Social Mobilisation for Housing Rights: A Qualitative Case Study Using Semi-Structured Interviews

Abstract

This methods case is a qualitative research study whose purpose is to explore social movements' strategies to pressure government for housing rights. It highlights the particular importance of explaining case selection in qualitative studies. In qualitative studies, especially, it is crucial to the validity of claims to justify why a specific case study, in a sea of other case studies, was chosen. In this methods case, I provide an account of one specific study I performed in Latin America on social mobilisation for housing rights at the local government level. It was an exploratory study conducted with members of a local housing council in the city of Maracanaú, Brazil. The case sheds light on purposive sample, as strategic social actors were chosen based on their experience and significance for the study. Finally, this case study provides an important insight on the details of the research process, in order to make the reader aware of the research background.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this research case, you should be able to

- Understand the importance of properly justifying methodological choices

- Offer important information about the research background

- Identify case studies that are suitable to the research objectives

Project Overview and Context

In Latin American countries, there is a long history of popular participation in government and a legacy of colonisation, dictatorship and transformation to democracy.

Today, strong remnants of dictatorship regimes are still in place, but new experimental models of participation in government have been more successful in Brazil than in other Latin American countries. Brazil is home to one of the largest social movements in South America – Landless Workers Movement (MST) – and has a long legacy of popular participation, including the Participatory Budget and Management Councils. Because popular participation is a central social issue in many countries of the global South, my research, which is described in this methods case, proposes to contribute to the understanding of how popular organisations are included in participatory institutions and the meaning of this participation.

I chose qualitative research methods for this research because I intended to study a single case to capture the in-depth processes and meanings related to my research topic, and qualitative methods would allow me to gather data about participation and practices directly from those involved in participatory institutions and decision-making processes at the local level. The following subsections provide information regarding my methodological choices, the target population I studied, my data collection procedures, the methods of analysis I chose and concerns about ethical issues.

The Methods

My research aimed to examine inclusion of social movements in the official spaces of decision-making offered by the state, particularly in social housing councils, as most of the studies conducted on management councils are centred on social welfare and health areas. It focused on qualitative forms of inquiry, namely, semi-structured in- depth interviews, field studies and case studies, to elicit detailed individual and in-depth narratives of time and place (Yin, 2003). A qualitative research framework allowed me to trace the process of social mobilisation regarding housing rights in Brazil and also demands for social transformation of local power structures in an in-depth, multi-faceted analysis. To investigate the topic in far more depth, I choose a single case study: a housing council in the Northeast of Brazil. Although Brazil is commonly defined as a 'developing country', its living conditions are far from good. The housing deficit is a serious issue, particularly in the northeast of the country – the region in Brazil which has the highest concentration of poverty and is the least developed. I chose this region because it allowed me to achieve a good geographical, cultural and class variance and representativeness within the country.

Case studies themselves are not exactly a research method; thus, researchers designate specific methods of data collection and methods of analysis that they will use in their case studies. Qualitative methods, such as open-ended interviews, field notes, triangulation and participant observations, provide the means to explore deeply a given case study.

I opted for qualitative research methodology instead of quantitative methods because the focus of my research is on the processes within the local housing council, not on the outcomes of the housing policies. By looking at policy reports and other official documents from government agencies, one can easily conclude that since the introduction of participatory experiences in

housing policies, there are more housing projects and more investments in housing in general (such as availability of funding, security of tenure, urbanisation of informal settlements, title possession), but one could not determine whether this 'success' is connected to the existence of a council and, if that is the case, what are the civil society contributions to the successful implementation of social housing. The focus of this study is on the inclusion of non-state actors once they become part of the process of policy-making and on what actually happens within the housing councils to effect change in housing policies. The expected result is to gain a deeper understanding of how such integration works and explain, using theories of participatory democracy and social movements, why it could be generalisable in the context of Brazil.

To ensure balanced representation, my sample included social movement activists, government officials and former and present members of the council. The entities that took part in this study have been involved in social mobilisation for housing for the past 15 years and are also involved in contentious interactions with the government advocating for housing rights.

