

Article Title Page

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY IN MANAGEMENT EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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Orlando Lima Rua holds a PhD in Economics and Management and is an Assistant Professor of Management at the Oporto Polytechnic Institute (School of Accounting and Management). His interest research areas are strategy, entrepreneurship and human resource management.

Structured Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of qualitative research within the scope of management scientific studies, referring to its philosophy, nature and instruments. It also confronts it with quantitative methodology, approaching its differences as well as its complementariness and synergies, with the purpose of explaining, from a more analytic point of view, the relevance of qualitative methodology in the course of an authentic and real research despite its complexity.

Design/methodology/approach: Regardless of its broad application, one may attest the scarcity literature that focuses on qualitative research applied to the management scientific area, as opposed to the large amount that refers to quantitative research.

Findings: The paper shows the influence that qualitative research has on management scientific research.

Originality/value: Qualitative research assumes an important role within qualitative research by allowing for the study and analysis of certain types of phenomena that occur inside organisations, and in respect of which quantitative studies cannot provide an answer.

Keywords:

Qualitative methodology, empirical research, management.

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Running Heads:

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term methodology expresses the way to conduct research, the focus one gives on problems, the different assumptions, interests and motives which lead us to choose one methodology or other (Taylor and Bogdan, 1992).

In literature on business management, there is a strong predominance of empirical studies of a quantitative nature. Researchers that want to get a grasp of reality develop complex and sophisticated statistical models that find generalisations in organisational behaviour. Journals with the highest reputation and notoriety in the referred knowledge area spread about and publish these types of studies and often, for one to get to publish on them it is a mandatory condition to resort to such research tools. Nevertheless, in the past few years several authors have been upholding the validity of qualitative methodology in the study of organisations and some of the most prestigious journals have begun giving room in their pages to empirical works which were developed under the light of study cases or other types of research designs of a qualitative nature (Caro, 2001, 2002).

In social sciences, there are different methods of alternative research to carry out an empirical research. A priori, no methodology is better than another and all of them present advantages and limitations when compared. Some specialists on research methodology defend, for quite some time now, the use of a set of more than one research methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to increase the reliability of the conducted works (Brewer and Hunter, 1989). It is a false and dangerous belief to preserve the existing debate about the merits of qualitative or quantitative research, as far as their relevance and rigour are concerned (Wright, 1996). The choice between one and other method will depend, among other variables, on the characteristics and nature of the research itself. On this subject, Ruiz-Olabuenaga (1996, p. 9) states that "the use of qualitative methodology does no longer take place in polemical terms around its advantages or demerits concerning quantitative research. The difference lies on the heuristic ability that it possesses, which makes it worthy to be used in different cases and situations".

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

The importance of qualitative methodology

The potential of qualitative methodology, in which one can include case studies, has been underestimated to the detriment of certain quantitative techniques, mostly due to the unawareness of its application either by scholars or by managers. It is therefore advisable to get to know its best suitability, as well as the possibilities and/or limitations of researching organisations according to qualitative techniques instead of the usual quantitative techniques, as stated by Yin (1994, 1998, 2005), Patton (1990) or Maxwell (1996). According to Bonache (1998: 124) it is difficult to find works that focus on its reason for being, when they might or should be applied, how they are elaborated and what type of knowledge they approach. The lack of clear ideas concerning such questions puts the researcher in a highly vulnerable position for s/he has to justify the use of that methodology and to stand by it upon critiques it gets upstream. The author also states that many scholars consider that cases draw us apart from the "normal" way to make science, which tends to relate with large samples statistical analysis.

Rialp (1998: 1-2) defends that if the distinct phenomena that occur inside an organisation are analysed, one can conclude that seldom these are directly related to qualitative methodology. According to the author, management studies should fundamentally focus on understanding and enabling even more organisations action via recommendations that help resolve their specific problems. The author suggests the convenience of developing a research style with a much more applied character on a much broader scale. From this perspective, the researcher may contribute to an improvement in organisational management, namely as far as decision making, implementation and organisational change processes are concerned, with the purpose of enabling its sustainability and prosperity.

