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## RESEARCH METHODS THAT OPTIMIZE EMPIRICAL PROCESSES IN ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

Any proof of a hypothesis or research thesis requires the researcher to use methods that are optimally selected according to the organizational capabilities of the researcher, the adopted research budget, and, above all, the adopted research assumptions. An important factor is to optimize the possibility of obtaining a research result that most closely reflects the surrounding cognitive reality. In economics, which is included in the field of social sciences, an important plane of analysis is the so-called data, which the researcher must process and, using statistical methods, carry out the process of falsification or confirmation of the research hypothesis. An activity that broadens the cognitive value is qualitative methods and, more specifically, the information obtained using them. In this way, the researcher creates a comprehensive research process, in which quantitative methods are compiled with qualitative methods. Such a study is referred to as a method of triangulation of methods, which allows the researcher to confront the representative result of quantitative and qualitative research.

KEYWORDS

qualitative research, research methods, triangulation method, economic sciences.

**INTRODUCTION**

In the late nineteenth century, with the development of institutionalism, economics began to criticize the neoclassical school, which was the foundation of the so-called mainstream economics [1].

Institutionalists accused neoclassical economics of being detached from reality by ignoring the role of institutions and adopting an erroneous vision of humans as so-called homo oeconomicus. They criticized the assumption that human action is based only on a pure market mechanism and does not take into account broader institutional conditions, such as those of a social, cultural, or psychological nature. With institutionalism began the dispute, which has continued to this day, about the necessity of including sociological or even psychological aspects in economic analyses [2], which is the basis for the scope of qualitative research in economic sciences, especially in relation to the needs of diagnosis of cultural, social conditions of a person in an organization.

Economists can be generally divided into those from the so-called positivist-deductive school and those from the historical-empirical school [3]. The positivist-deductive trend is represented by mainstream economics. In turn, the historicist-empirical trend refers to alternative schools or contemporary heterodox economics [2].

Representatives of the positivist-deductive trend strive for economics to meet the requirements of formal sciences, based on deduction or even on a priori sciences, such as, for example, mathematics or logic. In such sciences, the central role is played by universal laws and deduction, and the tool of analysis is mathematics, i.e. numerical values.

For representatives of this trend, scientificness is associated with an unequivocal dissociation from all value judgments, from judgment or authorial evaluation. The fact that contemporary academic economics is dominated precisely by representatives of this tradition can be seen in a significant number of prestigious journals in economics, that do not differ greatly from those devoted to mathematics [2, 4, 5].

On the other hand, the historico-empirical trend focuses on everything that is related to the being part of economics to social, inductive, or posterior sciences. The objects of analysis are not universal laws, but rather regularities or tendencies, while mathematics is only one of the tools used in the analysis [2]. In fact, methods based on mathematical or statistical considerations can be described as solutions that support or complement research assumptions.

According to the representatives of this trend, avoiding value judgments in empirical analysis is impossible - because economics is a social science, hence to understand the phenomena occurring in it, it is necessary to understand their social context [6].

The two dominant trends in economics correspond to the two main traditions represented by researchers, namely the positivist and naturalist traditions.

The former is dominated by a preference for deduction, hypothesis testing, and the use of survey research based on standardized research tools that guarantee objectivity and reliability, and allow the use of statistical analysis. Quantitative research that aims to describe reality using numbers works best here. In economics, the positivist-deductive current corresponds precisely to the positivist tradition.

In the naturalistic tradition, on the other hand, the goal is to describe and theoretically interpret the meanings people give to reality using images and words. This approach is dominated by the openness and freedom of the researcher expressed in the use of methods such as interviews or observation of subjects in their natural environment. In economics, this tradition corresponds to the historicist-empirical trend.

According to Gephart [7], most authors are more proficient in quantitative, positivist research techniques rather than the techniques used in the naturalistic approach. This is mainly due to the nature of the research methodology in a particular research stream. The quantitative stream requires the researcher (user) to follow the procedure and use quantitative methods, without unnecessary interpretation of the research itself, only to draw conclusions on the basis of the research data obtained based on a specific research sample in a methodical way. This also applies to research in economics. Thus, the question arises about the usefulness and challenges of conducting qualitative

research in economic sciences, which I will try to prove in the present work by pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative methods, as well as proposing a solution for optimizing research methods on enterprises and the resources and processes occurring in them. Therefore, the main objective is the optimization of research methods in diagnosing enterprises from a resource and process perspective.

