

Qualitative Research and Critical Social Psychology in Chile Today: Situated Knowledge and Political Action

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Abstract: Diverse approaches to qualitative research have been developed in Chile, one of them being that of critical social psychology. One of the characteristics of this perspective has been to develop a viewpoint that incorporates the perspectives of the social actors, considered as agents, and so to assume a situated view of knowledge, from which the aspiration to scientific objectivity and neutrality is renounced. This text will review critical social psychology's central characteristics and its relationship to qualitative research. A process of research will then be described which concerned memories of the coup d'état and the military dictatorship in Chile, and which developed into an intervention in this area.

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1. Introduction: Contexts and Problematics

When tackling the topic of the current development of qualitative research in Chile, it becomes inevitable that we orient our gaze toward the disciplines that have been the main centers using and developing this methodology. Different forms of qualitative research have been implemented and legitimized within sociology and anthropology, as well as in social psychology, history, and political science. These have ranged from the most classic methods, such as participant observation and in-depth interviewing, to others such as discussion groups, life histories and oral history, discourse analysis, and autoethnography. This methodological opening corresponds not only to a major development of qualitative research as an alternative to research of the quantitative type, but also to the deepening of a comprehensive and interpretive approach to social reality, including as central elements the subjective and intersubjective aspects of social problems, language as a characteristic mode of access to these aspects, and the

presence and position of the investigator as a condition for the possibility of knowledge. [1]

This process, which began to take shape during the 1980s at the height of the military dictatorship, seeks to recover the voices of social actors who are socially and/or politically marginalized, so as to produce knowledge that is dissident, distanced from or in open opposition to the official knowledge of the time, characterized especially by the official version of the authoritarian government. For MÁRQUEZ and SHARIM (1999, p.9), writing of biographical studies:

"the nineteen eighties were characterized by testimonial studies from those "with no voice" and the effervescence of social movements in the country. In this context, histories were compiled of the lives of women and men, slum dwellers and peasants who—alone or in an organized way—found the means to survive the hard conditions that those times imposed on them." [2]

Moreover, this process also sought to position social research according to a logic far from the aspirations to scientific neutrality, in consideration of the fact that "the subject cannot avoid participating in the construction of the object that he/she supposedly observes in an external manner" (PÉREZ, 1998, p.327). This figure of the participating observer obliges us to "review the classic assumptions of scientists' objectivity, neutrality and detachment" (PÉREZ, 1998, p.327), even more so when we consider the context of those years in which political violence and social and economic exclusion imposed the imperative of an ethical commitment to the affected sectors and to the struggle to put an end to the military dictatorship. [3]

With the return to democracy in the early 1990s, qualitative research went on to become institutionalized in universities and government agencies. This change of context brought about a shift from the aim described above to vindicate the perspective of social actors, towards a perspective that sought knowledge which instead considered these actors as passive subjects suffering diverse forms of social and economic exclusion. Continuing with the example of the biographical focus, "towards the end of the nineties, life narrative constituted basically a research method, but also a tool for training and diagnosis in experiments in social intervention and policy formulation" (MÁRQUEZ & SHARIM 1999, p.9). This was principally the case in state agencies charged with formulating public policies for social sectors defined by the state as having high priority needs, such as women, youth and the poor. [4]

For historian Gabriel SALAZAR (1999), during the nineties the transition to democracy and the shift in qualitative research toward the diagnosis of social problems and the devising of public policies resulted in the neutralization of the often-times anti-establishment character of the voices of social actors. This, he argues, occurred in the pursuit of governability—social actors became transformed into "subjects who were no longer docile carriers of objective 'data,' but, rather, unruly generators of intersubjective infections such as autonomy, social movements, sovereignty, local community, etc." (SALAZAR, 1999, p.203).

The social actor's voice is converted into a discomfiting element when it moves away from the norms of a public policy that seeks to insert these actors into a social structure increasingly distanced from social conflict. For this author, at the same time that state policy converted these social actors into mere beneficiaries of public policies, the use of qualitative methods to investigate them converted them into mere informants, stripping them of all agency and of the central role that had been achieved through the struggles of the preceding decade.

"For the people, politics and science originated a transitory kind of "tourism" that passed over them and over their problems and identities, which suddenly ended up tiring of them—the data did not return; neither did the interviewers; the politicians—almost never" (SALAZAR, 1999, p.203). [5]

For CANALES (1995), the pretense of recovering the word and subjectivity of social subjects was never more than a mere declaration of principles, since what continued to predominate was an episteme of control. This episteme consists of maintaining control over the subjects' speech, but with the paradox that they are granted the illusion of freedom of expression. "That paradoxical granting of freedom, that "you should ask yourself the questions," appears as a paradox of prisoners: "you may be free, but somehow *you owe it to me*" (CANALES, 1995, p.7). A tension was established between returning their voice to subjects—which implies that it can also be withheld from them again—and recovering their voice as a way of empowering them as social agents. This tension is present not only at the level of technique, but also in the relationship to the social context in which the technique is inscribed. The destination of the information generated is not the subjects who produced it, but a third party—"the customer, the market, science or any other institution that in this way knows about the investigation" (CANALES, 1995, p.7). In this regard, qualitative research waives its promise of returning the word to the subjects, leaving them immobilized in the position of object of study, irreversibly separating the successive moments of observer and observed, without any possibility that the knowledge produced from the subjects may return to them.

