



Why should University Lecturers focus on teaching about qualitative data Analysis strategies in humanities?: A Content analysis of research designs chosen for master theses

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 30th October 2013, revised 6th December 2013, accepted 3rd February 2014

Abstract

Choosing the correct research design is one of the most important steps when writing any kind of thesis. The following paper describes the results from a quantitative research realised on the topic of how students select research designs. The main goals of this study were to identify whereas the preference for a certain research strategy depends on the form of study, and whereas the research strategies used by students are associated with approaches to various areas of their interests. The main research method used was content analysis and statistical tests were performed using the software IBM SPSS v.17. The research found significant differences between full time and part-time students in most areas. The author stresses the importance of focusing on teaching about qualitative data analysis and associated techniques in the field of social work and humanities in general.

Keywords: Research design, qualitative research, quantitative research, fulltime study, part-time study.

Introduction

For college/university students, choosing the correct research strategy is important for many reasons. The most significant would possibly be the following: It does not only explain the performed research, but also justifies all the major choices that were made throughout the writing process. It can further be one of the easiest places within the thesis to either gain or lose points, since it can usually be reviewed from lecturers from various disciplinary fields. Finally, it is probably the most challenging chapter of the thesis to write in a clear and consistent way. Broadly speaking, when a student does a thesis, he or she will use one of three research designs: a qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods research design¹. The choice of research design is usually guided by the research paradigm the student believes in and the type of research he or she is trying to carry out. A paradigm can be understood as a worldview, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world².

Unquestionably, the three approaches are not as discrete as they first appear. Many authors point out that qualitative and quantitative approaches should not be seen as polar opposites or dichotomies; instead, they should be viewed as different ends on a continuum³.

Qualitative researchers study objects in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them⁴. The process of a qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, the data are usually collected in the participant's

natural setting, the data analysis is inductively build from particulars to general themes, the analysis of data can be performed using various QDA (qualitative data analysis) software and the researcher is making interpretations of the meaning of the data.

Quantitative research is a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. By studying a representative sample of a population it can establish statistically significant conclusions about a population. It does not matter if the population is broad or narrow, only that it includes every individual that fits the description of the group being studied⁵. The data analysis is based on statistical testing.

Qualitative and quantitative methods can complement each other in the design of one study⁶. This approach is usually defines as a mixed methods research. It is more than simply collecting and analysing both kinds of data; it also involves the use of both approaches in tandem so that the overall strength of a study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research.

It can be concluded that the quality of a research work is dependent upon the nature of the problem undertaken by the researcher, and the research design and supportive methodology selected to explore the problem⁷. Methodological decisions depend on the nature of the research question⁸.

The main objective of this short communication is to investigate whereas there are differences between students in terms of choosing their research strategies for master theses. Since higher education institutions play a vital role in bringing quality

education at higher level⁹, this paper stresses the importance of lecturers focusing on teaching about various research strategies in the field of humanities.

Methodology

A total of 114 master theses that were written in 2011 were analysed, consisting of theses written by students of full time and also part time studies. The students were from the Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Work. These are recent works that are in the University of Trnava's library register (theses written in 2012 were not completely available at the time when the research was undertaken). It should be noted, that this research sample does not include all master theses, because during the research it was found out, that some works are not freely available for inspection from various (mostly ethical) reasons (e.g. a thesis on religious sects where the author used a method of hidden observation).

I focused on the following main factors: i. The form of study – full time / part time, ii. The type of research conducted – quantitative / qualitative (Note: each analysed work included an empirical part, meaning that no work was theoretical, one thesis contained a mixed research strategy that combined both strategies, this work was not included in the research file), iii. Scope of research.

Determination of the fields in which the research was conducted, was not always obvious, therefore I created four basic categories for dividing the individual theses on the basis of their content, namely: i. A Specific Group (works dealing with families, communities, ethnic groups, etc.). ii. Management / Policy (works exploring the area of social management, social policy, greater social phenomena etc.), iii. Pathologies (works examining various forms of pathological social phenomena), iv. Health (works addressing issues of health, various diseases, clinical phenomena, etc.).