Empirical research in the sciences is like blood for an organism that cannot function without it. Conducting theoretical-empirical considerations every scientist or researcher collides with the functioning paradigm. Of course, it is not always necessary to disprove it, but the researcher must formulate the purpose of the study, which is to serve to confirm or reject it. Generally, the purpose of the study can be of a different nature. First, the descriptive purpose, which is to conduct a description of the research field. Second, the exploratory purpose, which is to clarify the research objective. Third, the predictive purpose, which is to predict, to provide a future image of the research field contained in the research objective. And fourth, the evaluative purpose, which is to assess the field included in the research objective.

## **2. Materials and methods**

Qualitative research is defined in different ways in the literature [8, 9]. It is generally considered to be research that uses a variety of methods based on the implementation of interpretive and naturalistic approaches [8].

Qualitative research „does not have a clear meaning in economic sciences therefore it is assumed to be broadly understood as a set of techniques for describing, interpreting, decoding, or otherwise inferring the meaning but not the frequency of some phenomena occurring in the social world” [9].

Qualitative research is not non-quantitative research, it has its own identity, perhaps even several identities, and it makes it possible to describe, interpret, and explain social phenomena in many ways. First, they analyze the experiences of individuals and groups. Second, interactions and acts of communication as they occur. And third, documents or similar traces of human experiences and interactions [10].

Qualitative methods are research methods in which numerical parameters are not specified, but instead, the phenomenon or object of study is characterized descriptively. They are based on the assumption that in-depth analyses of a smaller number of cases are better suited to the study of certain problems than superficial large research populations, which are often a prelude to qualitative research.

As the authors stated earlier, qualitative research is non-quantitative research that is non-standardized, etc.; it uses text; and it has a long history in many disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, organization and management, and health sciences.

The term „qualitative methods” can be viewed in two ways.

First narrowly, as a group of specific research and diagnostic methods in the social sciences (formalized and informal interviews, participatory and non-participatory observation, and a significant proportion of projective techniques) [11]. Secondly [12], broadly, as a separate research paradigm, based on appropriate ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. The first understanding in truth does not need to resolve the question posed by W. J. Paluchowski - from this point of view,

qualitative methods are simply part of the researcher's set of tools, which he can place next to - or sometimes use instead of - quantitative tools.

I do not have even the slightest intention of settling this dilemma, for me, the model is rather of a certain Indian chief who is believed to have said at the end of an hours-long meeting of tribal elders on some urgent matter: „We can all see that this is a very complex matter. We are going to talk about it a lot more”. The pressure-free need for cognitive closure seems very vulnerable in the subject for several reasons.

Firstly, each approach includes formulated rules of correctness that the researcher using it should follow. Therefore, we should be able to reliably distinguish between quantitative and qualitative methods or, more importantly, skillfully apply methods from both groups to empirical needs.

Secondly, qualitative and quantitative methods are sometimes used for different purposes and the effect of these applications is not equally beneficial. What makes it difficult to choose is that in research methodology it is assumed that the construction of the research objective determines the choice of methods, which in turn directly translates into the choice of research techniques also called measurement tools.

Therefore, it is worth considering in which types of projects the quantitative approach is particularly useful and cannot be substituted by the qualitative approach, and where, on the other hand, the opposite is true, i.e. the qualitative approach is irreplaceable.

Thirdly and finally, there is no need to make a disjunctive choice between these approaches, at least at the level of methods used (at the level of epistemological assumptions, perhaps).

In the development of qualitative research applications, according to the principle of appropriateness, three periods can be distinguished, namely.

The first period - is characterized by the fact that there are more topics to investigate than available methods. Qualitative research flows from specific research interests and from the characteristics of the subjects that are selected for study, e.g., managers' ways of thinking, problems of motivation, the behavior of organizational members, etc.

The second period is characterized by developed research methodologies. The methodologies are refined and stable. In specific disciplines, qualitative research ties its development and authority to specific methods: for psychology, it is experiment, for sociology - survey research. In empirical research, qualitative research is used to discover and develop theories of phenomena of practical significance.

The third period is characterized by the functioning of many qualitative methods, where qualitative research programs can be observed in a variety of areas. For example, these can include, organizations, management, health, etc. Each of these areas has peculiar characteristics of the subjects studied in them [13].

Science is characterized by the phenomenon of continuous and systematic oscillation of knowledge, the creation of incremental knowledge based on the knowledge spiral model, and the questioning of already existing models or theories. In this way, we can talk about evolution or revolutionary aspects in research, which is an important factor in determining the creation of knowledge.

