

# Qualitative versus Quantitative? Why are these two approaches relevant to understand homelessness?

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## **Introduction**

As a sociologist and a member of the Survey department of the National Institute for Demographic Studies, I have taken part over the past ten years in a number of studies related to homelessness, working with teams differing both in approach and background including demographers, statisticians, psychiatrists (clinicians and epidemiologists), sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists.

In the case of qualitative research, I used the results of statistical surveys to probe; I re-employed wordings from questionnaires while conducting semi-structured interviews, and considered the effect of institutions on the everyday life of individuals and on their actions. In the case of quantitative surveys, I have been a participative observer in order to acquire a closer understanding of individual and institutional practices and logic, taking field notes, co-operating for the drafting of guides and carrying out semi-structured interviews aimed at refining the analyses of results.

In every case, together with researchers, engineers, technicians and interviewers, I considered issues relating to legitimacy and ethics, to interviewer/respondent relationships, and the relevance of the questions to the situations experienced by those involved, and their consequences.

These experiences led me to question, the legitimacy of the still discernable rivalry between supporters of the qualitative and supporters of the quantitative.

As a reminder, there would be a so-called quantitative approach, being unable to explain or understand the world except through numbers and mathematical theories in which objectivity is taken for granted. This approach is associated with the "exact" or "pure" sciences in which everything that cannot be validated by a model does not exist. The power of mathematical proof... In this framework, individuals and actual experiences only exist through statistical categories. Individual behaviour, statistically insignificant, would then be disregarded or even ignored as. Opposing these mathematicians is another approach termed "qualitative", based upon interpretation grids generated from "comprehensive" sociology or from psychology. Its concern is with individuals in terms of their actions, and consequently, the logic that guides them. Number, in this category, does not exist, since the concern is with individual history and the interactions between individuals. We are then back to the old story about the "parts" and the "whole" which is not made of the sum of the parts.

Beyond this somehow simple caricature, other elements should be taken into account. Among these, the type of questions explored through each method and therefore, the answers provided, is central. Very closely linked to this question, the financial and institutional means that are available to the teams<sup>1</sup>, is another important issue. In Hungary, no quantitative studies having ever been conducted under the preceding regime, a strong demand for his type of studies was done in the 90's by the political and social fields<sup>2</sup>. Despite the lack of financial means, a few qualitative studies have been conducted in the 80's and are now being done but the political demand mainly concerns statistical data like the number of homeless, demographic features, the use of homeless institutions, etc. The demand from the social services, which conduct most of the research, was on very practical data like

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<sup>1</sup> Marpsat M, 2005, *The problem of definitions: Points of similarity and differences*, CUHP Brussels Conference: [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

<sup>2</sup> Somogyi E., Tosics I., 2004, *Qualitative research on homelessness in Hungary*, CUHP London workshop, [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

the way homeless used the services, what kind of people used the shelters, and what was their demand towards the institutions. Although these questions could have been the subject of a qualitative research (as it deals with the logic as well as with the meaning given to the action), quantitative studies, containing all these questionings, have been financed and conducted.

Moreover, knowing the reasons why a researcher chooses homelessness as a topic of research surely tell us more about the questions being asked than does the method employed to answer them.

Both approaches are now more frequently used in the course of the same research. For its study on "The Family Background of Young Homeless People", the English team<sup>3</sup> conducted a survey integrating the two methods. In Hungary, a similar project was done in 2001 which unfortunately never took place<sup>4</sup>. Results may also be compared and contrasted, as did Maryse Marpsat, whose book was written in collaboration with Albert Vanderburg, a homeless American net-surfer<sup>5</sup>. It is then no longer a question of different but of complementary views. Knowledge of a population is refined by the study of one of its subsets, and conversely, the understanding of an individual's practices is clarified through the practices of the group to which he belongs. The CUHP, European research network on the homeless, which includes researchers from both schools, is an example of this evolution in the perception and utilisation of these methods.