"[It is an] episteme of control because—and this is the central point—it spatializes or separates, in a non-reversible way, the observer's position from the position of what is observed. And in this sense it reduces the subjectivity, the support for speech, the questions or desires, to an object for us and for our gaze" (CANALES, 1995, p.8). [6]

Nevertheless, there have been efforts in diverse disciplines to maintain a critical focus in qualitative research, one which would precisely seek a viewpoint that would take responsibility for its political consequences, mainly in regard to overcoming the episteme of control, so that the agency of social actors would be promoted, starting with an coordination of the practices of these actors with investigative practices. As CANALES (1995) maintains, a type of research of the second order would restore the reversibility between investigator and what is investigated, so that the object would be converted into a subject of study. This would be a methodology that "from the qualitative promise might realize the possibility of a recycled, regenerated knowing, or one that in the end is inscribed

in the knowledge of the observed subject" (CANALES, 1995, p.49). In the words of SALAZAR (1999), this would be a type of research centered on the subject, whose first rule would be not just to remain with them, not to abandon them after extracting their knowledge, but to install oneself in them, to *be* them, diluting the epistemological separation between subject and object of study in order to empower social actors: "In the first case, science left with the data to return, converted into public policy and domination. In the second, science remains, empowering the subjective and intersubjective logos, to leave converted into social action and power" (SALAZAR, 1999, p.206). [7]

In the terms used by ALONSO (1998), this implies taking up qualitative research as a viewpoint or a perspective, which refers precisely to the idea that knowledge is the result of a subject's action in relations with others. "The concept of perspective as social viewpoint presupposes, from the beginning, openness towards the subject and the actors in a reflexive process of mutual production" (ALONSO 1998, p.19). [8]

One of the expressions of this way of understanding qualitative research in Chile has been critical social psychology. In this text, we will explore the principal characteristics of critical social psychology (CSP), as well as the bases for its conception of qualitative research. It is important to state that this text does not seek to claim for itself the complete and absolute paternity of CSP, since, as suggested by PIPER (2002), it is difficult to make a affirmative definition of what CSP is and what it is not, because no fixed or clearly delimited category exists to establish it once and for all. Therefore, "what is left is not to build a definition, but to show the fields of meaning and sense from which one is speaking" (PIPER, 2002, p.21). In this sense, we will be able to identify certain elements that characterize a critical approach in social psychology, which certainly is diverse and heterogeneous. [9]

Once the characteristics of CSP are put forth, together with the bases in terms of which this discipline understands qualitative research, I shall make reference to a process of investigation which led to a process of intervention in the area of memories and memorials of the 1973 coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende and installed the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. The objective of this example is to show in a particular investigation in what way CSP has developed a form of qualitative research which seeks to promote the agency of social subjects, and how this research led to an intervention in the area of memories and memorials of this historical period. [10]

2. Characteristics of Critical Social Psychology

The first characteristic of critical social psychology is its radical nonconformity with the conventional perspectives of psychology and of the social sciences in general, whose objective has been the solution of individual and social problems through the application of diagnostics and techniques managed by specialists. On the contrary, CSP is, before anything else, a political practice, to the extent that its objective is to contribute to the critical analysis and transformation of social

reality, more than to its improvement. "We seek to produce problematizing debates that reflect on the kind of social reality that our practices construct, which implies generating new practices and, therefore, opening up new meanings, producing new realities" (PIPER, 2002, p.30). This political dimension of social psychology implies, on the one hand, breaking with the assumptions that form the basis for traditional psychology (IBÁÑEZ, 1994; PIPER, 2002), and also, on the other, supporting processes of emancipation and social transformation. For MARTÍN-BARÓ (1995), in the face of social psychology's traditional objective of understanding human behavior in order to predict and control it, a social psychology of liberation "should seek as its objective the possibility of social and individual freedom" (MARTÍN-BARÓ, 1995, p.48). In the terms of IÑIGUEZ (2002), this implies a social psychology that is at once critical and radical, where questioning of the forms of production of knowledge is accompanied by an emancipatory intention. For IÑIGUEZ (2002), CSP consists of two subcomponents that at times go hand-in-hand and, at others, are separate. The critical component emphasizes continuous questioning of the practices of knowledge production, while the radical component seeks transformations of the social order. [11]

A second constitutive characteristic of CSP is its movement away from viewing the individual as the explanatory center of the phenomena of social reality (FERNÁNDEZ, 1994; DOMÉNECH & IBÁÑEZ, 1998; PIPER, 2002). Traditionally, conventional psychology has considered that the individual's internal factors are what make it possible to comprehend and explain human behavior. One of these factors has been the relation with the environment, and specifically with other human beings. Nevertheless, this more social dimension to the study of human conduct has tended to assume that social relations are merely a sum of individual factors with no characteristics of their own. For CSP (FERNÁNDEZ, 1994; DOMÉNECH & IBÁÑEZ, 1998; PIPER, 2002) the social sphere is an entity that is inseparable from the individual, being constitutive of and constituted by individuals in dynamic and changing relations: "We think of persons and societies not as autonomously constructed beings, but as products of constitutive social relationships. Society materializes through individual practices, and individuals exist as social beings through the production of society" (PIPER, 2002, p.25). [12]