Gummesson (2000) refers to the access to information proceeding from reality and to the attainment of remarkable quality in research works as being the main challenges in this area. Such challenges are not limited to resorting to statistical techniques (quantitative methodology), which must be applied wherever effectively relevant, giving therefore space to a large contribution that can be provided by qualitative methodology.

Understanding those processes according to which actions and events take place is one of the most valid research purposes of qualitative studies (Maxwell, 1998). Within this scope, as an applied method, case studies are increasingly accepted among the scientific community as a research instrument in the management area, mainly because it is corroborated that first hand access to information and/or the understanding of decision making, implementation and organisational change processes requires a type of analysis with sufficient depth through the study of a high number of observations, which, sometimes, is not feasible.

Eisenhardt (1989) highlights the applicability of the case studies method in the following contexts: 1) in situations where little is known about a certain phenomenon which is being analysed; 2) in early stadiums of the research on a new theme; 3) in the analysis of a process of longitudinal change; and 4) in situations where existing theoretical perspectives present themselves as incipient and inadequate or have a weak empirical subsistence.

This method offers the opportunity to obtain a holistic – vs. reductionist – perspective of any phenomenon, process or series of events, where the ability of the researcher him/herself performs capital relevance (Gummesson, 2000). Moreover, this kind of research is developed within the context of the realist paradigm (Hunt, 1994; Perry *et al.*, 1999), also known as the critical or post-positivist realism paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), for revealing itself to be appropriate for management related research.

Accordingly, an approach of an inductive nature is conducted, which is characterised for "letting reality



tell its story in its own terms and not in the terms of the received theory and accepted concepts” (Gummesson, 2003: 488). Explanations are thus searched through, for example, journals, and a triangulation of perceptions and information is also carried out in order to obtain a better representation of reality.

An adapted empirical theory approach is thusly carried out involving the induction of a set of concepts until a broad conceptualization of specific processes related to the research themes emerges, referring to the analytic categories present in the research model that will be used.

Qualitative methodology makes it possible to prove that formulated questions in research are in tune with the conventional concepts present in previously analysed literature, and those complex theories or formal theme processes under appreciation are adequate to the researched context.

Qualitative methodology vs. quantitative methodology

To assess which type of methodology to use in a specific research, it is necessary to know the characteristics of each one and under what circumstances its use is more adequate.

The recurring argument that refers to merits related to what is usually called qualitative and quantitative research is conditioned, beforehand, by two problems: 1) lack of coherent definitions; and 2) focus from most debates on methods instead of basic assumptions of both positions. Olson (1995) believes that the second problem lies in the genesis of the confusion and the first one is its manifestation. Specific methods, namely data collection, are not necessarily related to any series of assumptions as opposed to others. The question, underlining the differences between research positions or paradigms, should be their ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Both have different epistemological¹ propositions and objectives (Dachler, 1997). Quantitative methodology is based on positivism, according to which there is an objective truth concerning organisations revealed through scientific method. Qualitative methodology, on the other hand, assumes that reality is socially built and will have “ethnography” as its basic theoretical referential. Adapting this literary concept to management, which means the description from a native population point of view, as an alternative to imposing him/her as a self reference threshold of a particular situation, the ethnographer tries instead to understand the way native populations perceive things (Woolgar, 1991), and in these cases they are the equivalent to the members of the organisation.

After this initial disagreement, others have followed relating to predominant logic (the hypothetical-deductive model as opposed to inductive logic), basic method (questionnaires as opposed to observations and interviews) and the pursued objectives in the investigation (reliability and validity as opposed to authenticity and complexity). The following table reflects the mentioned positions.