Through a brief description of the different stages and some of the issues raised during a research programme, I will now identify some answers that can be provided through the association of the two methods.

- **Constructing the problematic**

Whether the method is qualitative or quantitative, the world being observed is a world to be discovered, and the problem is always stated in relation to a norm to which the researcher belongs: having a home. Questioning one's own representations on the population to be studied is one of the basic conditions of the research. The construction of the research objective and the definition of the field must take into account results from exploratory interviews, but also results from other studies, whether qualitative or quantitative, and the context in which these studies have been realized must not be ignored. This is what shows a review of the bibliography provided by members of the network.

Moreover, qualitative or quantitative surveys and studies already carried out on similar issues, like the conditions of access to employment and housing, the politics toward immigrants and asylum seekers, the evolution of family structures, as well as the consequences of political decisions relating to psychiatric care, cannot be ignored.

- **The theoretical framework**

The theory upon which the researcher bases his work will guide his perception and the questions he asks. Differences which emerged from discussions within the network on how to allow for the socio-economic context show that the affiliation of the teams to theories is not connected to the type of method employed, but strongly linked to the researchers and to the way in which they perceive the social world.

For example, French and Spanish quantitative surveys rely on different interpretation grids. One (Spanish) is individual<sup>6</sup> and rests upon a psychiatric diagnostic instrument validated by the international community. The other (French) emphasizes the effects of the structures and context, and is based on the concept of social capital<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, Italian biographical surveys are based upon

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<sup>3</sup> Smith J., Ravenhill M., 2004 *Undertaking qualitative research amongst homeless people in the UK – contrasting approaches* CUHP London workshop: [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

<sup>4</sup> Somogyi E., Tosics I., 2004, *Qualitative research on homelessness in Hungary*, CUHP London workshop, [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

<sup>5</sup> Marpsat M., Vanderburgh A. 2004. *Le monde d'Albert La Panthère. Cybernaute et sans domicile à Honolulu*. Paris: Bréal.

<sup>6</sup> Muñoz M., Vázquez C., Panadero S., Vázquez J.J., 2003: *Psychosocial Assessment Instruments in Point-in-time Surveys*, CUHP Madrid workshop: [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

<sup>7</sup> Firdion J.M., 2005: *A "capital" and "social field" approach*, CUHP Milan workshop : [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

theories of exclusion, taking account of structural and individual factors<sup>8</sup>. The Dutch<sup>9</sup> and Danish<sup>10</sup> studies are closer to an individual framework that claims its origins in the interactionist and ethnomethodologist schools.

- **Observation and closeness to the field**

The difference between the two methods would then depend upon the proximity of the researcher to his field of research. Whereas in statistical surveys field contact is often considered to be the domain of the interviewers, in qualitative research, observation of the persons and their environment by the research team, plays an important role.

In an article on the complementary contributions of the two methods<sup>11</sup>, Maryse Marpsat describes the different stages of the surveys carried out by INED on homeless people from 1995 to 1998. This type of operation was repeated in the 2002 survey on the people encountered by the outreach services. The way the survey was perceived by homeless people, the organisation of data collection, and the duration and conditions of the interview were tested by the INED team while following the outreach services. Team members came face to face with a reality which was, until then, little or completely unknown. This experience was really precious for the pursuit and completion of the survey<sup>12</sup>. Given, for example, the state of exhaustion of some of the people we met, the locations of the interviews, the presence of other homeless persons, or the fact that we were depending on outreach teams, the questionnaire had to be completed within 20 minutes. In addition, the respondents in preceding surveys could benefit from the presence of social workers or psychologists after the interview, in this particular survey they ended up alone. Consequently, issues of a more sensitive nature, such as those concerning childhood and family, were not raised and questioning had to be limited to the specific questions set out for this research, such as : did these persons frequent other services intended for the homeless?