A third characteristic is CSP's breaking away from the epistemological foundations of scientific psychology, in terms of rejecting the idea of objectivity; that is, considering social reality as an entity independent of the knowledge that we have of it, and assuming that scientific knowledge is a representation of this reality, with a logic of correspondence between known object and knowledge of the object (IBÁÑEZ 1994). In contrast, CSP proposes a constructionist epistemology (IBÁÑEZ, 1994; DOMÉNECH & IBÁÑEZ, 1998; PIPER, 2002) in which knowledge of reality is an intersubjective and symbolic construction, but one which has truth effects. Social reality thus seen is made up of shared meanings that define it in a specific socio-historic context (JIMÉNEZ-DOMÍNGUEZ, 2000), but not in any homogeneous sense. Social reality is constituted in a multiplicity of meanings that interweave and create tension, generating a complex field characterized by discursive variability. [13]

The fourth characteristic is that, in methodological terms, the symbolic nature of social reality implies the use of qualitative methods to investigate it (IBÁÑEZ, 1994; DOMÉNECH & IBÁÑEZ, 1998; JIMÉNEZ-DOMÍNGUEZ, 2000), so long as "these permit attending to the intersubjective, situated and constructed meanings that arise in human interaction, thus avoiding all attempts to seek objective facts or laws that explain them" (DOMÉNECH & IBÁÑEZ, 1998, p.20). However, it is important to state that qualitative research methodologies don't form a homogeneous field, and in this regard we can single out the fact that the critical foci in qualitative research go beyond the acceptance of subscribing to the language of social research, common to all qualitative perspectives, in assuming that the research itself is an interpretive practice: "it is in the interpretive study of a specific problem that the investigator is responsible for the production of meaning" (JIMÉNEZ-DOMÍNGUEZ, 2000, p.1). What is sought is knowledge of the diverse interpretations that may exist in a social context, but with consideration of the fact that knowing is also an interpretation, although often interpretations within the domain of the sciences produce truth effects. As we said before, CSP should struggle against these effects of truth, promoting dialog more than absolute and definitive truths. As IBAÑEZ (1994) and DOMÉNECH and IBÁÑEZ (1998) proposed, this requires assuming relativism as a way to approach the phenomena of social reality; not a neutral relativism but rather a committed relativism, one that copes with the criteria that base its viewpoint. [14]

In synthesis, CSP can be characterized in the following way:

"[a] critical posture and commitment to change things, a practice destabilizing the relations of domination, denaturalizing, a psychology that does not solve problems in order to sustain the reigning social order but that creates them in order to subvert it, that does not change persons so they may adapt to the social system, but produces subjects desirous of transforming it. A practice that does not advocate the discovery of what we are, but rather its rejection" (PIPER, 2002, p.29). [15]

3. The Bases of Qualitative Research in Critical Social Psychology

3.1 Social constructionism

Any discussion of the bases of qualitative research presupposes certain assumptions of an ontological and epistemological type (VALLES, 1997) concerning the nature of social reality and how it is known. For those research methodologies based on modern rationality, reality has been conceived as a natural reality, which implies that the latter exists before becoming known, and not only is independent of human beings but also precedes them.

"There is reality and there was reality before there were human beings. This is something more than a 'conviction' or a fact. It is—no more and no less—the conceptual structure of our actions. We act as if it were certain" (PÉREZ, 1998, p.222). [16]

From this perspective, what is real is nature, that is to say, all the objects (and the subjects) of the world are natural inasmuch as they are governed by certain continuities and regularities which are conceptualized as laws. "The belief in regularity is what gives meaning to the attempt to seek laws, or to make predictions" (PÉREZ, 1998, p.219). From the vantage point of this naturalistic realism, an ontological equivalence is also assumed between the reality of nature and social reality. The human world, like the natural world, is ruled by certain laws that regulate human behavior. In PIPER's (2002) terms, this naturalistic realism in social psychology has implied conceiving "persons and societies as natural entities, i.e., possessors of a certain nature that has laws which can be known and controlled" (PIPER, 2002, p.27). [17]

In opposition to this conception, CSP has assumed a constructionist perspective. A common interpretation has been to understand that what is constructed is not reality itself, but knowledge of it, assuming therefore that reality pre-exists the act of knowing it (PÉREZ, 1998, PIPER, 2002). For CSP, it is not enough to consider knowledge as socially constructed, but also that reality itself is a construction, assuming "a radical critique of the essentialist assumption that maintains that reality exists just as it is, independent of the action and knowledge of human beings" (SANDOVAL, 2004, p.112). In terms of the distinction proposed by VALLES (1997), this perspective assumes a constructionist dimension, both at the ontological and the epistemological level, in which reality and its knowledge are not separated. In this sense, the following is established:

"the relationship of interdependence that exists between the epistemological and ontological levels of analysis is founded on the theoretical assertion that the multiple processes of knowledge that mediate between us and what we call reality intervene performatively in the very status that reality acquires" (SANDOVAL, 2004, p.112). [18]

