceptance because the investigator's presence could represent a threat to privacy.

As we have tried to show, constructing new research designs is vital to face the theoretical and social challenges when studying family-school relationships. As this is still an incipient discussion in the Sociology of Education in Brazil and worldwide (Lareau; Rao, 2022), we conducted a bibliographical review called "narrative review." This method uses, as the main source, publications that aim to broadly describe the development of a theme and the types of methodologies that

researchers of the theme have used. The narrative review describes a specific topic's state of the art from a theoretical or contextual perspective (Cavalcante; Oliveira, 2020).

This type of review also allows the combination of results from theoretical and empirical studies, an essential condition for the scope of our article, which aims to scrutinize the methodological challenges in the family-school relationship in domestic spaces[2]. Nevertheless, we do not ignore the limits of choosing a review of this type, such as the difficulty of summing up the results and risks from the selection of the bibliography until the subjectivity in the review interpretation. Despite these challenges, we understand that the narrative bibliographical review can offer a broader and more diverse perspective of the investigated theme. Moreover, it allows us to map the main tendencies, gaps, and standards.

Hence, we sought to analyze some ethical and methodological issues found by research that try to understand family practices and interactions through discursive or observational tools. This article is divided into two sections, besides this introduction and final remarks. The first one approaches the initial challenges researchers face when entering private spaces, such as recruiting and research sample formation. The second section analyzes the tool choice for data production, the advantages and disadvantages of using discursive methodologies to understand the practices, the challenges and strategies used by researchers who conducted intensive observations in domestic spaces, and the combination of methodological tools.

The delicate work of entering the field in studies held in households

The countless changes that society has gone through demand a deep review of investigation principles and practices. An essential dimension of this issue is questioning the relativist posture, which is indispensable for Anthropology and Sociology to build the autonomy of the investigated objects and subjects (Van Zanten, 2003, p. 52). From a comprehensive perspective, the researcher must be vigilant not to fall into a normative and ethnocentric temptation, often supposedly indifferent, and, with it, the challenge it represents in current societies.

Hence, another question raised for a while is a particular concern among researchers who work with a qualitative approach regarding the type of (closer) relationship with the study subjects and, mainly, the domination problem. It is the confrontation between their own *a priori* classifications and the native ones that can emerge as an instrument of knowledge free from domination (Weber, 2009, p. 27). According to Weber (2009), though the term native refers to a tradition of exoticism, it can also designate an analytical posture. Every discourse and every analyzed representation is a native discourse. Any person is a potential native; we just need to take them as an object of observation and analysis. Its advantage lies in allowing researchers to separate themselves from the subjects they analyze and consider themselves natives (Weber, 2009).

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2 For our search, we focused on the descriptors "family-school relationship" AND "domestic spaces" AND "studies in domestic spaces" OR "family-school relationship in domestic spaces/environments", OR "private space" OR "domestic space" AND/OR "observation" OR "intensive observation" OR "ethnography". The consulted bases were Google Scholar and Scielo.

This *go-between* allows the researcher to avoid the risk of a dominant posture, often ethnocentric, and move forward with the challenge of understanding and interpreting. Considering this, it is more interesting to listen to what the natives have to say than question them, not only to listen to their classifications but also to avoid receiving answers that would just mirror researchers' questions and expectations.

Most sociological studies on family-school relationships use interviews as a methodological tool (Nogueira; Freitas, 2022). When used, observation rarely occurs in the domestic environment, maybe because it is much more challenging for the researcher to enter a world whose codes seem distant from their own, but mainly because modernity established the house as the privileged *locus* of privacy.

This difficulty is not new. On the contrary, it has been theoretically reported by family sociologists since Gilberto Velho (1981) and empirically faced by census researchers who work in urban groups in which family unity and residence coincide. Here, we should consider this premise, which has relevant consequences for the Sociology of Education. When using the nuclear family as a model, studies tend to consider only the group formed by one or more individuals living in the same space, disregarding family bonds that are close or even dependent but do not imply cohabitation. Hence, though contributing to delineating profiles, census data do not capture internal dynamics and rarely express the time factor and the family trajectory.