This period of observation also enabled us to understand and grasp the various strategies employed to adapt to the life of a "rough sleeper". For example, some older homeless people refused to enter an emergency shelter they had often used before its renovation. This shelter is now also frequented by a younger population, recently homeless or homeless as a result of being an illegal immigrant, and, sometimes, having a regular job. Older people therefore feel threatened because they are rejected by those who do not wish to be associated with "tramps".

- Technique and medium used for interviewing people

Another important factor differentiating the two approaches is the technique used for conducting interviews. The quantitative method often relies on professional interviewers to administer questionnaires. They are often comprising closed questions that only allow pre-defined responses. The qualitative method is based on a sometimes non-structured, and often semi-structured technique. During these semi-structured interviews, researchers follow a guide that they have prepared in advance, and which includes all the topics that they wish to cover. This technique enables, and even encourages, a free, spontaneous response, and therefore reveals the behaviour, attitudes and reasoning of the individuals being interviewed.

The standardised questionnaire used in quantitative surveys, long considered to be ill-adapted to the populations under study, now frequently includes a qualitative phase. The questions are piloted,

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<sup>8</sup> Tosi A., Torri R., 2004: *Marginalisation as a process and the biographical approach*. CUHP London workshop: [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

<sup>9</sup> Van Doorn L., 2004: *The newly homeless and the first days on the street*, CUHP London workshop: [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

<sup>10</sup> Stax T. B., 2004: *Observing the doing of Social Work with Homeless People* CUHP London workshop: [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

<sup>11</sup> Marpsat M., 2001: «Problems in Comparative and Triangulated Homelessness Research», *BMS, Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, n°71, juillet 2001, p. 5-57.

<sup>12</sup> Marpsat M., Quaglia M., Razafindratsima N. 2002 : «Etude des marges de l'enquête INSEE 2001 : le cas des personnes sans domicile n'utilisant pas les services d'hébergement et de restauration» [Study of the margins of the INSEE 2001 survey: the case of homeless people not using accommodation and food programs] (Report for the Observatoire National de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion sociale). Paris: INED

situations are explored, thus enabling wording to be revised and poor descriptions within the questionnaire to be corrected.

During preparation of the national survey carried out by INSEE in 2001<sup>13</sup>, a questionnaire was piloted in collaboration with a sociologist specialised in qualitative studies. For my part, this test entailed conducting interviews with persons encountered in various types of social services and in the street. After each interview, my colleague offered to meet the respondent again for a “more informal” discussion. This mini-test, carried out with 15 people, revealed which questions had not been clearly understood and consequently needed to be improved. Thus, for example, one possible answer to the question “Have you (in the past) worked for at least six months in succession?” was: “Yes, and you lost this job”. As the interviews revealed the negative connotation of the wording (placing the responsibility on the persons concerned for being unable to hold on to their job), the wording was changed to: “Yes, this is a job that you held in the past”. Similarly, a certain number of people apparently did not understand the meaning of “compelled” in the question: “Will you be compelled to leave this place?” It was reformulated as: “Will you have to leave this place?”

During the tests preceding the surveys, every page of the questionnaire comes with a blank page on which the interviewer is asked to note any remarks made by the respondents, or by himself should he consider a question to be badly formulated or misunderstood. Alongside this space reserved for observations, the final meetings with interviewers provide another opportunity to review the wording of the questions, to test their suitability and to reorganise parts of the questionnaire. One example of the decisions taken at these meetings was to end on a more open section, in which respondents are encouraged to comment on the questionnaire and to add information that they consider important for shedding light on their situation.

- Interview conditions: introducing oneself, social proximity to the respondent... Between a social science researcher and a professional interviewer....

Conducting interviews, whether in the form of a questionnaire or of a free interview, is subject to various conditions that are common, once again, to both approaches. Pierre Bourdieu, in “La misère du monde” underline the interviewing exchange as based “on the social interactions taking place under the constraint of social structures”<sup>14</sup>.

Beyond ethical and confidentiality issues, the interviewer/respondent relationship, the question of empathy and the necessary – although relative – neutrality, are also shared by both methods. These questions, often associated with the field of qualitative surveys, are now the topic of discussions during the training of interviewers for French public institutions, such as INSEE and INED.