Table 1: Quantitative Methodology vs. Qualitative Methodology

Designation	Quantitative	Qualitative
Theoretical paradigm	Positivism.	Ethnography.
Basic assumption	There is one objective truth concerning organisations revealed through scientific method.	Organising reality is socially built.
Logic	Hypothetical-deductive.	Inductive.
Objectives	Reliability and validity.	Authenticity and complexity.
Basic method	Questionnaires.	Observation, interviews, etc.

Source: Adapted from Lee (1991).

Regarding epistemological propositions, one needs to underline that qualitative methodology is more adequate when this search gets to know real facts and how they objectively occur, and points out common characteristics with other similar facts, their origin or causes and consequences. If the researcher intends to find the existing uniformities in the studied processes, and if for that purpose s/he uses numbers, tables and statistical tests, the research style to be used will be the quantitative style. If, on the other hand, the research focuses on social phenomena within the environment where they occur, and if s/he intends to know how the experiment’s basic structure is created mainly using language, for that purpose, the use of the qualitative methodology will be more adequate (Ruiz-Olabuenaga, Aristegue and Melgosa, 1998).

We consider the existence, or not, of a previous sufficiently founded theoretical body to be another equally differentiation aspect; quantitative methodology needs the existence of a clearly defined theoretical body (threshold or ground) which allows to analyse and measure the concepts from a concrete angle. Therefore, it is more appropriate for verifying and/or contrasting founded hypothesis in the existing theoretical knowledge than it is to build or move forward when forming a yet developing theory. If this theoretical body is not yet sufficiently developed hindering the proposition of clearly defined concepts, or if its measurement constructs do not achieve the necessary precision and validity, it will be convenient to previously deepen the nature of the problem under analysis in search for a progression in the theory that will allow the subsequent elaboration of such constructs. In these cases, qualitative methodology é usually more appropriate which will serve as a reference threshold that will guide us but that we can also modify, since it will be formulated as it is experimentally contrasted. Moreover, it allows for the analysis of concepts that are hardly separable from its context and of which crossed individual effects are hard to control (Ayuso Moya, 2004)

Glazier (1992: 6) sums up the dichotomy and the vague nature of qualitative research definitions suggesting its definition by what’s not quantitative: “It is not ... It is not ... It is not ...” The author lists ethnographic and naturalistic methods and, curiously, discrete measures as qualitative methods. The author also refers that “The one characteristic that all these terms share is that they

¹ That refers to ethnography, the science that studies peoples, their origins, languages, religions, traditions, etc.

tend to obscure rather than clarify the concept. The concept seems to be confusing not only because of the number of terms applied, but also because it carries different connotations for different people.”.

Bradley (1993: 433) also includes a series of methodologies by adding the “grounded theory” and the hermeneutical approach² to text interpretation. Chatman (1984, p. 436) also defines qualitative research by what it is not: “unlike other methods, field work does not use tightly controlled variables or the creation of structured situations”.

Fidel (1993) defines a series of qualitative research characteristics, only one of which, its non-manipulative or non-controlling nature, is negative. Positive definitions of qualitative research collectively include its holistic environmental or contextual being; inductive or dialectical; pluralistic or relative; and its involvement with the research object (Bradley, 1993; Fidel, 1993; Grover and Glazier, 1985; Mellon, 1990; Sutton, 1993). These defining characteristics differ from negative definitions in the sense that they are more ontological or epistemological than they are methodological.

Other differences have been registered between these two types of methodology, as the ones referred to in the following table concerning data collection techniques.

Table 2: Data collection methodology and techniques

Method	Methodology	
	Quantitative	Qualitative
Observation	Exploratory stage	Essential to understand a culture
Texts and documents analysis	Content analysis	Understand the participants' categories
Interviews	“Closed questions” in a random sample	“Open questions” in a small sample
Recordings and transcriptions	Not frequently used given its difficulty to quantify	Used to understand how the participants organize their speech

Source: Silverman (1993).