From the vantage point of CSP, qualitative research assumes that social reality is a historical and symbolic construction (IBÁÑEZ, 1994; DOMÉNECH & IBÁÑEZ, 1998), and therefore "there is nothing intrinsic in the object that may define its essential existence. On the contrary, its nature is inevitably bound to a type of symbolically mediated and spatio-temporally situated relationship, which confers upon it its meaning and existence" (SANDOVAL, 2004, p.112). In this sense, social reality is historical inasmuch as it is produced by human action itself, but history is not related exclusively to the temporal dimension of societies, but also assumes that the social is not a product of something external. This implies the recognition of human agency in the construction of social reality:

"The recognition of behavior's intentional character outlined in this way a concept of the human being as an agent capable of constituting himself as a source of ultimate self-determination of his own conduct; that is, capable of self-directing his actions, based on internally-elaborated decisions" (IBÁÑEZ, 1994, p.232). [19]

With respect to the symbolic character of social reality, it is assumed that the constitution of the social is always a construction inscribed in a weave of meanings that give it sense. Reality can never be known independently of our

mode of access to it, which is, precisely, language. "The social does not appear until the moment when it constituted itself in a world of meanings shared among various persons" (IBÁÑEZ, 1994, p.227). In this sense, though reality is indeed understood as symbolic, this dimension of meaning does not imply that the meanings thus defined as individual in character. Meanings are the dynamic result of social relationships, at the same time that these revert back on themselves, dynamizing and transforming them, which implies that the social "is precisely located among people, that is to say, in the space of meanings that they participate in or that they construct together" (IBÁÑEZ, 1994, p.227). Nonetheless, the idea of construction does not imply that reality is a uniform consensus of social agents; but, rather, a warp and weft of points of view, of interpretations, which cross and interrelate, permanently recreating the field of meaning in a social context. [20]

Intersubjectivity is in this sense a vision of the world that is neither fully subjective (each individual sees it as they wish to) nor fully objective (reality as independent of subjects), but "that rules as objective for more than one subjectivity" (FERNÁNDEZ, 1994, p.166). It is precisely this dimension that qualitative research seeks to approach:

"qualitative methods start from the basic supposition that the social world is built out of meanings and symbols. Thus it follows that intersubjectivity should be a key element of qualitative research and a point of departure to reflexively grasp social meanings" (JIMÉNEZ-DOMÍNGUEZ, 2000, p.1). [21]

3.2 Interpretation and situated knowledge

One of the consequences of the idea of social constructionism is that social research is not a process of representation of a reality that pre-exists, but rather ought to be considered as a process that participates in the construction of social reality, since it produces an interpretation that has effects on this reality—effects of its reproduction or transformation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to explain that interpretation in qualitative research is an interpretation of interpretations, to the extent that it gathers together the points of view of the diverse social actors who participate in the construction of their social reality. [22]

In this respect, it is assumed that knowledge is always of an interpretative type, that is to say, that it develops from and is grounded in a particular position, which enables and at the same time constrains a certain vision of reality. As maintained by ALONSO (1998), interpretation is not an attempt to translate reality, to give an account of it in an objective way; rather, on the contrary:

"it tries to discover, in the most complete way possible, the framework of meanings that reconstructs a reality in which the investigator, in a manner coherent with his/her project (specific objectives, action contexts and social position) encounters meaning as an interpreter" (ALONSO, 1998, p.222). [23]

Likewise, in much of the process of interpretation of social reality, the investigation is always situated, i.e., it is developed by someone in a particular position, which in turn makes it possible at the same time for the knowledge that is produced to be restricted. This speaks to us of the situated character of knowledge. As a process that is effected from a place—that of the investigator—interpretation "is socially and politically situated action" (ALONSO, 1998, p.224), which leads to the need to make explicit the bases of this position and the analysis of its consequences for the investigative process itself and for the social reality. Nevertheless, this positioning should not lead to an absolute hegemony of the investigator's vision, but should anchor itself in a dialogical perspective that seeks to gather together the diverse perspectives of the social actors in order to contrast them with one's own look, not so much to produce a consensus about the social reality in question, but rather to establish the fields of meaning that define it and imbue it with tension. [24]

Being of an interpretative type, the knowledge produced in the research also has political implications, creating tension in the social reality in order to maintain it as it is or to promote its transformation, and so the research needs to explicate the position from which one investigates and critically reflect on the consequences for the reality studied. [25]

3.3 Reflexivity

In opposition to the idea of the objectivity and neutrality of knowledge, qualitative research proposes the idea of reflexivity (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 1994; IBÁÑEZ, 1994; PARKER 2004). Assuming that research is a situated process that produces knowledge anchored to a particular position, it becomes necessary to explicate the conditions that the researcher's place imposes on the investigation. "Reflexivity implies that the orientations of investigators can acquire form through their socio-historical location, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them" (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 1994, p.31). This implies that research is always an interpretative process that requires making visible the conditions which permit certain interpretations and not others.

