



Elicitation as challenge in social research: evolution, frontiers and perspective

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Abstract

This article provides a critical review of the practice of elicitation in contemporary qualitative research, focusing on its methodological and epistemological implications. The study is based on a systematic literature review conducted according to the PRISMA protocol and supplemented by a multilevel analytical design combining qualitative content analysis with topic modelling techniques based on Latent Dirichlet Allocation, lexical correspondence analysis and cluster analysis. In this way, the study traces the evolution of elicitation techniques, ranging from traditional verbal and visual stimuli to the most recent digital and algorithmic tools. The fundamental role that these techniques play in the co-construction of knowledge is highlighted, emphasising how they contribute to redefining the traditional hierarchies between researcher and participant. The analysis identifies recurring cross-disciplinary themes, illustrating how elicitation operates at the intersection of qualitative depth and computational potential, while simultaneously negotiating tensions between standardisation and the recognition of participants' agency. Particular attention is given to the challenges posed by increasingly digitised research environments, in which elicitation practices are embedded in complex technological mediations. Overall, the article conceptualises elicitation not merely as a set of techniques, but as a broader methodological perspective that is attentive to power relations, situated voices, and contextual conditions of knowledge production. It argues for the transformative potential of elicitation in addressing the emerging complexities of post-digital societies, where meaning-making processes are distributed, mediated, and continuously negotiated within adaptive epistemological frameworks.

Keywords Elicitation · Elicitation techniques · Systematic review of the literature · Prisma slr

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Introduction

Over the past twelve years, social research has undergone a profound transformation in its epistemological foundations, methodological configurations, and technical apparatus. This transformation has been catalysed by the emergence of paradigmatic frameworks that challenge the longstanding binary between positivism and interpretivism. The rise of *critical realism* (Bhaskar 2013), *pragmatism* (Morgan 2007), and *transformative paradigms* (Mertens 2007) has redefined the landscape of inquiry, expanding the scope and legitimacy of methodological pluralism in the social sciences.

At the heart of this evolution lies the increasing prevalence of *mixed methods research* which has become a dominant approach across a wide array of disciplines (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017). Mixed methods have not only bridged quantitative and qualitative traditions but have also promoted reflexivity, inclusivity, and the co-construction of knowledge. Simultaneously, the advent of the *digital turn* (Lupton 2014) has introduced a new inflection point in the trajectory of social research. The perspective of *digital methods* (Rogers 2013) has positioned the digital not simply as an object of study but as an epistemic, methodological, and instrumental environment for studying digital society itself.

This ongoing reconfiguration is now further challenged by the integration of *artificial intelligence* (AI) and *machine learning* into research processes (Punziano 2025). These technologies are no longer auxiliary tools but active agents in shaping data production, analysis, and interpretation. As AI becomes embedded in the research infrastructure, social research is adapting once again—absorbing, translating, and anticipating technological transformations to remain capable of interrogating the dynamics of contemporary and future societies (Christou 2025; Ruppert et al. 2013).

Numerous innovations have emerged from this shifting landscape. Researchers have drawn on neighbouring disciplines—such as cognitive science for conceptual mapping techniques (Eppler 2006), or computer science for algorithm auditing (Sandvig et al. 2014)—while simultaneously revisiting and transforming classical tools like the interview and the survey. For instance, traditional *semi-structured interviews* have been augmented with visual prompts or digital diaries, while *questionnaires* have evolved into adaptive surveys using real-time logic and interactional design. Entirely new data-gathering strategies have also been introduced, such as *digital trace analysis*, *walkthrough methods* (Light et al. 2018), and *data donation frameworks* (Boeschoten et al. 2020).

Within this broad set of innovations, this article focuses specifically on one technique that is increasingly relevant in digitally mediated research: *elicitation*. Elicitation techniques can be defined as a family of methods that employ *visual*, *verbal*, *textual*, or *digital stimuli* to provoke and structure participant responses. These techniques are particularly effective in exploring sensitive or complex topics that resist direct questioning or involve layers of *tacit knowledge* (Thomson 2008). More than mere facilitative tools, elicitation techniques offer epistemological advantages: they decentre the authority of the researcher, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own semiotic frames, and foster a dialogical research environment that is especially important in post-positivist inquiry (Bagnoli 2009).

Among the many forms of elicitation are methods where participants *arrange*, *construct*, or *interpret stimuli*. These may include photo elicitation (Harper 2002), concept mapping, timeline construction, or interactive walkthroughs of digital platforms. As Pink et al. (2020) note, elicitation in digital environments also allows researchers to follow participants' engagements with algorithmically curated content in real-time, offering insights into meaning-making processes as they unfold. Elicitation thus functions as a hybrid methodological tool—simultaneously *immersive*, *adaptive*, and *reflexive*—making it particularly suited to the investigation of digital life and platform society (Van Dijck et al. 2018).

Based on this assumption, this article aims to analyse how elicitation has progressively been conceptualised and employed in the social sciences as a methodological response to transformations introduced by platformisation, the generativity of digital media and emerging forms of automated agency. Therefore, the article proposes considering elicitation as part of a broader epistemological response to the complexity, interactivity and co-constructed nature of knowledge in the digital age, rather than merely as a technique.

In order to understand the scope of elicitation in an empirical sense, this article conducts a systematic review of the literature according to the PRISMA protocol (Petticrew and Roberts 2008). Rather than providing a theoretical or normative redefinition of elicitation, the analysis aims to reconstruct its evolution and disciplinary diversification through a structured and replicable analytical framework. To this end, a corpus of relevant publications was constructed and the texts analysed by combining content analysis procedures with automated classification techniques. Topic modelling (Blei et al. 2003), lexical correspondence analysis (Lebart et al. 1998) and cluster analysis were used in particular to identify recurring patterns of conceptual co-occurrence, map the distribution of thematic areas, and determine the primary epistemic trajectories through which elicitation has been conceptualised and operationalised in various disciplines.

As Bolasco and De Mauro (2021) has pointed out, these computational approaches improve interpretative accuracy by reducing lexical ambiguity while preserving sensitivity to the discursive context. From this perspective, automated classification does not replace qualitative interpretation but rather provides a complementary layer that enables researchers to systematically identify the structural principles of large textual corpora (Schröder 2018). The empirical part of this work therefore offers a data-driven reconstruction of the field of application of elicitation, illustrating its consolidation as a methodological frontier and its diversification in post-digital contexts that are increasingly shaped by datafication and algorithmic mediation (Ruppert et al. 2013).

Mining of elicitation in social research: state of art

Elicitation techniques in social research have evolved significantly, expanding from traditional verbally mediated formats to encompass a wide range of visual, interactive, and digital tools. Historically rooted in qualitative traditions, early elicitation methods emphasised verbal, participant-centred approaches, such as spontaneous

interviews, unstructured stimuli and dialogic conversations designed to elicit implicit knowledge and reduce hierarchical asymmetries between researcher and interviewee (Barton 2015). These early techniques were primarily concerned with bringing latent meanings to the surface, negotiating position, and accessing the experiential world of participants beyond what could be directly observed or articulated.

Elicitation in social research encompasses a range of techniques intentionally designed to prompt, guide or stimulate participants' responses with the aim of accessing experiences, perceptions and forms of knowledge that might otherwise remain unexpressed, implicit or difficult to articulate through standard questions alone (Bagnoli 2009; Gubrium and Holstein 2002). These techniques are based on a constructivist epistemological perspective, which frames knowledge as relational and co-constructed through interaction, language and context (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Charmaz 2006). Unlike more extractive methods, elicitation does not position the participant as a passive source of information, but as a co-author of meaning within the research encounter.

From a genealogical perspective, elicitation techniques have their origins in part in the projective techniques developed in psychology—such as sentence completion, image association, or induced narratives—which were later adapted to qualitative research as tools for generating and enriching data, providing access to complementary levels of interpretation (Bauer and Gaskell 2000; Mason 2002).