Most of the official data regarding the local housing council can be accessed via the city council. The local housing council was officially created in 2007 and all documentation related to council activities, such as reports, policy documents, resolutions, regulations, letters, circulars, directives documents, press releases, among others, are stored at the City Hall and were made available for this study during the fieldwork phase.

To analyse the data collected from the interviews, I used thematic analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010; Kvale, 1996). Thematic analysis is a well-known method used in qualitative research, whereby the researcher identifies patterns across a data set. A meticulous process of becoming familiar with the data, by coding and identifying themes, generates data patterns. In my research, the data were displayed and organised with the help of qualitative software. Thematic analysis can also be used in a variety of theoretical frameworks, especially in studies on meaning and perceptions, to answer various types of research questions. In my study, this method of analysis was suited to answering the research questions related to meaning and perceptions of popular participation for local housing councils.

Sample Size and Selection of Sample

One medium-sized research. It is a city on the outskirts of the capital of the State of Ceará (Fortaleza), located in a metropolitan area. This city is a good example of medium-sized city – sharing the same type of housing issues as other cities of the same size in Brazil (considerable number of shanty towns, vandalised houses, and homeless people). Other characteristics include close socioeconomic relations with the capital and creation of local housing councils in the same period of time as many other cities (e.g. at the beginning of the president term of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, commonly called Lula, in 2003). According to a 2010 national survey, Maracanaú has 210,000 inhabitants. Thus, Maracanaú provides a good level of representativeness within the

country. The local housing council has 25 councillors (including their substitutes) from different backgrounds, especially state and non-state actors, ensuring that it was possible to get good variance in the data.

To justify the case selection, I used the guideline for sampling in qualitative research proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). They elaborated a set of criteria for proper case selection, which was attended (or at least partly attended) to in this research. Their criteria regarding feasibility, richness of information, generalisation of the selection, theoretical relevance and ethical consideration were considered largely influential in the sample choice literature.

Seeking better distribution and representativeness of respondents, I identified several social movements which have a seat on that local housing council. From these movements, I selected four or five members who are currently or have been part of the council at some point. I also guaranteed that there was at least one representative from the different mandates (e.g. members of a pre-Lula movement, during Lula and post- Lula) in order to trace changes and consistencies over time.

Data Collection Procedures

In this research, the qualitative data were collected from interviews with members of the local housing council who were also members of social movements or were civil servants (as both are part of the housing council). According to the guideline provided by the Brazilian Ministry of Cities, the members of the council must be elected and hold the position for 2 years, but re-conduction to the position is allowed for a second term. To obtain a better understanding of the processes, former members of the housing council were also included in the sample, as it permitted a better appreciation of the changes in local-level policy-making overtime.

As part of the data collection, it was necessary for me to take a research trip to this city in Brazil, where the fieldwork took place. The interviews conducted during the research trip assisted me in answering my research questions by using concepts and theories regarding the themes that emerged from the data collected in the interviews. After the trip, which required extensive preparations (e.g. phones calls, accommodation arrangements, interview schedule), and the conclusion of the interviews, I was able to grasp the perspectives of the subjects being studied and what they saw as important and significant in their context (Bryman, 2012).

Data Collection – Primary Data

The purpose of this phase was to collect background information about the participation of social movements in housing councils at the national level and, more specifically, the local level. This information is available in the National Hosing Councils' annual reports and in state-level reports; it can also be obtained from social housing projects officers in the city. The national- and local-level surveys provide information regarding budget by year, number of homeless people,

regeneration of houses units, rental accommodation schemes, housing co-operatives, number of mobilised groups involved in housing policies and local property taxes. The local authorities were also able to provide the number of households that qualify for social housing support and the waiting period for households seeking social housing support. That information helped me to understand the social and political context in which the councillors work and was used to provide support information for the data collected from the interviews (triangulation technique).

Interviews

The interviews were the most engaging stage of my research. I opted to perform semi-structured interviews, as this technique is an attractive option for data collection pertaining to participants' meanings and perceptions. From the interviews, and also from my field notes taken during the fieldwork, I was able to compile a qualitative description of the participants' experiences with social mobilisation for housing, including their interpretation and meanings of participation.