T. Kuhn popularized the term paradigm as a comprehensible set of interrelated and complementary ideas and theories, some known, some not fully recognized. It is an important concept in science due to the fact that it forms the basis for determining the necessary tools of scientific research to diagnose the established research objective [14].

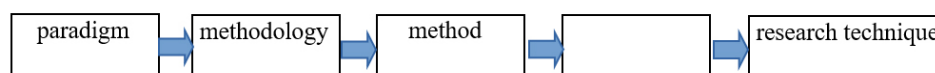


Fig. 1. Paradigm as the basis for the tools of scientific investigation of reality  
 Source: B., Brycz, T., Dudycz: Paradygmat jako podstawa metody naukowej w naukach o zarządzaniu. Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu. Vol. 144. Wrocław 2010. pp. 52-62.

Despite paradigmatic disputes between proponents of quantitative and qualitative methods, there is a clear trend of research compromise, where both methods are used together, forming the so-called mixed methods or multi-dimensional method [16, 17, 18]. This proves that the methods can be treated not as opposing, but the strengths of a group of methods can be mutually exploited, and their weaknesses, through the use of methods from the qualitative and quantitative groups cancel each other out.

Contemporary economic sciences are dominated by proponents of deductive reasoning, based on „hard” scientific evidence, making generalizations, and using numbers to analyze and present the studied economic reality [1, 4, 19]. Instead, the analysis of economic issues provides many research problems that cannot be solved according to the positivist tradition. This is because to study them, induction, the use of so-called „soft” explanatory variables, as well as the use of qualitative research, which allows us to understand the context in which the phenomena under study occur, are needed.

However, qualitative research is very useful, and its potential benefits can far outweigh its limitations.[20] It is through qualitative research that new, previously unknown variables can be identified [20, 21], which can then be examined quantitatively to verify the hypotheses. It is qualitative research that allows one to go deep into the processes under analysis [20, 22] and to study economic phenomena less superficially. At the same time, however, conducting qualitative research is accompanied by many problems and challenges. It is a very difficult research [7, 23], and these difficulties begin as early as the stage of its design and further increase at the stage of its analysis. These challenges may increase due to the specificity of the phenomena, processes, and subjects under study.

Every researcher, and scientist who wants to be proper, logical, and above all objective must know the meaning, usefulness, and application of methods and research tools.

Especially in social sciences or economics, qualitative methods are becoming more and more important, because they allow for the in-depth study of a particular phenomenon, particularly concerning the human being, his needs, preferences, competences, or expectations.

An increasing percentage of researchers uses methods belonging to the group of qualitative methods.[24]

In the case of qualitative research, the following research methodology should be adopted, which differs from quantitative research in the greater influence of the researcher at the stage of analysis of the collected research information, so that at this stage more responsibility and knowledge of the researcher are required than in the case of analysis in the methodology of quantitative research.

Data reduction is the process of elimination at subsequent stages of the study of those categories of empirical material (here: innovations) that do not meet the accepted criteria for data quality assessment (readability, reliability, etc.), do not meet the methodological criteria, or do not lead to the implementation of research objectives. Data reduction can be carried out on the basis of data verification results and/or coding results. It can be repeated multiple times in the research process, at different stages of the research process.

An example of the steps in methodology in qualitative research is presented below:

1. Formulation of the research problem.
2. Defining the research field (subject and object of study).
3. Constructing the hypothesis and purpose of the study.
4. Selecting the research method that is optimal for the purpose and field of study.
5. Constructing the measurement tool, usually in the case of qualitative research it consists of defining the assumptions and research criteria or constructing open questions.
6. In conducting the research, the effectiveness of research activities is determined by the number of observations made, and research information collected, which in the next stage will be analyzed.
7. Reduction of research information.
8. Author's analysis of collected results. It is this stage that is the most time-consuming and demanding on the part of the researcher, who must conduct qualitative analysis based on expert knowledge and experience in the research area.

### **3. Results and discussion**

Qualitative and quantitative approaches understand the meaning of the research process differently. The goal of the qualitative approach is not, as in the quantitative one, the explanation and control, but the understanding of the phenomenon under study, which is reached by reconstructing the internal perspective of the people participating in it. The knowledge obtained is certainly not objective - on the contrary, it is considered valuable if it adequately reflects the subjective senses and points of view, which ideally should be confirmed by the research participants themselves. With such an understanding of the research process, the classical nomothetic criteria of method quality do not apply, but within the qualitative approach, separate principles have been developed, of which the most widely known is perhaps Lincoln and Guba's [25] approach. It proposes four criteria that are counterparts to the classic criteria of quantitative methodology.