It is clear that, over time, the methodological repertoire has been enriched with the incorporation of multimodal formats. The main objective of these formats is to further decentralise the epistemic authority of the researcher and strengthen the agency of the participant in the knowledge construction process. As demonstrated in the relevant literature, techniques such as photo-elicitation or the use of visual *stimuli* are now widely adopted to activate forms of expression that involve affective, symbolic and situational dimensions of experience (Harper 2002; Rose 2022). A paradigmatic example is provided by images generated directly by participants via smartphones and disseminated on digital platforms (Agúndez del Castillo et al. 2025). Such practices democratise the act of research. Similarly, recent research has begun to explore the role of algorithmic interfaces, as demonstrated by the analysis of the feedback cycle of content proposed on TikTok or YouTube. This analysis uses user page scrolling as a form of indirect elicitation to explain in a situation of interview the cultural behaviour in the light of proposed content on these platforms (Punziano et al. 2025a).

Today, elicitation is increasingly taking place in digital and interactive environments, including mobile diaries, collaborative maps, browsing logs, and even algorithm-driven prompts (Pink et al. 2015; Lupton and Watson 2021). This shift from static *20stimuli* to dynamic and situated formats, capable of activating real-time interactions between participants and technologies, marks a paradigm shift that redefines forms of engagement, modes of data generation, and analytical possibilities for contemporary social research.

Methodology

Systematic literature reviews (SLRs) are defined as a rigorous and methodologically sound approach aimed at critically synthesising the scientific literature on a specific phenomenon or research topic (García-Peñalvo 2022; Milner 2015). These reviews involve exhaustive research, critical evaluation and synthesis of the available evidence, using explicit and predetermined methodological criteria in order to minimise possible bias arising from the subjectivity of the researchers (Howie 2013). SLRs are regarded as the most authoritative methodological reference for synthesising empirical evidence, providing an in-depth and rigorous overview of the available literature on specific subject areas (Priyadarsini and Ravindran 2023).

The process of conducting a systematic review is typically divided into well-defined stages, which may include planning, implementation and reporting, often according to established protocols such as the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Pati and Lorusso 2018). The PRISMA method is comprised of four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. These stages have been meticulously designed to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the research process, safeguarding it from the potential impact of researchers' preconceptions or implicit biases (Pahlevan Sharif et al. 2019). The conduction of an SLR is appropriate in circumstances where there is a necessity to delineate a comprehensive depiction of the extant scientific evidence, thereby facilitating the advancement of scientific knowledge in emerging or established fields characterised by a substantial corpus of published studies, as is evidenced in this investigation (Petticrew and Roberts 2008).

The prisma approach

In line with the objective of analysing how elicitation has been progressively conceptualised and employed in the social sciences — including as a methodological response to platformisation, the generativity of digital media and automated agency — this study employs a systematic review. The systematic review (summarised in Fig. 1). In fact, a systematic literature review enables us to reconstruct the evolution of a research field in a structured and replicable way. This makes it possible to observe the theoretical, methodological, and applicative trajectories that have guided its development over time.

This review critically analyses scientific publications on elicitation from 2000 to 2024. This timeframe was chosen to encompass the key phases of the digital ecosystem's transformation, from the emergence of Web 2.0 to the latest developments related to datafication and algorithmic mediation. This enables us to observe the progressive mobilisation of elicitation in response to increasingly interactive and platform-based research contexts. Our empirical objective is not to propose a comprehensive redefinition of elicitation from a theoretical perspective, but rather to reconstruct its evolution and disciplinary diversification by examining the ways in which it has been conceptualised, justified, and operationalised within the humanities and social sciences.

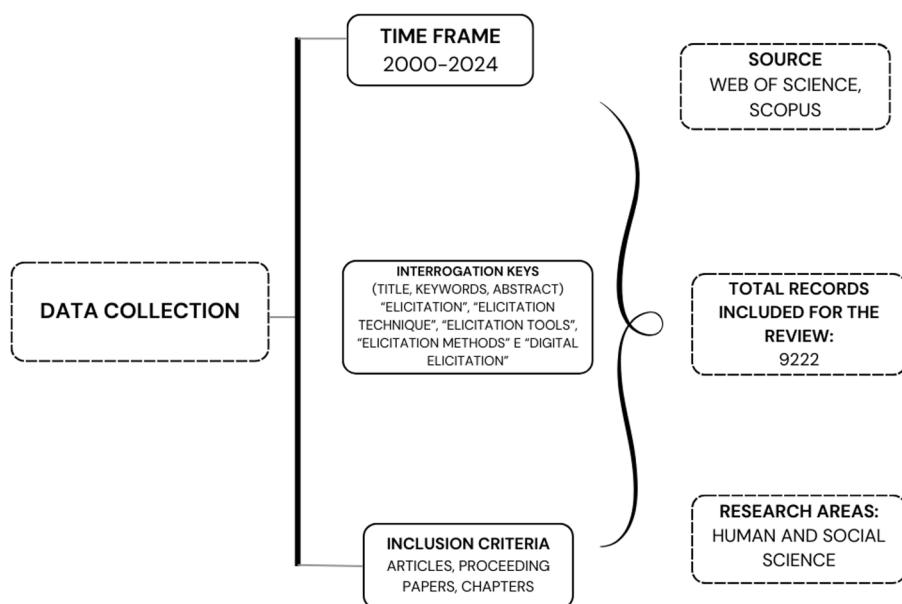


Fig. 1 Data collection process (our elaboration)

Data collection

All articles included in the corpus underwent content analysis procedures aimed at identifying the progressive development of the scientific debate on elicitation. The review particularly explores how elicitation techniques have been employed to investigate sensitive issues, implicit knowledge, and complex concepts. This has helped to overcome the communication and methodological barriers that are typical of qualitative research, as well as broadening access to dimensions of social life that would otherwise be difficult to observe (Barton 2015; Fisher et al. 2018; Liebenberg 2018).

Contributions that employed elicitation techniques in social research were favoured for inclusion in the corpus, with a specific focus on studies that introduced methodological innovations or explicitly discussed relevant theoretical considerations on the role of elicitation in contemporary research contexts. The corpus comprises articles published in peer-reviewed journals, as well as book chapters and conference proceedings. These were identified through a systematic search strategy conducted on international reference databases, particularly Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were chosen for their comprehensive and reliable coverage of the social sciences (Burnham 2006).

These sources are central vehicles for the circulation of scientific knowledge, facilitating the dissemination of empirical results and innovative theoretical contributions within the academic community and promoting forms of inter- and intra-disciplinary communication (Punziano et al. 2025).

The keywords used in the research were: “elicitation”, “elicitation technique”, “elicitation tools”, “elicitation methods” and “digital elicitation”. The application of

Article publications

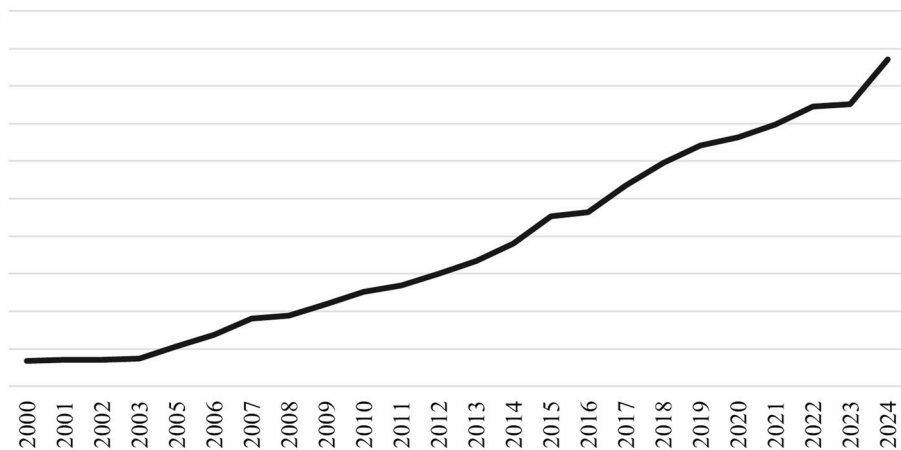


Fig. 2 Number of annual publications about elicitation technique in social science field from 2000 to 2024 (Our elaboration)

these criteria yielded an initial corpus of 9,406 publications, which forms the empirical basis on which the systematic analysis was conducted. After a matrix cleaning process, the final corpus consists of 9,222 articles¹, a number that is widely acceptable according to the methodological recommendations of Robinson and Lowe (2015).