Deciding who was going to participate and where to run this project was an important part of my research strategy. Following Creswell (2008) directives, I defined the setting of the research (a local housing council), the actors (people who are or were members of that council), the events (social movement introduction to process of decision-making at the local level) and the process (the contribution of those social movements in promoting democratisation).

I prepared an interview script based on my research questions. The flow of the interviews was concentrated on how the interviewees perceived and understood certain issues and events connected to their job as local councillors. The main objective of applying semi-structured interviews was to gain access to the participants' views regarding meanings of participation. To fully explore the benefits of this approach, I included follow-up questions that were not previously included in the script. These follow-up questions enabled me to explore unexpected responses or new issues brought up during the interview process.

The interviews were particularly suited to gathering data about the meanings that the participants attributed to their participation in the local council because they could describe their experiences and self-understanding, and clarify and elaborate their own perspective. During the interviews, the participants were asked to describe their initial contact with institutional participation and to relate the experiences they had while performing their job as a local councillor. The semi-structured questions permitted participants to speak freely about their point of view; thus, it was possible for me to get an appreciation of what they felt was significant and important and then build an understanding based on their ideas (Creswell, 2008).

The interview questions were designed to consider both a thematic and a dynamic dimension: they were thematic in that they connected to the research topic and dynamic in that the interviews entailed an interpersonal relationship (Kvale, 1996). Thematically, the questions were related to the theoretical concepts at the core of the study. Dynamically, the questions promoted a positive

interaction between me and the participants so that the conversation would continue to flow and motivate the participants to talk about their experiences and feelings.

The Interview Situation

The fieldwork occurred from 5 August to 9 September 2014, when 22 interviews were conducted and support documentation was collected. The interview questions were centred on the housing councillors' experiences with social mobilisation, meaning of participation and expectations concerning their participation on the council, power division, strategies for social mobilisation and their personal views about housing policies in the current political context.

The interviewees comprised former and current councillors, including government officials and civil society representatives because both have (or had) a seat in the local housing council. Government officials included representatives from secretariats (e.g. health, housing, education) who are members of the council and were appointed for the job by the head of the secretariat. Civil society representatives included those elected for a mandate of 2 years and are representatives of local nongovernmental organisations and neighbourhood associations in the municipality. I conducted the interviews in different locations, according to the convenience of the interviewee. Most of the interviews happened at the interviewee's home, workplace or nongovernmental organisation or association headquarters. The interviewees demonstrated great willingness to talk as no one refused to answer any of the interview questions. All interviews were audio recorded. The longest interview lasted for 65 min, and the shortest one was 35 min. On average, the interviews were 45 min in length.

The fieldwork part of the study did not occur without difficulties. Recruiting the participants took me and other gatekeepers plenty of time on the phone, trying to arrange the interviews. Most of the councillors had very busy schedules, but once a meeting was scheduled, they appeared to be willing to take part and engaged in the interview. Some councillors, especially those from civil society, were based in remote locations in the rural areas and in some cases very difficult to find.

While some participants were great talkers – they would answer the questions posed immediately – others were very careful with what they shared and either talked very little or just answered yes or no. Very few participants displayed this behaviour, but when it did occur, I attempted to continue to build rapport with them. Despite some interviewees' initial resistance to divulge information, I was able to keep the interviews flowing, facilitating the disclosure of information.

Once a researcher is in the field, gaining the necessary access to conduct research can be difficult and challenging. In my study, the gatekeepers' support during the fieldwork was essential to the study's success. These gatekeepers included a senior civil servant and a former president of the council who provided me with phone numbers, policy documents and informal contacts with current and former members of the council. Even before the start of my fieldwork, both gatekeepers vouched their willingness to help me by granting permission to access the contact list

of local councillors as well as other

council documents. In a practical sense, their help was significant because only a few interviews were organised in advance of my fieldwork.

Data Analysis Strategies

The strategies for analysing the collected data were defined before the interviews began. I opted to borrow methods of analysis from grounded theory, as data generation and analysis were to take place simultaneously. I used 'memoing', a technique for recording the thoughts and ideas of the researcher during the study, extensively in the form of marginal notes, so I would not miss insights. As the research progresses, memos tend to become more coherent and elaborated and can later be reviewed by the researcher throughout the writing process. By using the memoing technique in conjunction with the concepts revealed during a literature review, I analysed the data collected to see whether they supported the identified concepts and themes. As Charmaz (2006, p. 100) notes, those concepts and themes needed 'to earn their way' into the narrative.