There are various arguments for using qualitative research in the economic sciences as well.

Firstly, this research does not aim to measure a phenomenon but to better understand it and give it meaning [26]. Secondly, it allows for a holistic approach to complex and dynamic social phenomena that makes it possible to describe economic sciences and

broadly present their context [27] and help to search for the determinants of these phenomena in economic sciences taking into account their humanistic nature [28]. Thirdly, qualitative research makes it possible to recognize many nuances in attitudes and behaviors that researchers using other methods may miss. This is because when using qualitative research, these attitudes and behaviors can be studied in their natural environment, and thus can be better understood [29]. Fourthly, although qualitative research provides conclusions that are not statistically significant, it allows for socially relevant inferences [28]. It is also possible to analyze both typical and unique cases that are of interest to the social science researcher. This is because quantitative research only takes into account what is typical - it is often even normal practice to eliminate extreme, different data so as not to distort calculated statistical measures [29].

Fifthly, qualitative research is best suited to analyze phenomena about which little is known, or so-called exploration. Exploring a previously poorly understood issue is most often not possible using quantitative methods [29]. Qualitative research is often crucial when a researcher enters new ground, as it always helps to know the topic of research [29] and the possibilities of undertaking broader analyses, as well as the methods necessary to carry them out [30].

In practical terms, the most commonly used qualitative research techniques include free interviews, in-depth interviews, group discussions (so-called focus group interviews), and participant observation. One of the more widely used research tools is survey questionnaires, in which the respondent personally reads the questions and writes down the answers. Simplified survey questionnaires were used to conduct this study of innovation in the fruit and fruit products market.

Table 1. Criteria according to Yvonne Lincoln and Egon Guba

Criteria for quantitative approach:	Criteria for a qualitative approach:
internal validity	credibility
external validity	transferability
reliability	dependability
objectivity	confirmability

Source: K., Stemplewska-Żakowicz: Metody jakościowe, metody ilościowe: hamletowski dylemat czy różnorodność do wyboru? Roczniki Psychologiczne. Tom XIII. Num 1. Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL & Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II. Lublin 2010.

Each of the criteria listed in Table 1 translates into a series of steps that the researcher should take to be considered methodologically sound. Thus, in no way is the qualitative approach free from methodological rigor; it is only directed at protecting other values, e.g. the principle of triangulation serves to overcome the limitation of a single perspective, and cyclical coding in grounded theory favors the relevance of the emerging theoretical concept to the fragment of reality it models. Properly conducting a study using qualitative methods usually requires as much or more effort and competence than a good quantitative study.

The qualitative approach, compared to the quantitative one, has one clear weakness - it does not lead to certain and at the same time universal knowledge. This is a significant factor that reduces the cognitive value when qualitative methods are used.

Certain, „objective” knowledge is not so much knowledge that is always and everywhere true (no procedures in social sciences provide such knowledge), but rather such knowledge for which conditions of applicability and risk of research error are known.

The quantitative approach makes it possible to gather objective knowledge, but it is done at the cost of a significant limitation of questions and avoiding in-depth analysis.

Qualitative methods are very useful in areas where objective test results alone are not enough. Qualitative methods such as formalized or informal interviews, drawing analysis, or projective storytelling are very helpful.

Most people perceive the management environment only through the prism of numbers, graphs, economic variables, and leadership in a broad sense. Emotions, feelings, and all psychological issues seem irrelevant to most observers. Nothing could be further from the truth. In contemporary approaches to management, including knowledge management, storytelling is used extensively. The word comes from English and means a story, a narrative. In literature, a story is defined as an oral or written communication that engages people in interpreting a past or accumulated experience. It is worth noting, however, that the main purpose of storytelling is not to convey a story per se, but to evoke the interactivity and reflection that a story is able to stimulate. In many cases, they replace reasoning and logic.

According to McClelland, the interpretive method represents an activity focused on projective storytelling to assess the intensity of needs for achievement, affiliation, and power [32]. This is an example of a procedure in which quantitative research was conducted to provide an empirical foundation for an in-depth study using a qualitative technique, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT for short).

Morgan and Murray's procedure, which is qualified as a classical tool, was enriched with reliable indicators of diagnosed needs. The study consisted of comparing stories written by selected people in whom a given need arose (experimental research). The interpreter's procedure was also objectified by developing precise guidelines for recognizing the projective manifestations of particular needs in specific stories. As a result, McClelland's technique meets the psychometric requirements typical of quantitative approaches, while retaining the main value of TAT, i.e. analyzing the free statements of research participants. Thus, we can say that in this case, quantitative methods served to improve qualitative methods.