The application of SLR allows for the effective management and synthesis of large amounts of information, clearly distinguishing between scientifically accredited knowledge and subjective perceptions of it (Punziano et al. 2025).

In line with the objective of mapping the epistemic trajectories through which elicitation has been conceptualised and operationalised over time, the study also adopts a diachronic perspective inspired by the logic of longitudinal studies. This approach allows for the analysis of the temporal evolution of scientific production, treating publications as units that can be observed repeatedly along the time axis (Caputo et al. 2017). To place the empirical analysis within a diachronic perspective, the study first examines the temporal trend in scientific publications on elicitation techniques in the social sciences. Figure 2 illustrates the trend in article publications between 2000 and 2024, with the objective of identifying discontinuities or structural shifts in the level of scientific attention devoted to this field of research. The graph shows a progressive increase in the number of articles published, with a first phase of moderate growth until 2013, followed by a significant acceleration starting in 2014. This trend suggests a growing interest in the topic among the scientific community, which has intensified in recent years, culminating in a marked peak in 2024.

This trend can be understood in the context of broader methodological and technological changes that have gradually made it possible to systematically incorporate elicitation stimuli into traditional research designs. The greater accessibility and sophistication of digital tools has allowed visual, auditory and interactive stimuli to

¹ The extraction took place in June 2025.

be used repeatedly in interviews (e.g. photo elicitation and video prompts), questionnaires (e.g. vignettes based on images or situations) and experimental contexts (e.g. simulated digital environments). These additions encourage more multimodal and reflective engagement from participants, thereby increasing the depth and interpretative potential of data collected through elicitation practices (Bagnoli 2009; Crilly et al. 2006).

To contextualise the temporal evolution of scientific production, the analysis was supplemented by exploring the disciplinary distribution of the publications included in the corpus. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of research areas involved in the study of elicitation within the humanities and social sciences. This enables us to identify the disciplinary fields in which these practices are most prevalent. As Fig. 3 shows, sociology clearly dominates in terms of the number of publications, establishing itself as the main area of theoretical and methodological elaboration on elicitation.

This is followed, at a considerable distance, by business economics, psychology and educational research. Areas such as linguistics and communication also show significant involvement, albeit to a lesser extent. Other fields, including anthropology, geography and humanities, have a marginal participation in quantitative terms. This distribution suggests a sociological predominance in the construction of scientific discourse on the subject, but at the same time indicates the inter- and transdisciplinary nature of the phenomenon under study, which lends itself to being questioned from heterogeneous theoretical and methodological perspectives. This may be due not only to the practical advantages of elicitation but also to a stronger disciplinary emphasis on the conceptual framing and procedural transparency of research methods. Sociologists, more than others, tend to problematize and make explicit the epistemological assumptions, inferential logics, and interpretive frameworks that guide the use of such techniques. In this respect, elicitation is not merely a tool for data collection but also a methodological interface that facilitates reflexivity and theoriza-

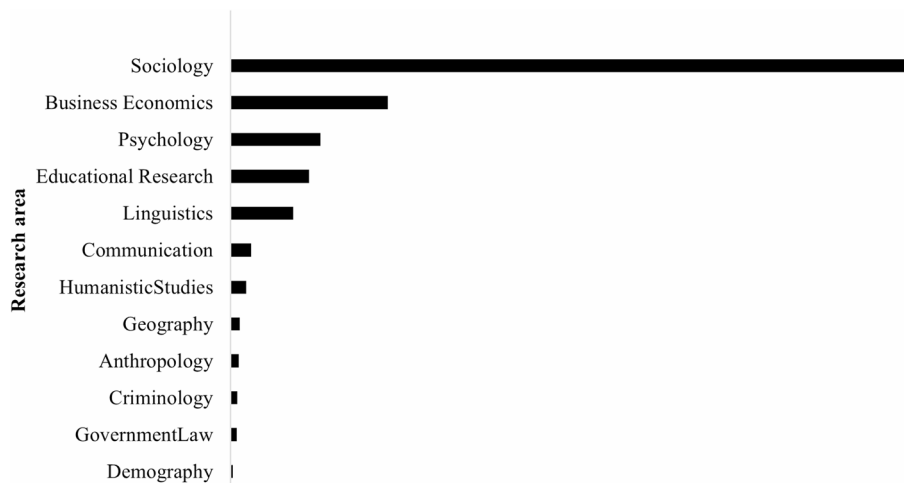


Fig. 3 Distribution of subject areas involved in scientific production on elicitation techniques in the humanities and social sciences (our analysis)

tion—aligning with the interpretivist turn in contemporary sociology and the growing emphasis on participant-centered research (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Pink 2020; Harper 2002). Furthermore, the growing methodological hybridity characterizing sociological research has encouraged the integration of elicitation in mixed methods designs. Elicitation procedures often serve as bridges between qualitative depth and quantitative scalability, enabling the exploration of subjective meanings alongside the identification of patterned responses. In this context, the success of elicitation-based research reflects not only technological facilitation but also a broader disciplinary orientation toward methodological innovation, epistemic reflexivity, and multimodal inquiry. reswell and Plano Clark

Reconfiguring elicitation through empirical evidence: analysis and results

Elicitation techniques, in addition to being an innovative methodological tool, represent an *epistemological intervention* (Latour 2005) that prompts a critical re-elaboration of the classic dichotomies between *data and meaning* (Silverman 2020), *participation and co-production* (Flick 2018), as well as between *structure and agency* (Giddens 1984). These approaches are particularly relevant in *post-digital* research contexts (Berry and Dieter 2015), characterised by the proliferation of *environmental* (Lupton 2020), *mediated* (Couldry and Hepp 2018) and *non-linear* (Kitchin 2014) data.

In light of the growing use of these techniques in the humanities and social sciences (Pink et al. 2022), this research adopts the technique of content analysis, a systematic procedure of textual decomposition into minimal units and subsequent coding aimed at identifying recurring patterns and themes (Krippendorff 2018; Prasad 2008).

As highlighted by Amaturio and Punziano (2013), documents are *social products* intrinsically characterised by situated perspectives, shaped by specific cultural contexts, institutional purposes and individual subjectivities. Therefore, content analysis allows for a critical examination of such materials, recognising their non-neutral and historically situated nature (Prior 2008). This approach, which is well established in social research (Semetko 2021), can be applied both quantitatively and qualitatively, favouring a contextualised interpretation of data (Zidane and Mehiri 2021). Its methodological flexibility makes it particularly suitable for investigating emerging dynamics in media studies and digital sociology (Schroeder 2018), contributing to a more nuanced understanding of discursive practices in the post-digital era.

Specifically, this study adopts a third type of content analysis (Losito 1996) which, similar to the construction of a structured questionnaire, involves a systematic process of interrogating textual content. Instead of a sequence of direct questions, the researcher works through a coding of predefined analytical categories corresponding to relevant dimensions of the examined empirical material (Krippendorff 2018).