Meaning interpretation methods were also utilised, as they fit my aim of capturing the points of view, ideas, expectation and frustrations of the participants. The interview questions were designed in accordance with the study and identified themes. In addition, these methods of analysis were taken into account during interview transcription (Wengraf, 2001; Flick, 2007). The methods of analysis were also built into the interview process itself. The objective was to grasp the meaning that the interviewees attribute to the topics raised in the interview questions. After transcription of the interviews was completed, to get familiar with all of the data, I followed the steps suggested by Flick (2007) and Hargreaves (1994): I read and re-read all the materials collected and wrote summary reports of each interview, in the form of memos. The goal, at this stage, was to identify general themes and intriguing or interesting parts of the interviews.

A more challenging aspect of this project was the data analysis itself. To that end, I used Saldana's (2009) coding model. First, I identified the themes that emerged from the interviews and then organised them into topics. I created a codebook to keep record of all emergent codes, making it possible to review, merge and elaborate new codes. At this stage, due to the amount of data collected, I used a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), NVivo, for data analysis: the topics addressed during the interviews were registered and classified on the basis of an active search for meaning condensation and central themes were analysed by using the defined units of analyses (Flick, 2007).

The Research Process

Out of 22 people interviewed, four were not in the current council term for a variety of reasons (illness, lack of time and other personal issues). Because these four individuals had been

participating in social mobilisation for housing in the municipality for considerable time, they provided me with interesting insights concerning how housing policies and popular participation were in the past and how they are nowadays.

The interview script was designed in strict adherence to the central research question and subquestions. Following Kvale's (1996) suggestion, I organised the interview questions into themes, keeping in mind that later they would be used to generate the raw data that would then be transcribed, coded and analysed. During the interviews, I also kept in mind that the focus was to be on listening to participants and then building understanding based on their ideas.

After conducting 16 interviews, I observed that patterns were starting to emerge. Thus, once the central categories were identified and I observed repeated patterns in participants' answers, I concluded that the project was nearing the saturation point, meaning that none or very few new themes or information are observed in the data.

The next stage was to start the data analyses by using qualitative coding techniques such as Saldana's (2009) coding model. After the interviews were transcribed, anonymised and organised in separate files, I started the coding process. I printed out and coded all interviews by hand. Because new codes were constantly being created or merged during the coding process, I created a codebook to keep record of all emergent codes. At this stage, I used the NVivo software to help manage, organise and make sense of unstructured information collected during fieldwork. CAQDAS such as NVivo do not do the thinking for the researcher; rather, they provide tools for visualising the connections among the collected data, to understand the nature of the relationships among codes, enabling the researcher to draw conclusions (Gibbs, 2008). Therefore, I input the passages coded from the interviews into NVivo, which helped to create new themes, identify new categories and organise the themes into these categories.

Sometimes, it was necessary to go back to the data and re-code and re-categorise, as new patterns and meanings were still appearing. Despite that this study comprised small *n* data, this activity took me quite a bit of time. It was not an easy task, during the analytical process, to decide what was important, interesting or useful, and it was common to re-code the data or revisit whether particular codes were necessary. As a result, I observed some clusters of data, so the next step was to subcategorise them and identify concepts and/or theories that connect to the literature review and research questions. Obviously, the data were untied at the beginning, but as patterns started to appear, I was able to see both particulars and generalities.

After the initial coding, the codes were organised into themes. According to Saldana (2009), a theme is phrase or a sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what is means. In my study, themes were identified both at the manifest level (directly observable from observation of the codes) and at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon) (Boyatzis, 1998). I then used the identified and developed themes as a strategy to categorise the data set into explicit topics in order

to develop theoretical ideas and further reconstruct the meanings I intended to explore. Figure 1 is a presentation of two of the main themes (Civil society integration in local government and Participation) and codes derived from the interviews.

Figure 1. Example of themes and codes.