"Research is always carried out from a particular position, and the pretence of neutrality in many quantitative studies of psychology is false. Therefore, it is always worthwhile to consider the 'investigator's position', as much in reference to the definition of the problem to be studied as with respect to the form in which the investigator interacts with the material in order to generate a particular species of meaning" (PARKER, 2004, p.27). [26]

But reflexivity does not only refer to analyzing critically the investigator's place and how this position constrains and at the same time enables his or her gaze. It also implies evaluating the effects of the research on social reality. Research always reverts back to the social, whether the investigators are conscious of this or not. Therefore, to the extent that research has political and practical consequences which are never neutral, reflexivity obliges the investigator to

assume responsibility for the commitments that orient his or her work (IBÁÑEZ, 1994). [27]

In consideration of these proposals in relation to reflexivity, qualitative research should not be understood as an attempt to reflect reality in the most objective terms possible, but rather as the production of a set of interpretations that seek to render a phenomenon intelligible. In this sense there is a movement away from the aspiration to show "reality itself," in order to place the investigator and their interpretations as the axes of the investigation, so as to support the vision/version that is proposed. The interpretative character of the research implies that it should distance itself from the positivist style, in third person, written from no place and by no one, as if reality were giving an account of itself. As we abandon the representationalist illusion in order to take up research as a discursive construction that proposes a particular interpretation of the social reality under study, we find ourselves obliged as researchers to take responsibility for this construction. In the words of FERNÁNDEZ (1994, p.293), we should try to propose to the reader a version of the reality under study,

"without pretensions to certainty, only with aspirations to argumentative verisimilitude, the resulting comprehension of which becomes known only when its reception is gauged by an interlocutor, and whose topic is never exhausted, because something more can always be said—something different with respect to it." [28]

From this point of view, this construction is built through a narration, through which the investigator elaborates a comprehensive text of the phenomena of which he seeks to give an account. "No action or event has a significance independent of the one who observes and selects it, and thus the determining elements of an action's meaning require the researcher's fundamental participation in its intelligible construction" (ALONSO, 1998, p.223). We must understand narration not as a transparent medium of communication, but as a descriptive and analytical tool, as an intellectual labor in which the researcher seeks to produce an interpretive version of the reality studied. To the extent that reality and its phenomena are by definition dynamic, the accounting requires a narrative character whose axis is not reality itself (or, at least, not in a naturalistic sense), but the grounding of the vision/version that is posited. All writing has a style, a form of presenting its content. In constructing any narrative:

"the form in which the text is subdivided, the terms selected, the titles chosen, the metaphors developed, the tone with which critiques are made, the examples added, the linguistic and scientific transgressions that are allowed, and so on, appear to add nothing to the content of the message; however, taken as a whole—reservedly, between the lines, without warning—they form a series of unspoken images, not put into words, not objectively present in the discourse, in the interlocutor (interpreter of texts)" (FERNÁNDEZ, 1994, p.289). [29]

Frequently, concerns of style have been left aside in favor of reality itself. In the case of the style of an interpretive account, this must be of an evocative character (GEERTZ, 1989). "Interpretation is not verifiable but, instead, is acceptable by

virtue of its coherence, persuasiveness, argumentation. Interpretation attempts to comprehend, and to comprehend is "to see," and, after having seen, it does not try to explain, which would be to transmit what was seen, but, rather, to make [others] comprehend, "to make [them] see" (FERNÁNDEZ, 1994, p.118). The point lies in what GEERTZ (1989) calls the author's problematic. This problematic situates the ethnographic text in the tension between relating things just as they are (absence of the author) or just as we want to see them (saturation of the author's presence). This tension

"simultaneously demands the lofty attitude of the non-authorial physicist and the sovereign self-consciousness of the hyper-authorial novelist, without falling into either of the two extremes. The first may provoke accusations of insensitivity, of treating people as objects, of listening to the words but not to the music, and, of course, of ethnocentrism. The second provokes accusations of impressionism, of treating people as puppets, of hearing music that doesn't exist, and, of course, also of ethnocentrism" (GEERTZ, 1989, p.20). [30]

In as much as we abandon the representationalist illusion of qualitative research to adopt it as a discursive construction that seeks to persuade through evocation, we find ourselves obliged as investigators/authors to take responsibility for this construction. [31]

3.4 Transdisciplinarity and the political dimension of qualitative research

To the extent that CSP defines itself in a critique of the traditional proposals of science, it also defines itself as being in opposition to the disciplinary segmentation of knowledge, wherein reality is fragmented among specialized ways of knowing. Nevertheless, neither does CSP subscribe to interdisciplinarity, which, although it assumes the complementarity of the sciences, continues to maintain the idea of the subdividing of knowledge. "It does not gather together the hybrid wealth of psychology as critique and require its substitution by transdisciplinarity—in other words, the same surpassing of the compartmentalization of knowledge in disciplines" (DOMÉNECH & IBÁÑEZ, 1998). In this sense, CSP—and, therefore, its way of understanding qualitative research—subscribe to the idea of transdisciplinarity, i.e., opposing the idea of a content that is specific and proper to social psychology, in order to replace it with a grasp of "complete reality, even when this comprehension may overlap with other disciplines, even to the degree of trying to build the knowledge of other disciplines" (FERNÁNDEZ, 2004, p.301). [32]