In quantitative methodology techniques such as text analysis and questionnaires are used, but in qualitative methodology the essential technique of text analysis is “content analysis”, that is, the establishment of categories and conferring them data. In quantitative methodology the important thing is the “reliability” in the use of this method, and that means that different codifiers perform the same classifications when analysing the same material. On the opposite side, in qualitative methodology the important thing is “authenticity”, that is, that the method allows us to understand the points of view and categories of the studied subjects. In quantitative methodology, questionnaires refer to a random but “representative” sample of the population, giving preference to closed questions for they are easier to codify and quantify. In qualitative methodology in depth interviews are privileged, since they let us understand the phenomenon being studied, resorting to open questions, for they allow the interviewee to reveal the authentic experience (Bonache, 1998).

Other authors, who accept research reliability and validity natural to the positivist epistemology, consider that case studying, a research methodology classified as qualitative, does not oppose but rather complement quantitative methodology (Bryman, 1986; Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) states that when one is confronted with questions that start with “why” or “how”, case studying is the most adequate research strategy. From our point of view, case studying can be carried out before or after quantitative studies. If they are carried out first, they will be useful to generate a set of hypothesis that would later on be contrasted in a wider sample; if, on the other hand, they are to be carried out afterwards, they will be useful to reveal why certain data or relations show up in quantitative studies, or to explain the variation that is not explained by such studies, thus transforming itself into an instrument which would serve a purpose of not so much building, but rather of depurating theories (Bonache, 1998).

Reid (1994: 477) supports the complementation between both methodologies since “one’s strengths are usually the other’s weaknesses”. The purpose of quantitative methodology is to distinguish statistical irregularities of behaviour; it is oriented towards (re)counting frequencies and measuring the reach of the studied behaviour (Wildemuth, 1993: 451). It, therefore, approaches more information which enables the generalisation of relations. In the meantime, the purpose of qualitative research is to understand the social world from the actors’ point of view and to help describe the flow of social systems in a holistic way, detecting beforehand unknown relations and generating more complete descriptions in order to enable generalisation (Wildemuth, 1993: 451).

The distinction between what one considers being quantitative and qualitative has been limited to the reference it does to the types of data used. By using numerical data, one is using the quantitative method; on the contrary, by using symbolic data, like language, one is using the qualitative method. Some authors have defined qualitative data as those which are not quantitative, those which cannot be numerically represented (Tesch, 1990). This conceptualisation is tremendously poor and reductive since both quantitative and qualitative techniques go far beyond the analysis of one type of data or other. For example, in case studying, a research methodology classified as qualitative, the employment of information sources triangulation is common and sometimes quantitative and qualitative natured data are bound to get mixed up. Data can be collected by means of an in depth interview and can, therefore, be analysed in a qualitative way if speech analysis techniques are applied, or in a quantitative way if content analysis is used. Qualitative data could be categorised, without the need to resort to the opposition quantitative-qualitative, as elaborations of a descriptive nature that collect a wide and varied range of information, rich and dense in meaning, polysemous³, hardly reproducible given its bondage to the contexts and determined moments, and collected from a minimal instrumentalisation, for to obtain them one uses procedures more than one uses instruments (Rodriguez *et al.*, 1996: 200).

According to Stake (1995: 37), the main differences between qualitative and quantitative research lie on three fundamental aspects: the distinction between the understanding and the explanation as a purpose of the inquiry; the distinction between the

² The art of interpreting words.

³ That refers to polysemy. Quality of a word that has several meanings.

personal and impersonal role that the researcher can adopt; and the distinction between discovered knowledge and knowledge building.