During the 1995 survey, interviewers with different profiles were recruited: professional interviewers, sociology students, and people who had been or were homeless at the time of the survey. Subsequently, based on the experience of 1995 and the recommendations of the social participants, professional interviewers were recruited, whose ability to adapt to different types of socio-professional environments and to different types of personalities had already proved its worth during earlier surveys. Social workers were reluctant to run the risk of disturbing the relationship they had established with individuals. Moreover, the distance required for administering a questionnaire sometimes conflicts with the interviewing techniques that are more concerned with psychology than with sociology. Finally, people who are or who have been homeless and are still close to the situations of those persons encountered are not always able to remain neutral when facing situations that they themselves have sometimes experienced.

The meeting in Copenhagen provided a forum for an exchange of views concerning the researcher-interviewer/respondent relationship. Ethical issues relating to monitoring of individuals over time, the

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<sup>13</sup> Brousse C., Rochère B. De La, Massé E. 2002: "L'enquête de l'INSEE auprès des usagers des services d'hébergement et de distribution de repas chauds. Une méthodologie inédite pour étudier la population des sans-domicile" [The INSEE Survey on Users of Accommodation Services and Food Programs].

An Original Methodology for Studying the Homeless Population]. *Courrier des statistiques*, (104), 33-40.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu P. 1993 : *La misère du monde*. Paris, Seuil, p.904.

position of the researcher were raised. The Spanish team<sup>15</sup>, considered the limits imposed by longitudinal surveys, especially in regard to the holding of (sometimes illegal) information, enabling people to be located and re-contacted. The issues of neutrality and non-intervention were also raised, as the Spanish researchers – for the most part psychology students – had the impression that the situations of the persons monitored were deteriorating over time.

- **Treatment of data and analysis of results**

The analysis of qualitative survey results most frequently relies on a manual process consisting of extracting and identifying the various parts of the interview, in order to subsequently classify them according to theme within an analysis of content grid.

In recent years, data have sometimes also been the object of a textual analysis, or “thematic distribution” using software. This is subject to certain conditions, the main one being the prior construction by the researcher of the themes to be identified. Although many researchers are still hesitant about this type of computer analysis of the data, the saving in time and energy that these software packages generate argues in favour of their increasingly frequent use. The data from some qualitative studies are, thus, partly subjected to computer processing.

As with the definition of the problem or improvement of the questionnaire, the analysis of quantitative survey results can be refined through a series of interviews with people who had previously answered the questionnaire. Maryse Marpsat cites F. Battagliola: “Having access to both a questionnaire and interviews with the same persons and being able to cross-reference the two, means that the various ways in which they formulate their life story and give it meaning can be revealed, according to the method employed to record their past”<sup>16</sup>

Because it refers to different aspects of a person’s life within a very limited space of time, and because it offers responses that the person would not have contributed spontaneously, a large-scale statistical survey questionnaire, while it doesn’t shed light upon the meaning that actors attach to their actions, may reveal the processes that contributed to that individual ending up on the street.

As an example, one of the persons encountered in the street for the qualitative phase of the survey carried out by INSEE in 2001 reminded me of a young woman I had encountered in 1998 for the survey among young homeless. She had changed, appeared to be in better health, and was about to stay at a friend’s place, whereas, at the time of the previous meeting, she had been sleeping in the basement of a hospital. In 2001, comparing the results of both data sources – questionnaire and interview guide – did not enable me to confirm the impression I had while administering the questionnaire. Some details provided by the young woman in the questionnaire did not appear in the qualitative interview. The statement of concrete facts during the administration of the questionnaires, such as time spent in the street, where she lived when she was 16, various events in her youth, health matters, the type of drugs taken<sup>17</sup>, frequency of contact with her mother and her various jobs, had no doubt played their part in building up an image for me of a somewhat rootless young girl. The image of the “backpacker” who had decided to go travelling that emerged from the qualitative interview had not been revealed in the 1998 questionnaire. Did the questionnaire enable me to go beyond the image that this young woman wished to give of herself and of her life?