The operational definition phase, which is fundamental for the construction of the database (Babbie 2021), involved segmenting the content into three conceptual domains, each characterised by a set of structured variables:

1. *General information* (language, year of publication and affiliation of authors);
2. *Information on the publication* (type of document, research area and name of the journal).
3. *Content information* (title, abstract, keywords).

This approach responds to the need to operationalise theoretical constructs into empirically observable indicators (Corbetta 2014), while ensuring ecological validity (Bryman 2016) through the systematic categorisation of the text corpus. The categorization was conducted by applying an automatized procedure of topic modelling.

Topic modelling

Subsequent to the conclusion of the data collection phase, the text corpus was constructed by means of concatenating the variables belonging to the third domain, thereby yielding a single composite text variable. The corpus was then subjected to a series of preliminary processing procedures aimed at improving its informational quality. These procedures included the elimination of duplicates and the removal of stop words and textual elements of no analytical relevance. The corpus was then analysed using T-Lab software, which is designed for textual analysis and is particularly suited to developing analytical models sensitive to the discursive context. In order to identify the latent thematic structure within the corpus, the topic modelling technique based on Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was applied. LDA is a generative probabilistic model that was introduced by Blei et al. (2003). The model operates under the assumption that each document in the corpus contains one or more latent topics, with each topic being represented by a probabilistic distribution of the words that compose it. The algorithmic procedure is thus able to identify recurring patterns of lexical co-occurrences, organising them into semantically coherent and distinct groups.

Eight latent topics were extracted through the application of LDA, each of which was appropriately renamed following an interpretative process based on rigorous statistical and semantic criteria. This process involved analysing the relative frequencies of specific terms that characterised each topic, as well as the distribution of common words across multiple topics. This ensured the internal consistency and discriminant validity of the results. Additionally, to enhance semantic interpretation accuracy and mitigate lexical ambiguity, a semantic tagging procedure was implemented (Bolasco 2013, p. 126). This step enabled the underlying conceptual categories of the various identified topics to be more clearly defined.

The eight identified topics were then analysed and classified based on the 4,971 elementary contexts that emerged from the analysis. These contexts are understood as textual units in which each topic is most representative. These contexts correspond to significant fragments of the analysed documents and were selected according to their informational weight. This was calculated by considering the relevance of the discursive formulas used, their position within the text, and the specific weight of the individual lemmas in relation to their overall dispersion in the corpus. This procedure enabled each topic to be associated with a coherent set of semantic contexts, facilitating interpretation based on statistical criteria and guided qualitative analysis. Figure 4 summarises the results of the topic modelling by presenting the emerging

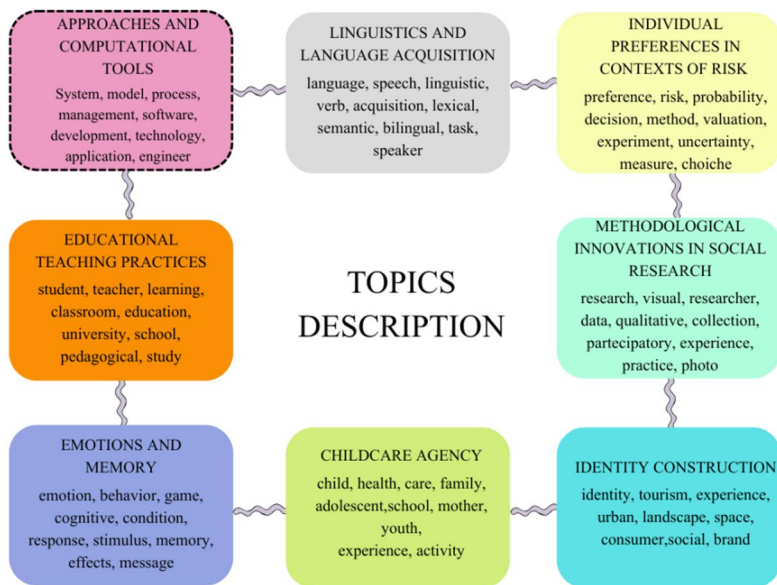


Fig. 4 Topics description

themes and their distribution. These form the basis for the thematic analysis presented in the subsequent sections.

The topic “Approaches and Computational Tools” emerges as the one with the highest frequency distribution (18%), establishing itself as a thematic area in which elicitation techniques and computational tools are closely integrated. Textual analysis highlights a significant lexical recurrence of terms such as “system”, “model”, “process”, “management”, “software”, “development”, “technology”, “application” and “engineer” confirming a focus on systems engineering and the design of structured and automated processes. In fact, the articles included in this topic focus, on the one hand on the use of elicitation in software development processes, and on the other, on designing tools to manage and measure knowledge at an organisational level. In this perspective, Kwadzo (2014) proposes a conceptual model for assessing knowledge growth in organisations through the construction of a *Knowledge Growth Elicitation and Measurement Tool* that makes the cognitive work of knowledge workers visible and assessable. In a similar manner, Ismayilov and Potters (2017) have developed a knowledge audit model with the objective of enhancing the completeness and accuracy of requirements elicitation in software engineering processes. A second line of research focuses on the integration of multilevel ontologies, machine learning techniques and goal-oriented frameworks to support elicitation processes in highly complex contexts, such as e-health systems (Paspali et al. 2022) or IoT architectures (Rouland et al. 2023). In these cases, elicitation is not simply a data collection technique but a process mediated by computational artefacts capable of incorporating, structuring and formalising the expectations of actors in a modelable form. A similar methodological proposal is that of Sefton and Ricketts (2022) who, in the context of avionics, develop a *requirements knowledge model* capable of translating

the multiplicity of stakeholder perspectives through a layered ontological representation system.

At the same time, some contributions adopt a critical stance towards the epistemic neutrality assumed by elicitation technologies, highlighting the power asymmetries and epistemic inequalities that can emerge in multi-actor contexts. Ocampo-Melgar and Orr's (2016) work, for instance, takes a participatory approach to selecting environmental assessment criteria, demonstrating how the priorities of those involved are frequently misaligned and potentially conflicting. Similarly, Brown and Dixon (2020) employed a visual methodology with young students to investigate the narratives of resilience promoted by school mental health policies. This revealed how the forms of elicitation adopted can act as both tools for empowerment and regulatory devices.

Overall, the topic "Approaches and Computational Tools" reveals the intricate relationship between technical-formal rationality and socio-cognitive practices. It highlights how elicitation operates at the intersection between knowledge engineering and the situated negotiation of meaning. In this context, the concept of "model" has multiple epistemic values: it is simultaneously a technical support, a cognitive artefact, and a socio-political device through which knowledge processes are organised and regulated in complex systems.

The second topic that emerged, "Linguistics and language acquisition", accounted for 16% of the frequency distribution and is a thematic area focused on language acquisition, use, and variation, with particular attention to atypical conditions of language development, childhood bilingualism, and the interaction between language and sociocultural context. Lexical analysis of the associated documents shows a particularly high frequency of terms such as "language", "speech", "linguistic", "verb", "acquisition", "lexical", "semantic", "bilingual", "task" and "speaker". This recurrence highlights a clear focus on the structural and functional dimensions of language, as well as on the use of empirical tools for its analysis, particularly in subjects in developmental stages. A number of contributions in this field have analysed the acquisition of narrative competence in bilingual children, questioning how variables such as age, elicitation language, lexical competence and language exposure influence the development of narrative macrostructure (Erdemir 2022; Zhang et al. 2024). The present studies emphasise that narrative abilities are not simply transferable from one language to another. Rather, they are mediated by linguistic and cultural choices, as well as specific conditions of exposure. Within the same topic, it is possible to identify a line of research focused on diagnosing specific language disorders (SLI/DLD) and neurodivergent conditions such as autism using narrative elicitation tools (Cao et al. 2023; Wahlang and Koshy 2018). These techniques, which include guided storytelling and sentence repetition tasks, effectively highlight significant differences between children who develop language typically and those with language disorders, even in multilingual and multicultural contexts. For example, this has been demonstrated in studies on verbal morphology in Bengali children with language disorders (Graham et al. 2018) and in comparative analyses of different elicitation methods highlighting variations in complex syntax production (Chamunorwa et al. 2022). A further significant theoretical contribution is represented by studies investigating code-switching in bilingual children with SLI, which call into question the

pathologizing assumption of a “dysfunctional” use of mixed language. Conversely, the findings indicate an aptitude for grammatical competence, even among subjects encountering linguistic challenges and exhibiting sensitivity to the sociolinguistic dynamics that govern the utilisation of the prevailing language (Green 2010).