This form of understanding transdisciplinarity tends toward de-disciplinarization; that is, the dissolution of the divisions among the sciences, so as to establish a point of view on reality, more than to define a set of phenomena to study (FERNÁNDEZ, 1994), so as to elaborate theories "that question the dominant assumptions of the culture and that foster the reconsidering of all that is presented as evident, thus generating new alternatives for social action" (DOMÉNECH & IBÁÑEZ, 1998, p.21). In this sense, transdisciplinarity is not only an epistemological matter but a political one as well, since what it seeks is the

elaboration of problematic ways of knowing reality, with an orientation toward critique and transformation. [33]

For JIMÉNEZ-DOMÍNGUEZ (2000, p.15), "the qualitative researcher is involved in social life, and for this reason must assume his role as a cultural critic." Nevertheless, cultural criticism does not seem to be a sufficient mode of action in relation to the reality of today's societies, particularly considering the powerful transformations that globalized neoliberalism has been imposing. As ZEMELMAN (2000) maintains, the ethical and political responsibility of the social sciences in general, and of qualitative research in particular, is to contribute to the production of critical thought that constitutes itself in a form of resistance to the dominant discourses that naturalize and justify the current social order.

"The present situation in Latin America, apparently without any other way out than savage capitalism, obliges one to work profoundly for alternatives that break the dominant hegemonic discourse, which, disguised in the language of technology, presumes to be inevitable and exclusive" (ZEMELMAN, 2000, p.1). [34]

In accord with the foregoing, although from another point of view, DENZIN and LINCOLN (2000, p.3) maintain that the present moment of qualitative research "demands that the social sciences and the humanities become places of critical conversation about democracy, race, gender, class, nation state, globalization, freedom and community." [35]

But the present context of globalized neoliberalism and its consequences is not the only element that defines the social problematics that confront our country. Up to the present day the effects of the military dictatorship continue to be felt in Chilean society, particularly those violations of human rights by diverse state apparatuses attempting to repress and eliminate the opposition to Augusto Pinochet's military government. Nevertheless, in regard to this issue, today we live in a state of tension between silence and memory. On the one hand, the communications media and the majority of the political parties wish to put behind them the military dictatorship and its consequences by ceasing to speak of these facts, or at the most, referring to that period as being part of a past that has already had its day, without much influence on the present. On the other hand, there is an entire sector of society that seeks to keep the memory of those years alive, vindicating a posture of promoting truth and justice in relation to the human rights violations occurring during that period. This position is expressed in diverse ways, but without any doubt its most important expression is the commemoration of the coup held every September 11th in the city of Santiago. [36]

4. The Experience of the "Marcha Rearme" [Rearming March]¹

Considering the above elements, I shall now refer to an experience of research concerning this commemoration, one which led to a process of action relative to the practices of memories of the coup and the military dictatorship. The purpose of reviewing this experience is to exemplify the development of CSP in concrete practices of research and intervention. In the first place, this intervention was the result of a process of qualitative research that, on the basis of its own reflexivity, led not only to the evaluation of its effects on the reality that was studied, but also intervened in this reality, articulating academics with politics. Secondly, because this process of research and intervention was characterized by a disciplinary transversality that hybridized the social sciences with cultural criticism and art, in the field of the politics of memory in our country. Finally, in the third place, because an attempt was made to consider the vision of the social actors, at first through the investigation and later through the joint work of organizing and implementing action. [37]

Within the framework of the research program "Social Memories and Collective Identities" of the Masters Program in Social Psychology of Universidad ARCIS², in 2004 we set ourselves the objective of investigating, among other elements, memories of the dictatorship and specifically the principal commemoration of the September 11, 1973 coup d'état (FERNÁNDEZ DROGUETT, 2006). This is a demonstration which begins in the center of the city and moves toward the General Cemetery, where the Memorial to the Disappeared Detainees and the Executed Political Prisoners is located. The Memorial is an imposing marble structure on which are inscribed the names of executed political prisoners and disappeared detainees during the military dictatorship. This is where the main commemorative September 11 rally is held, and where clashes frequently take place between demonstrators and police. [38]

The method used for this research was autoethnography (ALVESSON, 1999; HOLT, 2003; ESTEBAN, 2004), starting from the fact that my position as researcher overlapped with my position as a social actor, because of my participation in previous marches and my having been a member of groups linked to the field of political action. For ALVESSON (1999, p.8), autoethnography is "the study and text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural context in which he/she is an active participant, more-or-less in the same terms as other participants." In this sense, autoethnography can be understood as a method that, as both process and product of research, is characterized by the hybridization of the place of the researcher and that of what is researched. The researcher, being a social actor of the field that he/she studies, is simultaneously an informant, which in practical terms avoids the problems of participant observation, which requires the researcher's gradual and often times incomplete insertion into a social and cultural context alien to them. For ESTEBAN (2004),

1 "Armar" means both to arm with a weapon and to assemble or put together.