Qualitative interviews are also used to build upon the results of a quantitative study. For example, during an INED survey with homeless young people, some fifteen interviews were held that gave rise to a sociography of homeless youngsters and to the elaboration of hypotheses on the break-up of families.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Muñoz M., Vázquez C., Panadero S. Guillén A. I. *Follow-up studies in Spain* CUHP Copenhagen workshop: [www.cuhp.org](http://www.cuhp.org)

<sup>16</sup> Marpsat M., 1999 : Les apports réciproques des méthodes quantitatives et qualitatives : le cas particulier des enquêtes sur les personnes sans domicile Paris : INED, 1999, p.10. - (Dossiers et recherches / INED ; 79) citing Battagliola et alii (1991 et 1993).

<sup>17</sup> In the 1998 survey among homeless young people

<sup>18</sup> Les jeunes en grande difficulté : rapport au logement, ruptures familiales, trajectoires et santé : rapport pour l'INSERM / responsables scientifiques Jean-Marie Firdion, Gérard Mauger, Maryse Marpsat ; réd. par Thomas

Similarly, in 2001, having joined a research team working with young children taken into care by the Department for Social Assistance and Childhood Services<sup>19</sup>, I conducted semi-structured interviews with homeless youngsters met in the day centres in Paris and the suburbs. Although the 1998 survey carried out by INED had shown that 31% of the youngsters taken into care by the "DDASS" [Department for Health and Social Work] had been placed in foster homes or institutions, this stage in their childhood had not been developed in the questionnaire. This series of interviews with young people taken into care gave me a more complete understanding of care conditions and the reasons why young people who have lived in institutions are more likely to end up homeless after reaching adulthood and becoming independent. It also enabled me to understand why some individuals say that they find it difficult to live in their own home, whether alone or accompanied by a spouse and/or children.

The field of study in "Homelessness in Four Global Cities" directed by David Snow, Gary Blasius and Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos and carried out in Los Angeles, Paris, Sao Paulo and Tokyo, consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews, each country following a guide common to all the teams. Once the interviews had been completed, cross analysis with earlier statistical and ethnographic surveys produced results which became more meaningful thanks to the comparative and complementary nature of the results obtained from the two survey methods.

For example, the relationship to employment. According to the Insee survey, 16% of the homeless sleeping in the street or in a shelter that is closed during the day declare themselves to be seeking employment<sup>20</sup>. This small percentage could certainly be related to the conditions of accessibility to employment for those under 25 or over 50. Furthermore, conditions of access to the shelters must also be taken into account: being queuing outside the doors of a shelter from three o'clock in the afternoon, or waiting until midnight to be picked up by the RATP bus to go to a shelter in the Paris suburbs, and then set off again on foot early enough to get to the workplace on time, to be back before 5 in the afternoon to get their things, get to a food distribution centre and then go to some place to rest early enough to find a place.

All these conditions have to be met to gain access, at best and still according to the Insee results, to a (on average) 32 hours a week job, under the terms of a temporary, short term or subsidised contract, or again an undeclared job, with the risk of not being paid at all.

- **Presenting the results**

Whether the approach is qualitative or quantitative, the quality of presentation of the results depends on a precise description of the definitions, as well as the conditions and limits of the survey. Thus, the type of population studied (rough sleepers or people using services for the homeless), along with the theoretical or technical framework upon which the study rests, are precise details of the conditions that contributed to the construction of the interviews or questionnaires, and to data collection.

Although qualitative research informs us about the daily life of people, their behaviour and the individual reasoning that guides their actions, quantitative surveys reveal the characteristics of a large number of individuals by asking all of them the same questions. Common behaviour may also emerge from these statistical surveys. As a result confirmed by the in depth interviews done for the survey on Homelessness in Four Global Cities, we know that one of the reasons relates to not wishing to be associated with people commonly held to frequent the centres i.e. "tramps". To what extent is this category now appropriate for describing homeless people in France?