The topic under discussion adopts an empirical and methodologically articulated approach to the study of language acquisition. In this approach, elicited narration is a privileged device for observing children’s linguistic practices. It is also an interpretative lens capable of rendering the complexity of the relationships between language, cognitive development and social context (Triana Gallego 2019; van Assen and Snijders 2010). Despite the heterogeneity observed in terms of contexts, these analyses converge in delineating narration not only as an object, but also as a situated and socially significant practice, useful for understanding the processes of meaning construction in developmental subjects.

Another topic that emerged from the analysis, renamed “Individual preferences in contexts of risk and uncertainty,” accounts for 14% of the overall distribution and focuses on the use of elicitation techniques to understand individual preferences in situations of risk and uncertainty. The contributions included in this topic explore different elicitation techniques, including self-assessment questionnaires, multiple price lists, belief elicitation, and approaches inspired by prospect theory. These tools are used not only to detect individual choices, but also to analyse the consistency, stability, and sensitivity of the preferences detected in relation to the task structure and the proposed decision-making framework. Alongside individual techniques, some studies propose using composite scores based on item response theory (IRT) to increase robustness and minimise systematic biases associated with the specificity of individual elicitation methods (Sølvberg and Jarness 2019). Other contributions emphasise the significant influence of the simplicity or complexity of the techniques used on the preferences expressed by individuals, particularly when cognitive abilities or financial literacy are limited (Glöckner et al. 2020).

The topic also emphasises the application of elicitation techniques in various contexts, including personal financial planning (Perez and Garcia 2023), risk assessment in construction using expert elicitation and Bayesian analysis (Hamann 2006), and employment and intertemporal decisions among specific groups, such as farmers and students (Mavroudi et al. 2016). These studies clearly demonstrate that expressed preferences and subjective risk assessment are significantly influenced by contextual factors, including socio-economic, cognitive, and psychological conditions. For instance, in highly emotional situations, such as collective responses to the threat of mass shootings, the perception of risk can be distorted by perceptual and irrational biases, resulting in significantly different individual risk estimates (Grieshofer 2023). Overall, the topic reflects a dynamic theoretical and methodological evolution in the field of individual preference measurement, in which attention to the ecological validity of instruments, the triangulation of methods and the interaction between the individual and the context is a central element of scientific reflection.

The fourth topic that emerged, “Methodological Innovations in Social Research,” representing 13% of the overall distribution, focuses on the use of innovative qualitative approaches, with a particular focus on visual and participatory methodologies. The most recurring words in the associated texts – such as “research”, “visual”,

“researcher”, “data”, “qualitative”, “participatory”, “practice” and “photo” – indicate an interest in data collection practices that focus on lived experience, the co-production of knowledge and the valorisation of participants’ points of view.

The present topic includes numerous contributions that are emblematic of an innovative methodological approach. Of particular note is the study by Clark (2024), which offers a noteworthy illustration of the utilisation of photo-elicitation in an educational context for the purpose of eliciting the narratives of underrepresented students enrolled in engineering programmes. In a similar vein, Cheung et al. (2022) propose the participant photography approach as an inclusive visual method in education, highlighting the potential of these practices to overcome language barriers and epistemic inequalities.

The concept of promoting deep inclusion is also evident in the work of Chen (2018), who employs a combination of visual methods and a critical dialogic methodology to explore the social trajectories of young individuals using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems. In a similar way, Kotorova and Nefedov (2019) demonstrate how combining visual techniques and adapted interviews can enhance the participation of people with dementia, offering a paradigmatic example of an approach that is sensitive to the relationship between method and vulnerability. In addition to these visual applications, methodological practices oriented towards reflexivity and self-reflection on the part of the researcher are emerging. This is exemplified by Hamel (2015), who explores the use of research e-journaling as a tool to support research quality through critical and continuous documentation of the decision-making process. In a similar vein, Mújdeci (2022) proposes creative techniques such as “how-to” instructions and “object interviewing” to reflect on the transformative implications of social research and the material conditions of methodological production. Furthermore, a number of studies have explored the application of visual methodologies in specific areas, including mental health, disability and everyday life. In their study, Emang et al. (2017) employed the use of self-photography to explore the concept of life’s meaning among individuals with and without a diagnosis of depression. In contrast, Schreiner et al. (2020) put forward an advanced form of participant-led photo elicitation, utilising this method to investigate prevalent health information practices. This approach demonstrates how such techniques can stimulate processes of reflection and self-narration, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of qualitative data. In light of these contributions, it is evident that methodological experimentation in this field is not confined to technical instrumentation but rather is conceptualised as an epistemological and political decision. The adoption of visual and participatory approaches thus becomes a way of renegotiating the relationship between researchers and participants, of making marginalised subjectivities visible and of redefining the very concept of “data” in social research. This theme is indicative of a methodological transition, as well as a critical reconsideration of the ontological assumptions of contemporary sociological practice.

The fifth topic, “Identity construction,” accounting for 12% of the thematic distribution, focuses on exploring the processes through which individuals and groups construct and renegotiate their identities in relation to lived experiences, socio-spatial contexts and cultural practices. A distinctive feature of this area of research is the systematic use of elicitation techniques, especially visual ones, to investigate in

depth the subjective and narrative dimensions of identity. The most recurring keywords – “identity,” “tourism,” “experience,” “urban,” “landscape,” “space,” “consumer” – highlight a strong interest in the interactions between individuals, the environment and society, analysed through qualitative and participatory methodological approaches. Among the most widely used tools is photo-elicitation, adopted in numerous studies to facilitate self-narration and make often implicit elements of identity visible. Through visual stimulation, images become catalysts for evoking memories, emotions and values, providing privileged access to inner representations of the self and relationships with space and others. This topic includes significant studies such as Chung’s (2018) research, which uses photo elicitation to examine how Lebanese women develop and navigate beauty ideals in relation to their national identity. This study highlights the dynamics of conformity and resistance that manifest through bodily expression and aesthetic consumption. In the field of tourism, the work of Goda et al. (2019) represents a significant contribution to the analysis of the transformative experiences of young travellers. In this context, too, the use of photo-elicitation proves central in bringing out gender similarities and differences in self-perception and identity narration in liminal and mobile contexts. In a similar way, Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2019) and Geluykens (2019) have used this technique to investigate how study abroad experiences influence changes in cultural attitudes and perceptions of intercultural competence, showing how contact with otherness can generate forms of identity reflexivity and renegotiation of the self.

In an urban and territorial context, the study by Gutiérrez and Machado (2023) employs the technique of photo-elicitation to explore the relationship between urban renewal processes and landscape identity in Kenya, highlighting the role of physical changes in activating new forms of attachment to place. In a similar manner, Rathert and Cabaroglu (2024) demonstrate how an affiliation with a specific place influences community leadership in rural contexts. Utilising a methodological framework that integrates photo-elicitation, participant observation and in-depth interviews, the researchers offer a nuanced exploration of the subject.

It is evident that, while situated in different thematic areas, these contributions share a common approach that is characterised by an emphasis on experiential subjectivity and the co-production of meaning through visual tools. Images function not only as a medium for communication but also as catalysts for memory, affectivity and interpretation, thereby facilitating access to the often implicit or challenging-to-verbalise dimensions of identity.