Among frequently used research tools, the authors distinguish case study, brainstorming, the Delphi method, narrative collage, biographical stories, or the narratological approach. All research techniques have one thing in common, they are all focused on in-depth, even profound analysis of the research subject. Thus, the size of the research sample does not matter, but rather significance is placed on specific research subjects, chosen according to certain criteria. In this type of research, it is important to make a selection, which results in one of the following situations. The first, which consists of selecting leaders in the research subject, and the second, in which people who have average characteristics are selected for the study, which forces the use of quantitative methods to determine them.



#### 4. Conclusions

Combining qualitative and quantitative research can be considered, according to Flick, at several distinct levels:

- the epistemology and methodology (and the divergence between the two approaches) of research design that combines or integrates quantitative and qualitative data or methods,
- research methods that are both qualitative and quantitative,
- combining the results of qualitative and quantitative research,
- formulating generalizations,
- estimating research quality by applying qualitative research criteria to quantitative research and vice versa.[33]
- In the literature, we can find methods referring to combining qualitative and quantitative research. Hammersley distinguishes three such ways:
  - Triangulation of the two approaches, involving mutual scrutiny of results and, to a lesser extent, mutual expansion of cognitive potentials.
  - Facilitation - emphasizes the supporting role of both approaches, each providing hypotheses and inspiration that can be used by either method.
  - Both approaches can be combined as complementary research strategies [13].
- The main tenets of mixed methodologies are formulated as follows.
  - Mixed methodologies are intended to fulfill two requirements:
    - combine multiple approaches at all stages of the study (defining the research problem, collecting data, analyzing them, and formulating final conclusions),
    - involve the simultaneous transformation of data and their analysis by more than one approach.

Attempts at methodological integration between quantitative and qualitative methods have been made many times. Some of the results are considered beneficial by the author and are used in her own research work.

It is important to emphasize that modern versions of triangulation aim to combine the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research designs, the methods of both types, and the results obtained through them, which can be achieved as long as a variety of theoretical bases are taken into account [34].

There are three reasons to combine the two approaches. First, there are research questions that require combining both approaches. Second, pragmatically combining diverse methods is currently in vogue. Mixed methods are the best way to end methodological disputes that question the validity of qualitative research. And third, if there is a need to conduct research with a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, the principles of their use should be openly justified at the levels of theory, methodology, research practice, and interpretation of results.

Referring to the adopted objective in this study, the author confirms that in her empirical research, she particularly often uses the method of triangulation of research methods. In this way, she tries to obtain the most objective research results using mixed methods, that is, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Each study is implemented through the use of quantitative methods and techniques. Usually, it is a survey method (a survey questionnaire is the measurement tool). In the next stage, after the analysis of obtained research data, either the interview method or the observation method is used, depending on the research needs and possibilities. This requires a long substantive and organizational preparation from the researcher, in order to conduct effective and efficient research while maintaining all the assumptions and research procedures.

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# METODY BADAŃ OPTIMALIZUJĄCE PROCESY EMPIRYCZNE W EKONOMII

## STRESZCZENIE

Każdy dowód hipotezy lub tezy badawczej wymaga od badacza zastosowania metod optymalnie dobranych do możliwości organizacyjnych badacza, przyjętego budżetu badawczego, a przede wszystkim przyjętych założeń badawczych. Ważnym czynnikiem jest optymalizacja możliwości uzyskania wyniku badań, który w największym stopniu odzwierciedla otaczającą rzeczywistość poznawczą. W ekonomii, zaliczanej do dziedziny nauk społecznych, ważną płaszczyzną analizy są tzw. dane, które badacz musi przetworzyć i przy użyciu metod statystycznych przeprowadzić proces falsyfikacji lub potwierdzenia hipotezy badawczej. Działaniem pogłębiającym wartość poznawczą są metody jakościowe, a dokładniej informacje uzyskane za ich pomocą. W ten sposób badacz tworzy kompleksowy proces badawczy, w którym metody ilościowe zestawione są z metodami jakościowymi. Takie badanie określa się mianem metody triangulacji metod, która pozwala badaczowi skonfrontować reprezentatywny wynik ilościowy z jakościowym rezultatem badań.

## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

badania jakościowe, metody badawcze, metoda triangulacji, nauki ekonomiczne.



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