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Amossé, Pascal Arduin, Sylviane Cau, Jean-Marie Firdion, Gérard Mauger, Maryse Marpsat, Martine Quaglia, Géraldine Vivier ; avec la collab. de Thérèse Lecomte. - Paris : INED, 1999. - 172 p.

<sup>19</sup> Gheorghui, M., Labache, L., Legrand, C., Quaglia, M., Rafanelli Orta, J., Teixeira, M., 2002, *Rapport final de la recherche longitudinale sur le devenir des personnes sorties de l'ASE en Seine St Denis entre 1980 et 2000*.

<sup>20</sup> Rochère B. De La (2003). "Les sans-domicile ne sont pas coupés de l'emploi" [The homeless are not cut off from the world of work]. *Insee Première*, (925), 1-4.

In a paper at a symposium on public space and visibility<sup>21</sup>, I started out from an analysis of the results of two types of studies which attracted strong media attention (surveys carried out by the INED and INSEE and an ethnographic survey<sup>22</sup>), to show what effects the results of these surveys could have on representations and the public image of homeless people, as well as on social workers and political decision makers and, as a consequence, on public action aimed at homeless people. The results of the statistical surveys purported to be representative of the individuals encountered at a given time in their lives, and took into account the part played by the economic and social context in the development of homelessness. The ethnographic survey produced at that time confused the population studied in these surveys (users of services for homeless people) with the individuals involved in its own study (people encountered in the psychiatric service of an emergency shelter in the inner suburbs of Paris). Everybody was defined as “tramps, since they have to be given a name [...] but, if necessary, other designations, such as persons of no fixed abode, homeless, vagrants or down and outs would serve just as well”. No doubt all the people met in the INSEE and INED surveys (homeless, as well as social workers) would appreciate these figures...

As we have just seen, the claim of generalising from the results of a study conducted among a small group of individuals or on a subgroup of a given population is not without risk. For the effects that these results may have on the population thus described, the representations that they entail and the ensuing practices of social workers, and lastly on the choices adopted with regard to social action. Everything suggests that if the author of this study had taken the time to study the results of the previous statistical surveys, he would have been more precise about the definitions of the population he studied and the limits in his work.

## Conclusion

### Qualitative versus Quantitative?

This argument is no longer adapted to the reality of the research on homelessness. As we have just seen, combining both methods is an obvious advantage for the quality of data thus produced. Because the two methods don't ask the same questions and therefore, produce answers on different themes, thus refining knowledge on homelessness; because the combination, when it is done, enlarges the researcher point of view, enriches the method and tools for a better analysis of situations. This discussion has more to do with the researchers point of view and the political and social demand that exists in the country where the research is conducted.

In his book describing the method of sociology, the main question is, according to Jean Claude Combessie<sup>23</sup>, to answer this double aim: “objectivize the research “in the way of” experimental sciences and objectivize representations inevitably socio-centred of one's own understanding grids”

Being regardless of this question is taking the risk - when conducting a research on people encountering social and/or psychological difficulties- to give up to the political demand, generally more interested on an individual understanding grid than on the questioning of structural causes and therefore, to take the effects for the causes. Could the social demand, underlying the effects of the structural evolutions, like the Fondation Abbe Pierre and the Secours Catholique in France in their annual report, make the difference?

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<sup>21</sup> Quaglia M., 2003: « *L'espace public, scène de la vie quotidienne des personnes sans domicile* », communication, DGUHC (Direction Générale de l'Urbanisme, de l'habitat et de la Construction) Visibles, proches, citoyens, les SDF, Paris.

<sup>22</sup> Declerck, P., 2001: *Les naufragés. Avec les clochards de Paris*, Terre Humaine, Plon, Paris.

<sup>23</sup> Combessie, J.C., 2004: *La méthode en sociologie*, Collection Repères, La découverte, Paris, p.10.