The sixth topic, renamed “Childcare agency”, covers 10% of the thematic distribution and highlights the dynamics of childcare and agency in family, school and community contexts, with a particular focus on the experiences of children, adolescents and mothers in vulnerable situations. The contributions collected in this topic explore the meanings attributed to care and family relationships, emphasising the implications for the health, education and daily activities of children and young adolescents. A distinctive feature of this topic is the systematic use of elicitation techniques, in particular photo-elicitation, doll-play, narrative interviews supported by drawings and symbolic objects, and guided walks (walking interviews).

This topic includes notable studies such as those by Altenberger (2024) and Lo et al. (2023). These studies investigate the experiences of children in foster care in Eng-

land using dialogic and visual methods. They highlight how elicitation techniques can help us to understand the meaning that children attribute to their family relationships, as well as their forms of participation and social recognition. Similarly, Dworokin et al. (2021) employed narrative techniques and graphic elicitation to explore the experiences of child domestic workers in India. This revealed how the children themselves attributed complex meanings to family separation and their role within work contexts. It also highlighted their capacity to autonomously reinterpret situations of vulnerability and family separation.

Qualitative techniques in this field not only provide alternative ways of accessing data, but also act as genuine epistemological tools capable of deconstructing adult-centric paradigms in research and social intervention practices (Greene and Hogan 2005). For instance, Wiltchko, Denis and D'Arcy (2018) employed photo-elicitation to investigate the difficulties and requirements of mothers with allergic children during the transition to school. This revealed the significance of families' perspectives in managing daily risks and engaging with the school system. Jongman et al. (2021) demonstrate how a narrative-visual approach can empower the voices of children with autism and their families, providing a child-centred perspective on Ireland's early childhood education system.

These studies reflect a methodological approach that transcends the notion of elicitation as a mere technical instrument, metamorphosing it into a deliberate and attentive dialogue that endows children and adolescents with an active role in the generation and interpretation of knowledge about their own lives.

The penultimate topic that emerged was "Emotions and memory", with a frequency distribution of 9%, which mainly addresses the role of emotions and elicitation techniques in experimental contexts. The most frequent words, such as "emotion", "behaviour", "game", "cognitive", "stimulus", "memory", "effects" and "message", indicate a strong focus on the cognitive and behavioural aspects of emotional responses elicited by specific experimental conditions. The contributions included in the topic compare different approaches to eliciting emotions, including films, static images, interactive games, and verbal or written messages. In particular, the effects on memory, decision-making behaviour, and cognitive performance are investigated, showing how the choice of stimulus and its specific mode of presentation influence emotional responses.

For example, Farnia et al.'s (2018) study highlighted generational differences in emotional responses to films, demonstrating that adults and older individuals react differently in terms of intensity and duration when exposed to visual emotional stimuli. Furthermore, contributions such as that of Bago et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of considering gender and age when investigating the influence of emotions on memory. These studies show that positive and negative images can have different effects depending on the demographic profile of the participants. A significant methodological consideration is the manner and timing of introducing emotional stimuli into experiments. In this regard, da Silva Rebelo et al. (2022) challenge the hypothesis that automatic facial reactions are mediated by conscious emotional experience. They demonstrate that these automatic responses persist regardless of the subjective intensity of the perceived emotion. The collection of literature on this topic also highlights the importance of adopting increasingly immersive and realistic

elicitation techniques, such as serious games or interactive stimuli. These techniques are capable of faithfully replicating authentic experiential conditions and maximising spontaneous emotional responses. The use of narrative vignettes, as proposed by de Groot et al. (2019), constitutes an innovative methodological approach that exploits the power of narrative to elicit clearly defined emotional responses that can be replicated in cross-cultural contexts. The contributions included in this topic illustrate the theoretical and methodological relevance of emotions in shaping decision-making behaviour, cognitive performance and memory. It is highlighted how the choice of stimulus and mode of presentation are determining factors in understanding emotional and cognitive dynamics in experimental contexts.

Finally, we have the topic “Educational teaching practices” with an 8% distribution, highlighting the central role that elicitation techniques can play in teaching practices. For example, in English language learning (ESL) contexts, elicitation takes the form of targeted questions, step-by-step structured examples and corrective feedback that encourage students to actively process their understanding. Tools such as photo elicitation and image interpretation are also used to elicit the expression of experiences, subjective meanings and personal narratives. In this perspective, elicitation acts as an epistemic mediator that allows teachers and researchers to access forms of situated knowledge that are difficult to detect using standardised techniques. In STEM disciplines and teacher training, elicitation can take the form of educational simulations or interactive scriptwriting. For example, Bautista García-Vera et al. (2016) demonstrate how trainee teachers can use imagined scenarios to develop educational dialogues that support and enhance students’ mathematical reasoning. This type of educational elicitation promotes reflectiveness among future teachers and encourages them to anticipate and deal with different communicative and educational situations effectively. Overall, the theme reflects an increasing focus on elicitation as an epistemic and pedagogical mediator that can facilitate access to forms of situated knowledge which are challenging to identify using standardised techniques. As studies by Khoo-Lattimore and Prideaux (2013) suggest, adopting more participatory and reflective approaches in inclusive education research highlights the potential of elicitation to value the voices of students and future teachers, support inclusive educational practices, encourage critical thinking, and construct more equitable teaching relationships.

Lexical correspondence analysis and cluster analysis

Following the exploratory phase, which was based on topic modelling, the analysis was deepened further by means of a Lexical Correspondence Analysis (LCA)², followed by Cluster Analysis (Lebart 1994) with the aim of summarising the information contained in the corpus and investigating its latent structure. This strategy allows us to explore the relationships between themes, lexicon and contextual variables,

² Lexical correspondence analysis (LCA) is a statistical technique for analysing textual data, particularly useful for examining relationships between words and documents (Greenacre 2010). It is an exploratory technique that provides graphical representations of contingency tables and multivariate categorical data (Hoffman and Franke 1986; Greenacre and Hastie 1987).

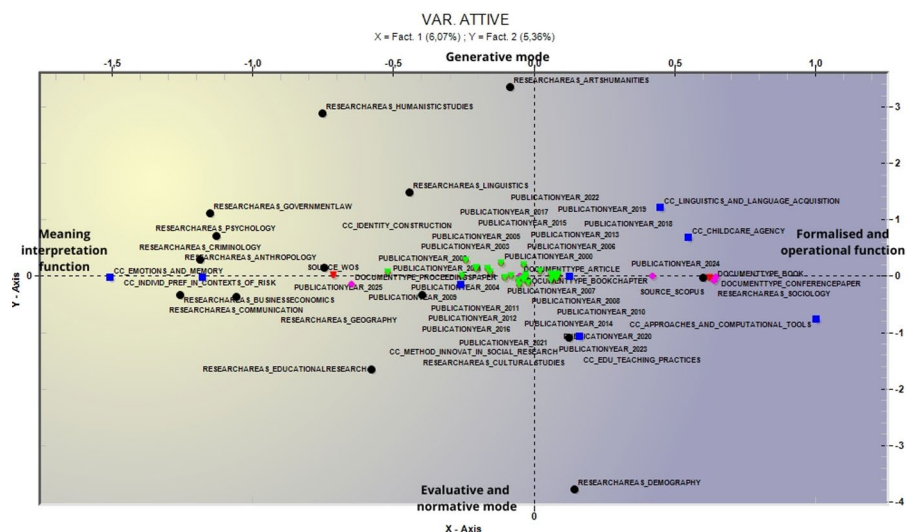


Fig. 5 Factorial plan with active and illustrative variable illustrated (made by T-Lab)

offering a multidimensional representation of the discursive field relating to elicitation practices in the social sciences.