In turn, the interviews conducted by academic studies about family-school relationships have almost always sought to know the family by producing data from one respondent who talks in the name of all others, often an adult woman, rarely a child. Though they have greatly contributed to understand the effect of family dynamics in children's school trajectories, they tend to consider the family as a simple sum of individuals (Rodrigues, 1978; 1980), by leaving behind the fact that, even though they might behave as a group, each member has their individuality and own interests, which not always converge. Hence, the interviews with only one family member tend to hide the unequal power distribution according to these social properties while revealing the crystallization of roles associated with gender and age characteristics. When building a static portrait of a family with no conflicts, we risk repeating the functionalist mistake, which is the perception of a nuclear and harmonious family with clear and well-defined roles.

Regardless of the methodological design, obtaining consent from participants is particularly delicate when the research *locus* is the domestic space. Researchers have frequently reported the need for a trustworthy person or institution to support the contact for comfort or even security issues.

In the case of studies in Education, the mediation of children's teaching institutions is a frequently used resource. More than that, the implementation of a precedent phase of data production in school seems fruitful to establish the first bond with the children, helping the selection, and approximation with the parents. Thus, researchers do not have to use the snow ball sample composition technique, reducing the chances of involuntary information sharing among families.

This strategy was used, for example, in the well-known work by Annette Lareau (2018), who aimed, through intensive observations, to investigate the mechanisms through which parents

transmit and produce advantages that tend to convert into educational and economic opportunities for their children. Lareau (2018) describes that, though considering the first meetings with the families scary, she tried to seem at ease and appease participants, when affirming that she understood that family life and childcare were extremely challenging. She explained that the research team was used to shouts, children's cries, messy bedrooms and kitchens, and that the work's intention was to have an image of family life as realistic as possible.

Inspired by Lareau's (2018) work, Séverine Kakpo (2019) conducted an observation of everyday practices and interactions of teachers' families and identified, in this experience, at least three factors that eased the acceptance of a sufficient number of participants: form of approach; researcher's gender; and identification or empathy of participants, adults and children, with the research objectives.

Regarding the approach, the research reports that she was careful to contact the possible participants through social networks and not through the institutional channels of the schools they worked with, even though this is a common and efficient recruiting strategy. This choice sought to reduce, in the prospective candidates, the sensation that they were being observed in advance (Kakpo, 2019). Even though the first contact is often established by instant message applications, social networks, or the Internet, the in-person invitation seems to transmit more security than a "cold invitation" (Lareau; Rao, 2022).

The second facilitator refers to the fact that she was a woman, and women are socially perceived as more trustworthy in the care of children; we are rarely suspected of violent crimes, mainly sexual ones (Kakpo, 2019).

The third and last factor refers to the adherence of intellectualized middle classes – the social group to which participate the families in Kakpo's (2019) study – to the research objectives. In these situations, she sought to emphasize that the participation would be a contribution to fight educational inequalities, an argument that seemed to touch teachers/parents, mainly regarding a group averse to a self-image as academic and social distinction strategists.

In some measure, Kakpo's (2019) methodological planning assumed participants' motivation to build a less uninterested self-image, pointing out a meaningful knowledge of the *ethos* of the investigated social group. As she explains, the participants seemed to consider the research a distinctive strategy towards the elite, which granted sociological substance to their feeling of social singularity.

The real interest of families in the investigation not only allowed the researcher to enter the field but also guaranteed the continuity of the research. According to Kakpo (2019), participants had a clearer idea of the issues discussed at the end of data production. Despite the inconveniences, they even perceived the advantages of conducting observations in the family routine. Though not always consciously, parents also seem to take this participation as an opportunity to help transmit the taste of scientific making to their children.

Similarly to the challenges pointed out by Kakpo (2019), Bruggeman (2011) also raises interesting issues about research conditions and methodological approaches "at home". Moving from the school terrain to the participants' houses, the researcher was confronted with other

spaces, times, and cultural and social questions. How does one research an intimate space at such a close distance? When questioning this issue, the author brings her experiences with two different qualitative experiences (one held with gypsy families in the metropolitan area of Lille and another with families whose children faced "school difficulties" in Pas de Calais).