The author is very well aware of the limits of such categorization, but for purposes of this research this division can be considered as appropriate.

The goal was to answer the following questions: i. Does the preference for a certain research strategy depend on the form of study? ii. Does the student's area of interest depend on the form of study? iii. Are the research strategies used by students associated with approaches to various areas of students' interests? The data were analysed with the appropriate software IBM SPSS v.17 using nonparametric statistical tests, namely Chi-square test for association and Fishers exact test¹⁰.

Results and Discussion

The first research goal was to answer the question whether the choice of research strategy used by students differs depending on the form of study. Thus, is it possible to identify differences

in the selection of quantitative and qualitative strategies in the students' master thesis of full-time and part-time form of study?

Table-1
Type of research x Form of study

Form of study	Type of research		
	Quantitative	Qualitative	Total
Full time	27	19	46
Part-time	53	15	68
Total	80	34	114

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4,856 ^a	1	,028

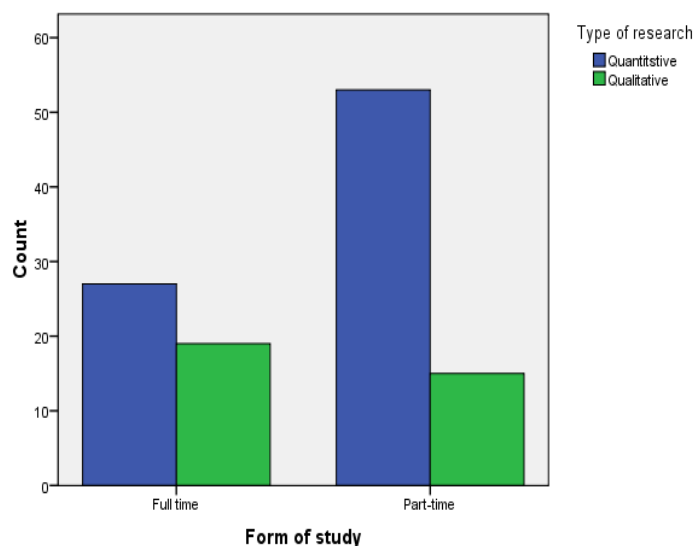


Figure-1
Type of research x Form of study

The Pearson Chi-square value $p = 0.028$, therefore it can be concluded that there are statistically significant differences among the students of full time and part-time study and research strategy they chose for their master thesis. I do believe that students of part-time study tend to choose quantitative research methods because they are in a certain way easier for them to understand. Qualitative research strategies require a deeper insight into the problems of empirical research in social sciences, which the full-time student is likely to learn more about during contact lessons.

The next goal was to identify whether the area of interest of a student varies depending on the form of study. After analysing all works in the research sample the differences were not observed ($p = 0.957$).

Table-2
Scope of research x Form of study

Form of study	Scope of research				Total
	Specific group	Management / policy	Pathologies	Health	
Full time	16	8	14	8	46
Part-time	22	13	23	10	68
Total	38	21	37	18	114

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	,315 ^a	3	,957

It can therefore be concluded that students' interest in different areas of social life does not differ depending on the form of study.

students in each category. Let us illustrate the differences in the forms of study in the following bar charts.

The last goal was to know whether it is possible to observe differences in the approach to different areas of interest of the students in terms of research strategies.

Table-3
Type of research x Scope of research

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17,133 ^a	3	,001

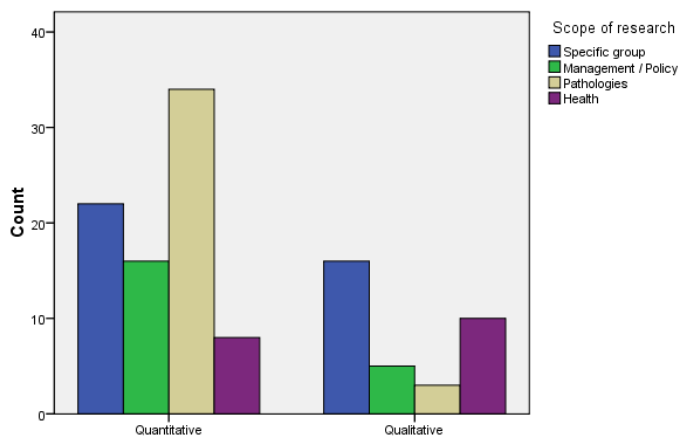


Figure-2
Type of research x Scope of research

Indeed, since the value of the Pearson chi-square $p = 0.01$, we can conclude that the difference in approach to various areas of social life in the master theses can be identified. For problems relating to various pathological phenomena students often opt for quantitative strategy solutions.