The application of LCA enabled the identification of two latent dimensions, designated factors, which were represented graphically on a factorial plane. This representation enables the visualisation of the thematic distribution that has been previously identified, the most characteristic lemmas of each theme, as well as the active and illustrative variables that have been used in the analysis.

The active variables, i.e. those that contribute directly to the construction of the factorial space, include the most frequent words occurring in the themes that emerged, the themes identified through topic modelling and the research area. The latter comprises 12 categories: The following subjects are covered: demography, government law, criminology, anthropology, geography, humanistic studies, communication, linguistics, educational research, psychology, business economics and sociology.

The illustrative variables, which do not influence the generation of factors but allow for a more sociologically dense reading, are the remaining ones and include the year of publication and the type of document (scientific article, book chapter, monographic volume or conference proceedings).

The total inertia extracted from the two factors is 11.43% (6.07% of the X axis and 5.36% of the Y axis).

As shown in Fig. 5, the LCA highlights two main semantic axes that structure the discursive field of elicitation in the social sciences.

The first factor (horizontal axis) identified through factor analysis describes an epistemological dichotomy relating to the *function attributed to elicitation*. On the negative side of the spectrum are practices aimed at generating meaning through interpretation, centred on the subjectivity of social actors and on the dialogic dynamics of situated interaction; on the other hand, there is a formalised approach, in which elicitation is conceived as a technical-operational device aimed at producing struc-

tured, replicable and sometimes computationalised data. This axis highlights a tension between two modes of knowledge production: one based on lived experience, intentionality and narration (as in the case of studies on identity, emotions or risk perception), and the other anchored in procedural and standardised models, often supported by digital technologies and oriented towards analytical efficiency. The negative semi-axis therefore includes contexts in which elicitation takes the form of a generative and relational practice — as in biographical accounts or the use of evocative *stimuli* — while the positive semi-axis includes more rigidly codified forms of elicitation, integrated into computational frameworks and aimed at the systematic collection of information.

The second factor (vertical axis) articulates a distinction regarding the *ways in which meaning emerges through elicitation*. On the one hand, it contrasts a normative and evaluative dimension, in which elicitation operates as a device for regulating, measuring or monitoring the subject; on the other hand, it contrasts a generative and enabling dimension, in which this practice takes the form of a discursive space oriented towards the co-construction of meaning, the recognition of agency and the expression of self-representation. On the negative side, there are contexts in which elicitation practices take on a performative function: when incorporated into standardised protocols — such as those used in educational research or individual preference assessment — they aim to produce stabilisable, comparable data, often for measurement purposes. In this sense, elicitation tends to function as an extractive device rather than a space for dialogue. Conversely, on the positive semi-axis, there are situations in which elicitation manifests itself as a dialogic and relational practice, in which meaning emerges from the interaction between researcher and participant. In areas such as language acquisition, identity construction or educational practices aimed at children, it takes on the character of an open epistemic device that values the voice, intentionality and active participation of the subjects.

The positioning of the illustrative variables — in particular the disciplinary areas, the type of document and the temporal distribution — reinforces the interpretative validity of the factorial plan. Qualitative and interpretative social sciences (such as anthropology, psychology and risk studies) are mainly associated with narrative and subjectivising forms of elicitation. On the contrary, applied or pedagogical disciplines (such as linguistics and education sciences) tend to use elicitation in an instrumental way, as an operational or teaching technique. From a diachronic perspective, the plan emphasises a notable shift: whereas elicitation was primarily employed as a qualitative method to explore lived experience in the early 2000s, it has increasingly been incorporated into hybrid research protocols in recent years, often through digital technologies, and integrated into institutional and educational settings.

The analysis of lexical clusters³ projected onto the factorial plane emerging from the Lexical Correspondence Analysis yielded a triadic configuration that helps consolidate the epistemic trajectories outlined above. This three-cluster structure reveals

³ Lexical cluster analysis is a versatile technique used in various linguistic applications. It can be used to analyse word co-occurrences in texts, revealing lexical structures and semantic relationships (Meara 2016; Lebart et al. 1998).

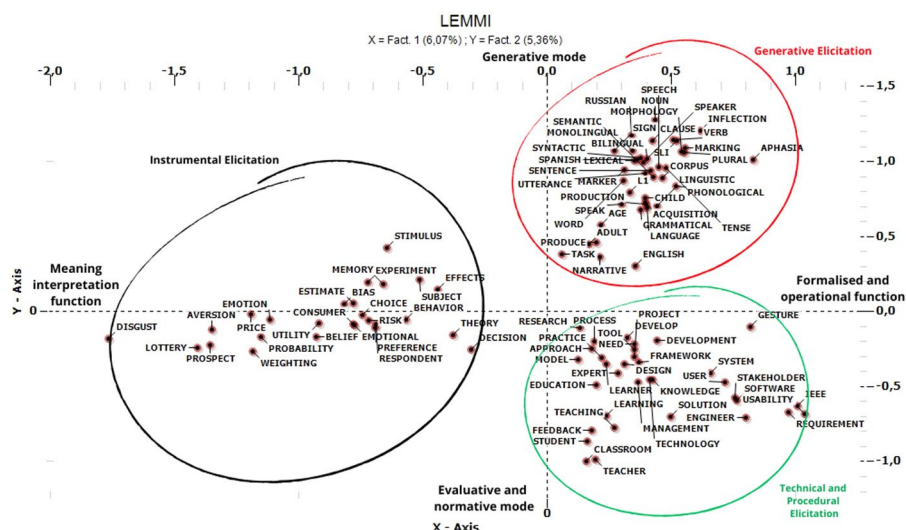


Fig. 6 Three clusters of different discourse domains within which the practice of elicitation is discussed in scientific literature

the different discursive domains within which the practice of elicitation is institutionalised, transformed and thematised in scientific literature.

As Fig. 6 shows, analysing lexical clusters and projecting them onto the factorial plane yielded a triadic configuration. This allows us to distinguish three recurring modes of conceptualisation and use of elicitation in scientific literature. Each cluster is defined based on the co-occurrence of characteristic lemmas, their position in the factorial space and their relationship with the previously identified semantic axes.

The first cluster has been renamed “Instrumental Elicitation” and is located between the second and third quadrants of the factorial plane. It is characterised semantically by terms such as “risk”, “bias”, “preference”, “utility”, “emotion”, “respondent” and “stimulus”. In these discursive segments, elicitation is a useful methodological technique for accessing subjective dispositions, such as preferences, emotions and perceptions. Respondents are questioned within pre-established conceptual frameworks and asked to ‘perform’ their uncertainty or disposition. Thus, elicitation takes on a form that is only apparently dialogical, since meaning is pre-structured by regulative epistemic models. Therefore, it is a use of elicitation based on an extractive and comparative logic, in which words are solicited not to generate meaning, but to be measured and compared. As Brinkmann (2007) argues, the interview—especially when structured by pre-determined epistemic models—can function less as a dialogic encounter and more as a form of “qualitative opinion polling,” where the aim is not to co-construct meaning, but to extract comparable and classifiable responses. This extractive and comparative logic shapes a form of elicitation in which participant voices are instrumentalized rather than interpreted in their situational richness.