2 This program consists of the research work of Isabel Piper, Roberto FERNÁNDEZ, Marcia ESCOBAR and María José REYES, and receives the support of Research Assistant Evelyn HEVIA.

this form of research implies salvaging the cultural and political dimension of one's own experience, connecting the individual and the local with the collective and the global, despite the reticent postures of those who consider this method to be excessively self-indulgent, introspective, individualistic and narcissistic (HOLT, 2003). These criticisms of autoethnography as excessively personalized and centered on experience are part of the paternalism and moralism of certain perspectives in the social sciences, which dictate what is considered to be an adequate interpretation of the facts and what can and cannot be recounted. On the contrary, this author maintains that "in autoethnography, informant and researcher [fused] in one and the same person vindicate their right to speak, until the ultimate consequences" (ESTEBAN, 2003, p.21). [39]

According to DENZIN and LINCOLN (2000), the emergence of these perspectives is part of the crisis of representation of the traditional forms of research, those that sought to objectively render an account of a reality, independent of the researcher's look. This concept is displaced by a comprehension of the research process that considers it as being the production of one version of the social reality. [40]

The option of using the autoethnographic method was based on my prior relationship with the field of study. I have been participating in this and other commemorations of September 11 for a long time, and in diverse groups and organizations that form this context. My recognition of this personal dimension in the research is what led me to use a methodology that allows overlap between the traditionally separated places of the researcher and what is researched, between the subject and object of study.

"In this sense, autoethnography allows me to move away from the exclusivity of the traditional ethnography of being there (Geertz 1989); that is, to shift towards a field of study that is foreign and different from one's own in order to know it, to focus attention on "being here," in the field where the researcher is a social actor who investigates their own social context, observing it and at the same time observing themselves, diluting the epistemological separation between subject/researcher and object/social actor" (FERNÁNDEZ DROGUETT, 2006, p.9). [41]

In the results of the research, my aim was to understand the commemoration as a ritual that symbolically reproduced what I termed "the historical route of defeat."

"The march, upon repeating every year the route that goes from La Moneda up to the Cemetery, traces once again the historical route of defeat. In symbolic terms, it repeats the overthrow of the forces of transformation in Chilean society, symbolized by the bombing of La Moneda and the death of President Salvador Allende, as well as the fate of the fallen during the military coup which, ending in death, are represented by the Memorial and its location in the Cemetery" (FERNÁNDEZ DROGUETT, 2006, p.77). [42]

For the last fifteen years, since the return of democracy in 1990, this march has been held more or less in the same way. At the beginning, it was full of meaning

in relation to the context of transition to democratic normalcy—it was necessary to make it visible in society that, in effect, human rights had been violated during the dictatorship, and the best way to do this was to go to the place where the human remains of disappeared detainees had been found. However, through all these years there have been different acknowledgments on the part of all the social sectors involved—the state, political parties of the entire ideological spectrum, the armed forces, etc. In the current context, while acknowledgment exists, the problematic has changed, as the silencing of the past has become the central element. The analysis of the march as "the route of defeat" implies that ending the march in the cemetery, backs turned to the public space, only reinforces this silencing. The march is no longer a news item in the media. All that is reported are possible clashes between the police and the demonstrators, transforming the little that is known about the commemoration into a police event. [43]

Although the institutionalization of memory in a specific form (in this case, the form of defeat) is a constitutive part of the tensions established by any commemoration, this does not constitute a natural or mandatory dimension of these practices. This creates an opening for thinking of other forms of commemoration, which would build other versions and produce other effects (VÁZQUEZ, 2001; VÁZQUEZ & MUÑOZ, 2003). In this sense, on the basis of the analysis carried out, we decided to develop a process of intervention that would succeed in establishing a different kind of commemoration for September 11, 2005. [44]

In our process of reflection we considered that our main criticism of the march, as it had been conducted until then, was its culmination in the Cemetery, thus repeating the symbolic route of historical defeat. We therefore resolved that our main interest was to leave the Cemetery and return to the center of the city, coining the idea of a march "in reverse." Nevertheless, we knew that a small group of academics would not be able to carry out a project of this nature without support, and so we began to establish contacts with various social actors who might be interested in participating in the initiative—artists and human rights organizations. Clearly not just any artist would take an interest in this initiative, and so we contacted those known for their interventions in the public space, especially during the dictatorship. We succeeded in recruiting several, and together with others who began to join this project, we decided to create an independent working collective, separate from the research program, that could devote itself exclusively to the organization and development of the "reverse march." This was the beginning of a joint effort in which the diverse perspectives of academics and political and artistic groups converged in a productive way, although not without conflict. [45]

We were aware, however, that the concept of a "march in reverse" was too broad and imprecise for us to move ahead with our contacts, above all with the human rights groups. Long discussions were held concerning a concept that would be more adequate, and the idea emerged of a "rearming march" (known in Chile as "MarchaRearme"). Through this concept we sought to express the idea of re-assembling the forms of remembering, but also the re-arming of dreams, of

ideals, of the occupation of public spaces. It also was a way to reflect on the central action, which would constitute the backbone of the return march to the center of the city: the re-assembling of a representation of the Memorial in front of La Moneda presidential palace. This representation consisted of a gigantic photograph of the Memorial, divided into 64 pieces. The idea was to reunite all those involved at the Cemetery after they marched, distribute the pieces of the reproduction of the memorial among the marchers, and head back downtown in order to reassemble the pieces in front of the Moneda Palace. [46]

We began to publicize the idea through various contacts, and above all through our [webpage](#). In this part of the process, we made contact with other organizations having a evaluation of the march similar to our own. After an arduous and complex process of coming to agreement and coordinating our interests, we achieved agreement on the plan for the activity. [47]

