

A truly wonderful origami fox: Collage-making around 'The story of animals and me' to explore how a research question can be felt through



Micol Pizzolati, University of Bergamo

What happens in and with the student groups I've been meeting over the past three years, thanks to my teaching of *Applied Social Research*, is something I truly cherish — it challenges, inspires, excites and moves me. These are third-year students in a BA in Communication Studies. In their journey so far, they've explored how sociology helps explain representations and behaviours through empirical research, and how choosing and applying a method is always shaped by context. In my course, I aim to foster both reflection and skill-building around research techniques rooted in feminist, postcolonial and participatory traditions. In doing so, I am learning how to teach approaches that invite participants to create their own narratives — often grounded in biographical experiences — by engaging with the making of artefacts, whether material or digital.

So, I guide students into processes that combine well-established qualitative methods — such as interviews and focus groups — with techniques drawn from outside conventional research, especially from artistic and therapeutic fields. My intention is to help them discover how such practices can surface associations that might otherwise remain blurred or backgrounded, and to enable a representation of complexity that may yield unexpected insights.

There's a passage in the textbook I co-wrote with two colleagues and friends that feels especially important to me. In the chapter on the research question, it says: 'Participants are not simply treated as sources of data, but as actors in the research who are involved in formulating and carrying forward research questions' (Giorgi, Pizzolati & Vacchelli, 2021, p. 54). This is a meaningful — and slightly elusive — idea. That's why I decided to offer my students an experience of what it might feel like to formulate and carry forward a research question. To do so, I drew on one of the approaches we cover in the textbook: the collage interview. In a session about halfway through the course, I brought in an abundance of materials — paper,

newspapers, magazines, colours, scissors, glitter, stickers, threads, tape... — and invited the students to spend the first hour creating an individual collage around the theme '*The Story of Animals and Me*', and the second hour discussing, freely, what had happened to them as they made it.

Interestingly, one student decided to make an origami instead of a collage — a choice that sparked a great conversation about the value of unexpected, out-of-the-box responses in research and how letting participants take their own path can bring richness and surprise to the process.

That day I didn't take notes of our discussion, but I did take photographs of the fifteen collages that were made — and later described with affection and amusement. And it's through those images — taken with permission to share with others and show our work — that I now return, more than a year later, to that class session, to share a few details here. I include four collages — the ones that struck me the most at the time:

- (a) an image of a very luxurious interior, onto which had been pasted a photo of a black cat and a clipart of a little dog
- (b) a mix of words, photos, drawings and symbols expressing which animals had provoked fear (spiders, swans, sharks, dogs) and which had inspired great affection (cats)
- (c) cuttings from ads for mosquito extermination services, alongside supermarket promotions for cured meats and fish
- (d) a (truly wonderful!) origami fox.





Visuals that support learning



I remember thinking that these students had, in their reflections, managed to express how — in making their collages — they were caught between immersing themselves in their own stories and, so to speak, using them to bring into focus certain questions that could be explored in empirical research, whether through that technique or others. We didn't go into detail on this during that lesson. With the clarity of hindsight, I attempt to articulate those questions in my own words today:

- (a) Why is it that some — indeed, many — people can't imagine life without companion animals?
- (b) Do those who speak of fearing certain animals also worry that this fear might make others see them as lacking in sensitivity?
- (c) How do we navigate, in our everyday lives, the contradiction of loving some animals while living in a society organised around the killing of others?

- (d) Can the friendship between a person and a non-human animal be described using the same words we use to talk about friendship between humans?

This experience shows how using creative, embodied practices — like collage-making — can open new pathways for students to engage with thinking about how research ideas can emerge by drawing beyond just the intellectual level. What makes this approach distinctive is that it grounds students' curiosities in their own experiences: by making space for personal stories, hands-on exploration, and emotional reflection, students are invited to *feel* and *anchor* potential topics to be explored. The interplay between the material, tactile engagement and affective reflection helped them connect with the winding but inspiring journey of empirical research. I believe we were able to foster moments of insight in our classroom, where making collages becomes more than just a possible tool that enters the scene only after defining 'what you want to find out', and it is discovered as a meaningful way to enter the world of empirical research.

References

Giorgi, A., Pizzolati, M. & Vacchelli, E. (2021). *Metodi creativi per la ricerca sociale. Contesto, pratiche e strumenti* [Creative Methods for Social Research: Context, Practices, and Tools]. Bologna: il Mulino.