According to Bruggeman (2011, p. 56), it is essential to outline a pathway in which there is not much room for improvisation and that, at the same time, has an extensive support network:

> the person we call 'informant' in the ethnographic jargon played a fundamental role in the phase of entering the field. In fact, contrary to the institutional spaces we can access through formal procedures, the family – as an investigation "field" – cannot be directly contacted by the unknown investigator. Thus, there is a need to be presented by a person who has already established a trusting relationship with the family through professional and/or personal relationships so as to benefit from a positive *priori* that eases the first contact.

Only after having families' agreements, the researcher should go to the place, know, and understand it, even before entering their homes. This very intimate and private world requires a careful prospection work, probing internal dynamics, and a certain ability to read what is not said. According to Bruggeman (2011), entering the universe of families is to be in an in-between, as the place never exists in a pure way. In everyday life, the places are recomposed and the relationships can always be reconstructed.

Besides the challenges of obtaining parental consent, we should mention those related to gaining children's participation, a necessary step for the research good development and the fulfillment of the ethical norms for research with children in Brazil (Brasil, 2016; 2024). In general, obtaining the consent of this age group demands the mediation of another adult, parents or teachers, who assume the task of favoring the construction of a trusting relationship between the child and the researcher and explain that contributing to scientific production is a moral value. About this, Kakpo (2019, p. 175) tells that:

> [...] though I have not seen this effort (from parents), I noticed its effects in the field. In fact, not all children immediately approved of the idea of participating in the observation. When I made this proposal, Diego was quite reluctant (for example, he squirmed on the desk, hid his face, and asked me to follow his younger sister, etc.). However, the next Monday, he was completely convinced of his participation in the investigation after his mother explained "everything again" to him during the weekend.

The ongoing assessment of consent and the guarantee that all participants can give up is especially delicate with children. The field research in Childhood Studies have been showing that, regarding this age group, an ethical posture implies that the choice of participating or not in the research can be expressed in any moment and by different types of language, including non-verbal ones (Cruz, 2008). The mediation work can be facilitated when the child already has a certain scientific culture. To illustrate this assumption, Kakpo (2019, p. 175) reports that, when explaining to a child, a teacher's daughter, about the principle of data anonymization, she immediately answered: "I know [...] I read in the [magazine] *Science and Life*".

The factors listed by the author certainly would not have the same impact in studies with other social groups. About the relationship between social class and the several forms of signification

and the adherence degrees of families, Lareau (2018) observes that, in middle-class families, her research was received as a type of cultural enrichment, not much different from music, foreign language, or sports classes. If, in these groups, families included the children in making the decision of participation in the study, in the low-income families, parented tended not to ask their children's opinion, only informing them about their decision. This style of parenting education imposes new ethical challenges for the researcher, which can be seen when needing to distinguish between what is the children's free will and what is adults' coercion.

International researchers (Jaccoud; Mayer, 2008) have been showing that, in underprivileged groups, financial retribution for participation can be an efficient way of having participants, mainly because they tend to have long work hours and, thus, little time to receive researchers. However, in Brazil, this practice is not allowed, and there is room for just small compensations for eventual losses caused by the research (Brasil, 1996). Finally, reflecting on the profile of the people who accepted the invitation to participate in a given interview and the reasons that led them to participate in a way to foresee possible biases in data interpretation.

Are there more adequate methodological tools to understand family dynamics?

The interviews

Education researchers focused on understanding family dynamics through qualitative studies face a dilemma. Often interested in socializing practices, they need to opt to use discursive methodologies combined or not with the observation of practices. If they take interviews alone, they are faced with resistance to objectivation (Bourdieu, 1999) and the impossibility of accessing aspects that are not available to the consciousness or the memory of subjects. On the other, the observations held in domestic spaces impose several ethical and methodological challenges.