On Sunday September 11, 2005, we arrived around 10:00 a.m. at the Memorial in the cemetery. We took part in the rally which culminated in the traditional march, and then headed for Allende's tomb, which was the starting point of our activity. Close to a hundred people were with us and several hundred more joined us at the tomb. We began the activity by showing the pieces of the picture and a brief explanation of the route. Then we started back for the center of the city, in a march that gathered close to a thousand people. [48]

From the moment we left the cemetery we were harassed by police, in spite of behaving in a manner which observed "public order." During the trip we had to detour many times because of barriers set up by special police units, whose attitude toward us was clearly hostile. A few blocks away from the Moneda Palace, in the central square called Plaza de Armas, and without any provocation whatsoever on the part of the marchers, we began to be violently repressed and dispersed with water cannon, tear gas, police charges, and arrests. In the face of such a heavy deployment of police forces we found ourselves unable to reach our objective, which was the Moneda Palace, and so we decided to regroup the memorial march a few blocks from there, in front of the main building of the University of Chile's Main Campus. We had succeeded in installing the majority of the pieces when we were violently and finally dispersed by the police, with in the end a total of over thirty people arrested. [49]

Despite this abrupt finale, we consider this intervention a success in several respects. The mere fact of having carried out the march and having gathered such a large number of people makes it possible to judge this initiative as meaningful, as uniting the perceptions of diverse sectors who were dissatisfied with the way the commemoration had been carried out in recent years. As the organizers, we had the feeling that we had established the possibility of commemorating in a different way—de-naturalizing the traditional form of commemorating that day and establishing the possibility of doing it again differently. We always thought that the most important impact of the March would become clear with the passage of time, and next September 11, in 2006 we will see

whether the idea is used again or not. We have received information that diverse political and human rights groups are considering continuing the initiative. [50]

5. By Way of a Conclusion

In this text I have attempted to give an account of the bases of critical social psychology in Chile and of its relationship to qualitative research, illustrating how the latter is shaped in a process of investigation and intervention in the field of memories of the Chilean military coup and dictatorship. I consider this process of intervention to be an important move forward in terms of ending the separation between the academic world and larger society, and of establishing what CANALES (1995) calls the reversibility of observer and observed. [51]

As was pointed out at the beginning, qualitative research in Chile has moved between two poles: criticism and political positioning, on the one hand, and institutionalization and normativization on the other. From CSP we have realized such efforts as the "Rearming March," in order to maintain a qualitative research that is critical of the traditional forms of research in the social sciences, promoting investigation that is situated in and committed to our country's social, cultural and political processes, and without losing sight of the need to question and problematize our own practices and their effects, above all in terms of the reproduction or transformation of social reality. [52]

This process of intervention around the 2005 march produces a type of recursive closure to the autoethnography that gave rise to it. I decided to start from my own experience as a social actor in the context in question, and this research culminated in a new form of action. At the risk of appearing to be overly self-satisfied, I believe this double turn—from action to research and from there to action in a new form—allows one to think of autoethnography as an adequate methodological tool for hybridizing the fruit of academics with that of political action. However, this method requires questioning and permanent problematization, so as not to offer a mere portrait of the researcher. Even more, considering the tendency of psychology to psychologize not just its objects of study but researchers themselves, understanding psychologization as the reduction of social phenomena to a strictly psychological dimension, where they are understood as the correlates of individual processes of an internal type. [53]

I have attempted to give an account of one way of understanding qualitative research that subscribes to this explicitly political perspective, whose principal objective is to contribute to the generation of actions that are transformative of social reality. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the proposals expounded here leave unanswered various questions that require broader debate, particularly concerning the status of the social actors in qualitative research, where tension exists between locating them as fundamental axes for the comprehension of the reality that is studied, and converting them into mere informants with relatively little influence over the interpretations that the research may develop. Another point that remains open for discussion is the researcher's place in relation to his/her epistemological position. Some will defend the idea that the boundary

between the researcher's place and that of the object of research must be maintained, so that scientific knowledge will continue to be a social practice that is differentiated from activism and political action. Others will defend the idea that this distinction is artificial and nothing more than an assumption—itself political—that one should avoid involvement in social and political processes. From the former posture, commitment to these processes becomes an ethical duty—there is no reason for the academic and political spheres to be mutually exclusive. An interesting example of this has been militant or activist research (VERGER, 2005). This approach posits generating knowledge from the actors who play a central role in the practices to be studied, with the aim of creating mechanisms that promote these actors' empowerment and autonomy, so that they are transformed into complete subjects of study, thereby abandoning the traditional concept of objects of study. In its relationship to the academic world, this type of investigation would imply questioning the normative requirements of traditional research, so as to generate articulations between academic practices and those of the actors in question. [54]

As IBÁÑEZ (1994) maintains, when we move away from the objectivist aims of knowledge and come to terms with the fact that knowledge always implies the a certain point of view that has specific effects on social reality, we find ourselves obligated to choose the kind of knowledge we want to produce:

"an authoritarian kind of knowledge, alienating, normalizing, that goes on to become part of the multiple devices of domination that straitjacket people, or—conversely—a libertarian kind of knowledge, emancipating, that makes its modest contribution to people's struggle against domination" (IBÁÑEZ, 1994, p.278). [55]

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