Each interview was transcribed in the original language (Brazilian Portuguese) and also translated into English by a company specialising in language translation services. The interviews were translated into English because my initial plan was to perform the

analysis using the translated versions, but after reading some works on methodology, I decided that I would have better results if the original language was retained. The data generated from the interviews were triangulated with the results of documents collected during fieldwork, such as meeting notes, resolutions, policy documents and other official documents used as background information. I used the triangulation technique to give support to councillors' statements. By examining the documents provided by the city council, such as meeting minutes and councils resolutions, I was able to observe how

a discussion would unfold in a meeting, for example, and also how councillors from both groups (civil society and government) try to work out their partnership and reach consensus.

Ethics and Human Subjects' Issues

My research did not involve any foreseeable risk to participants above the level experienced in everyday life and no vulnerable groups were included in the interviews, as only government officials and local leaders would be interviewed. Therefore, before the fieldwork began, I submitted an application for exemption from full ethical review ethics. The application for exemption from full ethical review was accepted by the Human Research Ethics Committee–Humanities (HREC-HS), and because my research met all the requirements for exemption from full ethical review, the Office of Research Ethics approved it on 30 July 2014.

The fieldwork phase was the time when I would come into close contact with the subjects; thus, ethical issues became concrete at this stage. Before the fieldwork started, ethical procedures were put into place. The university Code of Good Practice in Research guideline was largely applied, as I intended to conduct an honest research at all costs in order to maintain the standards of

confidentiality and integrity as defined in those guidelines. With the goal of keeping the collected data from the interviews as confidential as possible, I took specific care to avoid any negative consequences to the participants, such as exposure of their name or other identifying information.

The interview participants received as much information as possible to help them decide whether or not to take part in the study. It was made clear to them that their participation in the research was voluntary, that they were free to refuse to answer any question and that they could stop the interview at any time. Although they were informed about the research process, they were not asked to sign informed consent forms, as such forms can minimise the willingness of a participant to take part in the research, as verified by Singer (2003). However, oral consent was obtained from each participant before the interview began and was registered with a voice recorder.

Keeping in mind the future publication of the research, I considered what kinds of effects publication could have on participants. Thus, I took care to inform the interviewees about the later use and potential publication of the content of the interviews. Participants were asked for authorisation to record the interview before it started. In the case of respondents not authorising the recording of the interview, I was equipped with pen and paper for note-taking, but it was not necessary, as no one was against recording. They were also informed that interview data would be used strictly for academic purposes and that any quotations would be done anonymously.

To guarantee the participants' anonymity, their names were changed to code numbers (e.g. Participant 1 = P1, Participant 2 = P2 for interviewees 1 and 2 and so on, respectively, in the order the interviews were conducted). Sometimes participants' characteristics were removed, such as changing the names of the places or neighbourhoods where they live or work.

I also offered participants a transcription of their interview, in case they wanted a copy. No one had objection with recording, and three councillors requested the interview transcription. One interview was conducted by phone because this particular participant was travelling during the entire fieldwork. A diary with observations from all interview situations was organised, and it provided great insights and relevant observations that were used in the analysis process.

Conclusion

The purpose of this methods case was to present my research methodological choices. I disclosed in this case study my entire research processes, offering justification for the decisions I made as well as a description of the fieldwork and interview atmosphere. I have also included an explanation of how I derived the themes and codes from the interviews. This work was facilitated by the willingness of the participants to share their views and great collaboration from gatekeepers during fieldwork.

Note

1. The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) defines the size of Brazilian cities by the population. Small cities are those with up to 100,000 people; medium cities are ones with population between 100,000 and 500,000 inhabitants (the case of my study); and large cities have over 500,000 inhabitants. Currently, Brazil has 255 cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- 1. What steps would you take to prepare for fieldwork in a country where you do not live or have never been to?

- 2. Are you familiar with your school's ethical research regulations? If not, what can you do to become familiar with them. If so, how would you apply these ethical guidelines to your own research?

- 3. What are the benefits and limitations of using purposive sampling? In the writing of your research, how would you make it clear why you chose a particular sample?

- 4. What do you see as the benefits of using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) software to analyse data? What are some drawbacks?

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