Here, what seems to be at stake is the possibility of apprehending the dispositions, these "useful abstractions" that seem intangible for researchers. They cannot be directly captured; they need to be reconstructed from the data produced, which can lead to interpretative mistakes, as Lahire (2002; 2016) warns. The first of these mistakes would be to infer the existence of a particular disposition in an individual from a single episode reported or observed. The second would be to ignore the context in which the dispositions are activated or inhibited. Finally, the third would be to mechanically deduce the existence of a disposition through the interviewees' discourse.

Lahire (1997) calls attention to what might be at stake in a social relationship, such as the interview, when the words do not expect a sociologist to harvest them from the interviewees' mouths or minds. The words were enunciated because the interviewers participated in the social world through their cultural dispositions, perceptions, and interpretation schemes; they resulted from their multiple belongings.

Therefore, for the author, the interview plays the role of a filter that allows the enunciability of certain experiences and, at the same time, hinders the emergence of others that imply the use of specific linguistic forms that can discourage their fruition. This happens, for example, when the

interview takes place in a differentiated and hierarchical cultural universe (in which some products are more legitimate than others). Moreover, when the person that answers a question about these objects or practices participates more or less in this universe and has a consciousness more or less clear of the cultural dignity or indignity of certain objects or practices affecting what the author calls "legitimacy effects ."Summing up, by facing the issue of the interview as a non-transparent discourse we can have the opportunity of reconstructing effective practices. Or, better, the effective social dispositions that are based on the principle of the uttered discourses (Lahire, 1997).

On this issue, Darmon (2019) states that, though it is important to consider the limits of using interviews to understand the construction of dispositions, this does not mean that it is impossible or even fruitless to try to understand them from the interviewee's speech. Researchers should only be aware of not closing their analysis on the disposition traces highlighted by informants when neglecting other traces that, for several reasons, were not stressed.

According to the author, capturing dispositions through the comparisons between different moments and processes would be interesting. In other words, the comparative perspective could be used to understand the transformations that occur in different moments of the socializing process in the same subject, including the intimate work of dispositions' self-transformation and the inevitable internal conflicts. This was what Darmon (2019) observed in a study conducted with girls who went through an anorexic trajectory and sought to abandon old dispositions, as well as an investigation with students from preparatory courses that made self-socialization efforts to leave behaviors that distanced them from their academic objectives, substituting them for more ascetic habits. The comparative perspective can also be employed when understanding different processes simultaneously experienced by the same subject(s) or to analyze the effects of the same socialization process in different subjects.

In the case of the studies about family-school relationships, the interviews could be held with the same family at different moments; they could focus on one student to perceive the influence of the school, the family, and other socialization instances or be applied in different students to understand the singularities and recurrences in how each family relates with the socialization of the same school institution.

Intensive observations

To soften the limits of discursive methodological tools, a second strategy would be direct observations of the practices within the domestic spaces. Less employed than interviews, household observations are considered invasive. Therefore, they tend to have more negative answers when people are invited to participate in the research.

Furthermore, the mere research presence directly interferes in the nature of the private space, raising epistemological issues. What type of distortion would the external researcher produce when observing the dynamics of the private space? What are the advantages and disadvantages of researching one's own family group, as Règine Sirota (2010) did in her study on children's birthday parties? What would be the best posture for the visiting-researcher to adopt, one closer

to neutrality and passiveness, as the naturalist model, or one encompassing some interaction with family members?

In this section, we list and analyze some procedures used by researchers in the area of Sociology of Education, Family, and Childhood to answer these questions. The first refers to the agreement with families about researchers' limits and possibilities and the possible effects of these agreements in data production.

Inspired by Hochschild's (1989) research about women's second shift, Lareau (2018) reports that she even asked participants to ignore her presence and consider her like a family dog to avoid contaminating data production. In less extreme terms, Kakpo (2019) mentions explicit agreements, such as the observation focusing on only one child, and implicit agreements, such as stopping observations at certain moments to preserve children's privacy.

