Is qualitative research in Psychology an asset? Analysis of methodological options in master's dissertations

Ana Pereira Antunes¹,²

¹Departament of Psychology, University of Madeira, Portugal. aantunes@uma.pt
²Research Centre on Child Studies, University of Minho, Portugal.

The importance of qualitative methods in the scientific field of Psychology has been questioned and there has been a greater acceptance of them, especially when there is a perception that they do not constitute a threat to the scientific knowledge acquired (Michell, 2004). Along with the recognition that has been happening to the qualitative methodology in Psychology, the way and the specificity that is required in this field of knowledge have also been questioned, requiring, more and more, the establishment of guidelines for the evaluation of qualitative studies (Leonidaki, 2015). Several issues have contrasted quantitative methodology with qualitative one and, sometimes, mixed methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative, appears as an alternative with possibilities to overcome difficulties associated with every single one (Toomela, 2011). This paper aims to analyse how the qualitative methodology is recognised and valued in the scientific production of graduate education in Psychology. More specifically, it was analysed the production of master's dissertations carried out under a master’s degree course in Educational Psychology, in a Portuguese public university, between 2010 and 2017, and available online at the institutional digital repository.

According to the defined descriptors, 68 master's dissertations were found and 14 (20%) of them used qualitative methods, 5 (7%) were qualitative and 9 (13%) were mixed studies. The researches that used only qualitative methods were diverse concerning thematic and methodological procedures. It was verified that they were carried out with the purpose of describing and understanding situations, adopting paradigms typically associated to the qualitative methodology such as grounded theory, ethnography or phenomenology. However, it was registered more mixed studies, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, when compared to qualitative studies. In the case of mixed studies, it seems that more conventional paradigms did not apply so clearly and the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology seemed to occur as a generic qualitative methodology, as Percy, Kostere and Kostere (2015) suggest. In fact, several of these works were defined as case studies, and case studies are also characterised by the possibility of combining several data sources. This conjugation, according to Creswell (2009), occurred in three different ways: a sequential explanatory procedure (first happened the collection of quantitative data and then the collection of qualitative data); a sequential exploratory procedure (first, it was collected qualitative data and, afterwards, it was collected quantitative data); or as a concurrent triangulation procedure (quantitative and qualitative concurrent data was collected for comparison). Data show that qualitative methodology is recognised as a way of doing science, despite the predominance of the quantitative methods in the master’s dissertations produced. These results are according to recent international studies (Povee & Roberts, 2014; Roberts & Povee, 2014; Rubin, Bell, & McClelland, 2018; Wiggins, Gordon-Finlaysonb, Beckerc, & Sullivan, 2015), revealing that quantitative methodology still tends to be the dominant paradigm, thus conditioning training and research opportunities offered to students.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research; mixed methods; graduate education; Psychology.
Acknowledgments. This work was financed by National Funds through the FCT (Foundation for Science and Technology) and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (FEDER) through the COMPETE 2020 - Operational Program for Competitiveness and Internationalization (POCI) within the CIEC (Research Centre on Child Studies at the University of Minho) under the reference POCI-01-0145-FEDER-007562.

References