It is interesting to watch this assumption even if the file has been split according to the criteria of study. Exact testing procedures were used to determine the results because of fewer

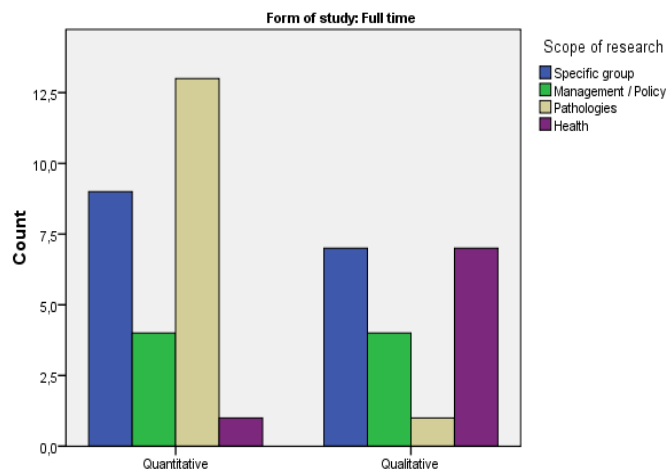


Figure-3
Type of research x Scope of research (full time study)

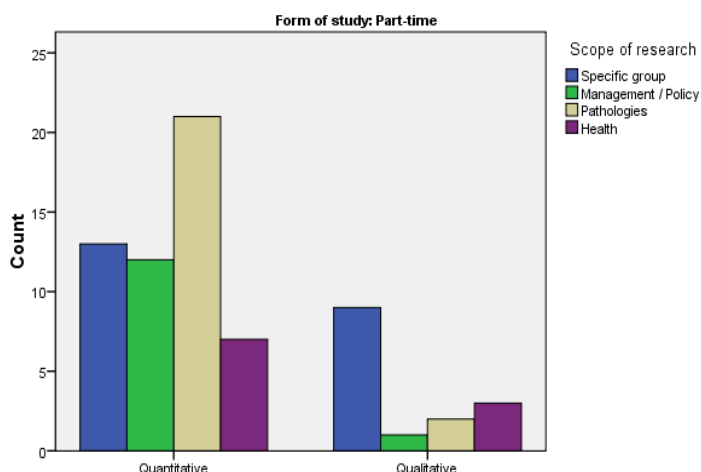


Figure-4
Type of research x Scope of research (part-time study)

Table-4
Type of research x Scope of research - results by forms of study

Form of study		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Full time	Pearson Chi-Square	14,070 ^a	3	,003	,002
	Fisher's Exact Test	14,482			,002
	N of Valid Cases	46			
Part-time	Pearson Chi-Square	8,863 ^c	3	,031	,030
	Fisher's Exact Test	8,340			,030
	N of Valid Cases	68			

The value of Fisher's exact test is $p = 0.002$ for full-time students and $p = 0.030$ for part-time students. Thus, our assumption is valid for the entire set of students, but also for day and part-time study alone.

Conclusion

The results of the research show that there are significant differences between full time and part-time students. As mentioned before, I do believe that students of part-time study tend to choose quantitative research methods because they are in a certain way easier for them to understand. Qualitative research strategies require a deeper insight into the problems of empirical research in social sciences, which the full time student is likely to learn more about during contact lessons. Therefore it is important for the teachers and lecturers in social work and humanities in general to focus more on the qualitative approach and various methods of qualitative research, especially when working with students of part-time study programmes. Students often do not feel comfortable with these methods and they also have problems with the analysis of qualitative data. A good understanding of both research designs is essential for improving the quality of master's (and other) theses.

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