The second cluster has been renamed “Generative Elicitation”, located in the first quadrant, has a clear focus on educational and linguistic contexts, as indicated by terms such as “linguistic”, “acquisition”, “bilingual”, “child”, “corpus”, “produc-

tion”, “narrative” and “speech”. Here, elicitation is considered an enabling and generative practice aimed at facilitating the activation of communicative and expressive resources, particularly in areas related to childhood, education, and language learning. The objective is not to extract data, but rather to establish epistemic conditions that enable subjects to express, narrate and position themselves. Elicitation therefore operates as a relational and pedagogical infrastructure, in which methodological order is instrumental to the emergence of meaning. In this context, technique acts as a means of interpretative openness rather than control. As Thomson (2008) points out, elicitation techniques—particularly those based on visual and creative prompts—can serve as pedagogical and relational tools that activate expressive repertoires in children and young people. Rather than functioning as extractive devices, these practices create the epistemic space for subjects to self-narrate, construct meanings, and engage reflectively with their own positions. In this view, technique becomes a medium for openness, enabling interpretation rather than constraining it. On the same side, Pink (2015) emphasizes that elicitation methods, when grounded in participatory and multimodal frameworks, do not merely generate data but foster a co-constructed interpretive process grounded in empathy, context, and reflexivity.

The third cluster has been redesigned as “Technical and Procedural Elicitation”, located in the fourth quadrant, is semantically anchored to terms such as “tool”, “framework”, “software”, “system”, “requirement”, “usability”, “management”, “teacher”, “education” and “development”. This lexical set highlights an interpretation of elicitation as a technical procedure, embedded in computational or design environments. In such contexts, elicitation is a tool for structured information gathering, aimed at system engineering, performance evaluation or the development of training environments. The word elicited is not an end in itself, nor a means of producing meaning: it is rather a computable unit, inserted into data flows and operational models. In this configuration, elicitation takes on a predominantly functional and instrumental role. In such computational or design-oriented environments, elicitation assumes an instrumental character—its function is to generate inputs for technical systems, rather than to construct shared meaning (Nuseibeh and Easterbrook 2000). What is elicited is processed as structured data, translated into computable units that can be modelled, measured, or optimized.

This triadic articulation confirms the inherently ambivalent and situated nature of the practice of elicitation. It is not a univocal technique but rather an epistemic one, traversed by tensions between: an evaluative function, when used to classify and measure subjectivity within regulatory frameworks; a generative function, oriented towards the co-construction of meaning and the activation of agency; an operational function, rooted in technical-procedural logics and digital environments. The alignment of lexical clusters, elementary contexts and semantic polarities within the factorial plan indicates that the form, function and meaning regime of elicitation practices are shaped by their specific epistemic, disciplinary and institutional ecologies.

Conclusions

In line with post-positivist epistemologies and performative approaches to social research, this study aimed to investigate elicitation not as a neutral, transferable technique, but as a deeply situated, reflective practice. Every act of elicitation — whether a stimulus, a question, or an invitation to dialogue — confers a distinctive advantage on the research process by affecting the relationship between researcher and participant, as well as the forms of knowledge that emerge.

Through a systematic review of the literature, this study traced the evolution, applications, and significant epistemological implications of elicitation techniques in contemporary social research. Through diachronic and thematic analysis of a large body of literature, the study revealed how elicitation has gradually become established — in line with the “digital turn” (Lupton 2014) and the emergence of “digital methods” (Rogers 2013) — as not only a set of methodological tools, but also as a genuine research perspective that considers power relations, the co-construction of knowledge, and the socio-technological context in which knowledge is produced. The systematic review emphasised the multifaceted and cross-cutting nature of elicitation, highlighting its value as an epistemological device oriented towards the co-construction of knowledge. Notably, it diminishes the epistemic distance between researchers and participants, fostering collaborative interpretative processes. The eight thematic areas identified — ranging from computational approaches to identity construction — confirm the versatility of elicitation and its centrality in the current social research landscape.

The results of our analysis, conducted through topic modelling (LDA) and lexical correspondence analysis, reveal a constitutive and productive tension within elicitation practices, articulated around three main functions: instrumental, generative and technical procedural. This tripartite division outlines different epistemological positions. On the one hand, we observe a use of elicitation aimed at measuring and extracting data, in which the participant is often positioned as a source of information rather than as an active co-constructor, a criticism raised by Brinkmann (2007) regarding the risk of reducing the interview to a “qualitative opinion poll”. On the other hand, a generative and relational practice emerges strongly, particularly evident in studies on identity and childhood, in which the technique, as pointed out by Thomson (2008) and Pink (2020), acts as a catalyst for self-narration and empowerment, acting as a “relational infrastructure”. Finally, the spread of digital environments has given rise to a third configuration, technical procedural, in which elicitation is integrated into algorithmic systems (Nuseibah and Easterbrook 2000), becoming a formalised process for requirements engineering.

This complexity highlights how the value of elicitation lies in its hybridity and adaptability. It acts as a methodological bridge capable of connecting the interpretative depth of qualitative approaches with the emerging logics of datafication, embodying the ethos of methodological pluralism (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017). While interviews integrated with multimodal stimuli have demonstrated their ability to transcend the limits of verbal memory and open up dense and nuanced spaces for storytelling, timelines, concept maps, and digital diaries have brought research closer to biographical trajectories and everyday experiences, recorded in the very flow of social life. Similarly, mobile ethnographies have highlighted the epistemic value of situated experience, rooted in spaces and practices,

while digital walkthrough techniques have opened up an understanding of interactions mediated by interfaces and platforms, showing how technological materiality contributes to structuring the very possibilities of social action.

However, this study warns against a purely technocratic or neutral view of these practices. Elicitation is always a situated intervention (Haraway 2013): choices about stimuli and platforms actively shape the data produced and the voices that are amplified or silenced, reproducing potential “epistemic inequalities” (Ocampo-Melgar and Orr 2016). The ethical and methodological challenge for the contemporary researcher is therefore to adopt a critical reflective qualitative approach that continually problematises their own role and the power asymmetries inherent in the research process, an imperative at the heart of interpretive sociology (Gubrium and Holstein 2002).

Looking ahead, elicitation is a vital method for studying post-digital societies (Berry and Dieter 2015), which are characterised by experiences mediated by platforms (Van Dijck et al. 2018) and pervasive algorithmic infrastructures. Its transformative potential lies in its ability to analyse the implicit, affective and tacit dimensions of social experience without reducing their complexity.

In conclusion, we argue that elicitation should be conceptualised as a genuine epistemological intervention (Latour 2005) capable of redefining traditional dichotomies, rather than as a simple technical repertoire available to the researcher. These dichotomies include those between researcher and participant, technical device and social relationship, and empirical data and construction of meaning. The future relevance of elicitation for qualitative sociology depends on critically addressing its relational, political, and technological dimensions. It is important to recognise that the value of elicitation lies not in the extraction of information, but in facilitating inclusive and reflective deliberative spaces capable of accommodating the complexity of the contemporary social world.

In a research landscape increasingly shaped by algorithmic infrastructures and artificial intelligence systems, as discussed by Punziano (2025), the field of elicitation is emerging as a privileged area for epistemic experimentation. This provides an opportunity to reaffirm the commitment of qualitative sociology to epistemic justice and the promotion of diverse voices. Addressing these challenges requires the development of shared ethical standards and clear methodological guidelines, as well as solid interdisciplinary networks capable of exploiting the critical and creative potential of elicitation practices.

The advent of generative systems, conversational agents and immersive technologies suggests that elicitation could act as a critical interface between human action and algorithmic infrastructures, ensuring the social dimension remains central to interpreting contemporary reality. In a context characterised by abundant data, sensory overload, and increasing symbolic complexity, elicitation emerges as an essential practice, mediating between subjective experiences and social structures, everyday life and abstract representations, and the analogue and digital dimensions of existence.

Author contributions All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study. Gabriella Punziano reviewed the entire first draft of the manuscript and wrote Sections “[Introduction](#)”, “[Mining of elicitation in social research: state of art](#)”, and “[Conclusions](#)”. Noemi Crescentini collected and analysed the data and wrote Sections “[Methodology](#)” and “[Reconfiguring elicitation through empirical evidence: analysis and results](#)”.

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Data availability The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval Not applicable.

Competing interests Gabriella Punziano is Editorial Board Member of the subject area Culture, Communication & Media.

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