The paradigm of qualitative methodology

Fidel (1993) enumerates the characteristics of qualitative research: it is holistic, contextual, inductive or dialectic, plural or relative, and it is mixed with the object of the research. With a wider and more detailed definition, we now enumerate the characteristics of qualitative methods. For this purpose, we base on the contributions of Ruiz-Olabuenaga (1996) and Janesick (1994):

- Its purpose is to gather and rebuild the meaning of things, more than it is to describe social facts.
- The language it employs is basically conceptual and metaphorical, as opposed to numbers, algorithms and statistical formulae.
- The way of gathering information is not structured but flexible and destructured. One of the tools which is most employed is the in depth interview, as opposed to massive and standardised questionnaires from the quantitative methods.
- Its procedure is more inductive than it is deductive. One doesn't go from a theory or from perfectly elaborate and precise hypothesis onward.
- It requires joint data analysis.
- The research is not oriented towards the particular and general, but rather towards the holistic and concreteness (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 6). The research intends to gather all content from experiences and meanings that occur in one single case or in a narrow number of cases.
- It focuses on relations inside a system or culture.

Olson (1995) completes these characteristics with a consideration of a methodological nature. The context is of the essence in qualitative research; the study object integrates itself in and relates to the environment where it takes place. The essential difference between one and the other epistemological focus derives from the global definition of research in order to for it to adjust, at a higher or lower level, the previously mentioned seven points.

The research paradigm's justification and explicitation assumes a vital importance in the research. After all, one seeks to justify the research options from the paradigmatic nature of the obtained understanding through a revision of the literature about research methodologies.

Initially, one needs to characterise scientific paradigms in general and the scientific realism paradigm in particular, so that afterwards one can enlighten the nature of qualitative methodologies and of the interpretative approach adopted in the research to be carried out.

According to Deshpande (1983), a paradigm fulfils the following purposes:

- To serve as a guide for professionals of a subject matter, by pointing out what the main problems and questions that confront the subject matter are.
- To develop an explanatory scheme (models and theories) that puts such questions and problems in a reference table that allows professionals to try to solve them.
- To establish criteria for appropriate "tools" (methodologies, instruments and types and forms of data collection) to be used in the subject matter's puzzle-solving.
- To provide an epistemology in which the preceding tasks can be seen as organising principles for the unfold of the "normal work" of the subject matter.

In this sense, paradigms allow not only for one subject matter to "give meaning" to different types of phenomena, but also to provide a reference table where these phenomena may be identified as those existing in the first place. The paradigm's nature allows researchers to determine problems worthy to be explored and available methods to approach them.

Kuhn (1970) sustained that without paradigms, scientific research will not be able to take place as a collective undertake, in the sense that science needs an organising principle.

The acquisition of a paradigm and of the related type of research is a sign of maturity in the development of any scientific field (Milliken, 2001: 73). In this framing, qualitative research methodology within the scope of scientific realism paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), through a process of inductive construction of a theory (Bonoma, 1985; Parkhe, 1993; Romano, 1989) seems adequate when applied to the study of phenomena that occur inside an organisation with the purpose of gauging its authenticity.

This methodological option finds ground in literature and has been recognised as a qualitative approach inside the realism's scientific paradigm (Hunt, 1994; Perry *et al.*, 1999), also known as critical realism or post-positivist paradigm (Guba e Lincoln, 1994), revealing itself to be particularly appropriate for research within the scope of management. To be accurate, realism is a paradigm that differs from, although it includes some elements of, positivism and constructivism⁴.

According to Perry (1998, 2001), realism has been the preferred paradigm in case studying research due to the following reasons: it usually involves contemporary and pre-paradigmatic research areas, and it is characterised by some objectivity from the researcher and knowledge commensurability. Realism is appropriate in "research areas (that) usually require the construction of an inductive theory, since deduction from the existing principles of a 'paradigm' is probably hard, where accepted constructs and principles were not established or are clearly inadequate" (Perry, 1998: 787).

Following the same line of thought, Bygrave (1989) sustained that in a paradigm's initial stage, a qualitative and inductive logic applied to an empirical and exploratory research might be more useful than a mere deductive reasoning of the theory. For the author, the emphasis in an emergent paradigm should mostly lie in empirical observations within the scope of an exploratory research, or preferably empirical, instead of being limited to the test of deducted hypothesis from still fragile theories. That is, what one preferably needs in an initial stage of knowledge is empirical models that describe observed phenomena in the most careful way possible, that are useful for the understanding of the studied phenomenon, and that may lead to theories by providing data for an

⁴ Perry *et al.* (1999, pp. 18-19) summarised the system of the realistic paradigm basic beliefs and its fundamental characteristics.

adequate theoretical development (Bygrave, 1989: 20). These models are important as instruments of scientific inquiry by allowing the identification of the structure, functioning and evolution of a concrete or real system or phenomenon.