These agreements translate the use of a research model more inclined to researchers' retraction or, on the contrary, their interaction with participants. They also affect the choice of the place from where family routines will be observed. This choice is never defined and fixed *a priori* but, on the contrary, is constantly renegotiated and redefined depending on the subjects or even group displacement. When experiencing the dynamic of a family with children, researchers frequently need to "follow" the families in their intra and extra-residence displacements (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007; Mikats, 2020), taking constant decisions that sometimes result in a position closer to a passive observer, while others a more participant-observer one. Sitting around the table with the family during breakfast or standing up and observing? Go with the family to the supermarket or wait in the car? Sit down on the children's bed or on the floor? To passively observe or help the overworked mother with dinner and the crying baby? In domestic spaces, passiveness does not always result in neutrality, as it brings the viewer closer to the position of guest. On the other hand, restrained participation can make the researcher more familiar and, at the same time, more neutral.

Observation in the domestic space demands a strong "social tact" (Goffman, 1988), materialized in a type of "be there" (Geertz, 2004; Robind; Tillard, 2010) that demands from the researcher a balance between being spontaneous and hiding their identity. Lareau (2018) says that this was especially difficult, for instance, when she needed to have meals with the families and disliked the food or the need to repress her emotions regarding authoritarian styles of education or antidemocratic political opinions.

How researchers record information in the field diary results from a more or less participative research design. The more the researcher interacts with the family, the less difficulties it is to immediately record the descriptive, theoretical, and methodological notes (Hammersley; Atkinson, 1983; Jaccoud; Mayer, 2008). Indeed, there is the possibility of using videos and sound recorders during family visits, a resource that allows capturing simultaneous actions in the same domestic scene, as well as a less impressionist transcription. However, one must understand that the resource can create tensions and compromise even more the spontaneity of the actions and interactions in the private space.

Besides the choice, situated or reflexive, for a more participative or restrictive posture, another device to manage access to family routine is the ritualization of entering and leaving and

the prolonged observation time. Though conducting exploratory interviews, the researcher certainly knows little about the family dynamics before starting observations; the family members also do not know the researcher. Therefore, the entrance ritualization would make this moment less unpredictable and uncomfortable because it would establish a "face of reciprocal domestication," which favors bonds of mutual trust (Kohn, 1989).

A consensus among researchers using Ethnography (Jaccoud; Mayer, 2008) the permanence in the field for a longer period increases researchers' "familiarization" and the consequent mitigation of resistance. Regarding this topic, Lareau (2018) explains that family members gradually got used to the research team during the intensive observations she coordinated. The tension would dissipate, generally in the third and tenth days. She argues that, mainly for the children, it is difficult to sustain a "business quality standard" for a long time.

Even though the observation in domestic spaces demands some effort of self-suppression to highlight family practices, this work unmistakably calls upon researchers' biographies. Lareau (2018) admits that part of her motivation to conduct this project emerged from her desire to better understand the internal works of families because, as a child, she wished to have a "normal" family. On the other hand, her parents' difficult temper allowed her to be aware of the various parenting styles, as she could feel reasonably stable even in households with shouts or physical punishment. The research assistants' personal histories also seemed to interfere when determining what each one considered worthy of writing in their field diary. As it is not possible, or even desirable, to completely remove researchers' subjectivity, a possible measure to define which data should be recorded would be to use a "funnel" observation process. In this process, researchers write merely descriptive notes, whose interpretations can ground the following observations (Deslauriers, 1982; Jaccoud; Mayer, 2008).

In the case of education works, observation is almost always centered on one child, and a limit is created that follows the criteria established by the researchers. Even so, regarding the studies that consider the family group through the speech of a single interviewee, the observations offer the advantage of capturing the relationships of domination between family members, mainly those related to gender and generation, but also associated with ethnical-racial characteristics in multiracial families. It also allows the reconstitutions of space-time sequences and access to contents that subjects could forget or censure in the interview.

The combination of tools

The combination of several data production tools is not rare in ethnographic and other types of studies. In several of his works, Lahire (1997; 2004) uses interviews as the main tool but adds observation, a term often used between quotation marks, to confirm researchers' impressions of the interviewees' testimonies.

For the author, the sociological role is precisely to reconstitute this web of interdependencies "present in the direct observation of practices and the social relationships that permeate the

information produced through discourse, in the scope of a specific social relationship: the interview" (Lahire, 1997, p. 75).