In this context, the 'creation' of a consistent theoretical threshold of the research problem we are facing, in view of the usual complex nature of handled themes and the need to be researched in its natural and real context, legitimise the adoption of a research approach of a qualitative nature. This methodological option also derives from the acknowledgment that "the research of certain problems obtains more significant results with qualitative, post-positivist and interpretative descriptive methods", and that "problems that reflect too many variables hard to measure and poorly defined relations may be better understood with interpretative methods" (Davis e Parker, 1997: 69). That is, the importance of a detailed qualitative research lies on the need for understanding the phenomenon in depth and to obtain significant knowledge about circumstances and differences, (Carson *et al.*, 2001) and in the realisation, as testified by Gummesson (2000), that from the studies of a qualitative nature, it is possible to obtain good empirical and theoretical progress, as well as "critical and useful interventions about organisational flow" (ibidem, p. ix).

Characteristics inherent to qualitative research demand that, from its very beginning, one duly takes into consideration that for it to be considered methodologically valid, it must satisfy a set of specific rigorous assessment criteria. Hirschmann (1986) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) defended credibility, transmissibility, trust and confirmation criteria as adequate ways to authenticate qualitative research results. Additionally, one must respect data triangulation approaches that point to several common criteria suggested by Denzin (1978) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), namely the triangulation of the responders.

Inferences withdrawn from a set of sources of data must be verified, whenever possible, through data collection from other sources. So, the triangulation of data sources involves the comparison of data related to the same phenomenon, yet obtained in different stages of the field work, in different time frames or, as in responders validation, the descriptions of the different participants (including the researcher) differently located.

A qualitative paradigm is, therefore, more concerned with meaning than it is with measuring phenomena from the participants' reference tables themselves (Silverman, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

Far from a consensus between both views to come closer to a reality, researchers position themselves in opposite sides. Those who defend quantitative analysis state that qualitative analysis lacks the internal mechanisms that grant the minimum level of reliability and validity. Those who defend qualitative analysis state that the so called neutrality and precision of quantitative data measurement are nothing but a mere ideological statement, highlighting the scarce variation explanatory value approached by statistical testing, mocking the esoteric abuse of formulae that are increasingly cabalistic to reach social phenomena definitions that are progressively apart from social reality (Ruiz-Olabuenaga, 1996: 11).

In its essence, this is not a simple methodological debate. The root of the problem lies in ontology and epistemology of researches. It is the classic controversy that confronts positivist and interpretative approaches, objectivity and subjectivity (Morgan and Smircich, 1980).

Facing this controversy one might think that both are equally valid. Each one of them has advantages and inconveniences; the important thing is to elect the most suitable method regarding the research object (Olson, 1995). One may even go further by stating that both are complementary and the tendency is to carry out empirical studies that use methodological plurality to present an enriched vision of the study object reality (Bartunek *et al.*, 1993: 1365).

The qualitative researcher tends to maintain the perspective that an open focus will allow him to access unforeseen important aspects that could not be discovered resorting to more closed researches, and opens up to the possibility to discover that a certain aspect that was considered to be important before becomes irrelevant. So, concepts are simultaneously research inputs and outputs, providing a reference threshold refined by the researcher during the field work (Bryman, 1988). According to a broader vision, they can be useful to discover, refine and/or refute a theory (Keating, 1995).

The role of qualitative research becomes, therefore, urgent and coherent within the scope of management scientific research, autonomously or combined with quantitative methodology, since it allows the analysis of organisational reality phenomena in its most 'pure' and 'genuine' form, result of its methodological nature and approach.

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