Regarding the analysis itself, even in the works mentioned in this article, there are few reflections on the data interpretation problem. However, in studies using multiple tools, data produced through observation tend to be secondary, while the testimonies of the subjects participating in the interviews are prioritized. More than knowing if the interviewees were telling the truth or not, the researcher has the responsibility of rebuilding interdependency relationships and possible social dispositions through the convergences and internal contradictions to the discourse of the same person, and also analyzing the verbal, para-verbal, and contextual, or stylistic information, combined with the data produced through the observation of practices.

Final remarks

Given the importance of primary socialization processes and family dynamics in school trajectories, Education studies should understand family practices and dynamics. Most sociological studies about family-school relationships tend to use interviews or observation in school as a methodological tool; observations focused on domestic spaces are rare.

However, discursive tools are frequently mistrusted under the belief that they would not be the most adequate to investigate family practices as the subjects could manage, consciously or not, the discourse over themselves. On the other hand, the challenges of observing domestic space, which are mainly caused by the difficulties of accessing private space, can be insurmountable.

Faced with this deadlock, this article points out strategies that can reduce the limitations of using interviews, such as a careful posture when deducing a disposition from a single practice reported or observed, and the use of a comparative perspective. These measures do not eliminate the consideration over the use of observations to complement the interviews or even intensive observations, as they can reveal unconscious dimensions or that are not available to memory, which are especially adequate to capture the space-time sequences of social interactions, hierarchical roles, and internal family negotiations.

Using bibliographical research, we sought to reduce the mistrust regarding using interviews in studies on family practices and present some parameters that allow them to be used more consistently. Furthermore, we discussed challenges and ethical-methodological strategies that can encourage future observations in domestic spaces. This endeavor has many challenges, which are not restricted to having families' acceptance. They involve the conscious choice for a more participative or restricted posture, decisions regarding the spatial position and how the produced data is recorded, a reflective attitude about the tensions between subjectivity and objectivity, and the ethical implications of such a delicate task.

As craftspeople, researchers who study family-school relations from a sociological perspective have to choose, in the discipline universe, the methods and ways to scientifically build social reality. This choice should be guided by the research question and the understanding that no methodology offers full access to reality. However, this necessary epistemological resignation should not halt us

from addressing unavoidable issues to advance the studies on family-school relationships, mainly regarding intra-family dynamics and practices.

In this sense, the observer/researcher can use "ancient devices" of "the practice of everyday life" and the "arts of making," analyzed by Michel de Certeau[3] (2014), such as subtle tricks or tactics[4] to creatively re-appropriate the space to understand how everyday practice shapes social reality.

When analyzing it, it is almost certain that no qualitative approach in family households is free from challenges. On the other hand, researchers should try to overcome these challenges by using their creativity and implementing available resources in an almost always unpredictable environment. When choosing the methods and ways to scientifically build social reality, the researcher simultaneously develops tactics to deal with varied contexts, situations, and experiences, what Michel de Certeau (2014) described and analyzed when redimensioning the importance of everyday experiences, as well as the practical knowledge, in the "arts of making" and the "everyday practice."

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[3] In his book *The Practice of Life*, Michel de Certeau (2014) narrates common practices of a "crowd of unknown people", ordinary people. When analyzing these practices, the author reflects on the contacts, solidarity, and fights that organize the space where these narrations open a pathway. To observe, one needs to think "in way of walking (or observing?) that belong to the "ways of making" of these people. The author concludes that "to read and write everyday culture, the investigator needs to relearn common operations and to make the analysis a variation of his object" (Certeau, 2014, p. 35).

[4] According to the author, tactics can be understood as creative and adaptive actions, differently from the notion of strategy, which demands a long-term plan with clear and defined objectives (Certeau, 2014).

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CIBELE NORONHA DE CARVALHO

PhD in Education, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil; Substitute Professor, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

MARIA AMÁLIA DE ALMEIDA CUNHA

PhD in Education, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP), Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil; Professor, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1 – Conception and design of the research; construction and processing of data; analysis and interpretation of data; details of their collaboration in preparing the final text.
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