



Trends in the Proportion of Qualitative Studies in Psychology, Biology and Social Work since 1900

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Abstract

The purpose of our project was, ironically, to quantify the number of qualitative journal articles published since 1900 in psychology, biology, and social work, in order to determine if the professional literature reflects the growing appreciation of the contributions qualitative methodologies can make to understanding human experience.

To gather pertinent data for this research, we searched the entire EBSCO database and found more than 80 different providers producing at least one hit.

Our analysis of the proportion of qualitative research articles published in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals showed a significant increase over time in all three disciplines, and no differences among disciplines. Overall, the proportion of qualitative studies is small but growing, leading to calls for research courses to train students to qualitative methodologies.

Introduction

Researchers who use qualitative methodologies collect descriptions of experiences (typically in words), then look for patterns that can lead to an understanding of those experiences. Qualitative analyses take many forms, including narrative, grounded, ethnographic, phenomenological, thematic, critical, and discursive, each with its own set of techniques and philosophical underpinnings (Levitt, et al., 2018).

Advocates for qualitative research point to the richness of detail and attention to individual variation that can be uncovered, and to the limitations of quantitative research—in particular, its focus on control of the participant's environment and making individual predictions based on group averages (McMullen & Winston-Proctor, 2018).

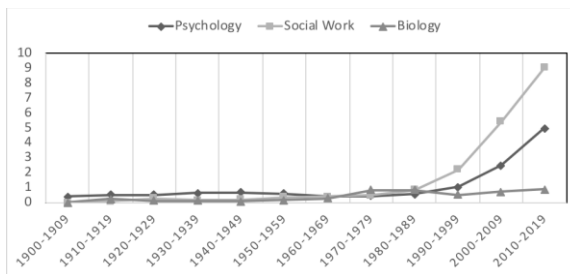
Because the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2010) does not include standards for conducting or reporting qualitative research, Levitt et al. (2018), serving as the task force of the APA Publications and Communications Board, developed extensive guidelines on qualitative research for authors, reviewers, and editors. Similarly, finding merit in the qualitative approach, but no clear standards for qualitative studies in biology, Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams, and Blackman (2016) developed guidelines for assessing qualitative biological research, especially in the areas of ecology and conservation. Many years earlier, Drisko (1997) provided guidelines for conducting and reviewing qualitative studies in social work, the earlier date perhaps reflecting the natural affinity between the concerns of social work researchers and qualitative epistemology

Method

Using the EBSCO host search engine with the terms psychology, social work, biology, psychology qualitative, biology qualitative, and social work qualitative, we recorded the number of scholarly peer-reviewed academic journal articles published in 10-year time spans beginning in 1900. We recorded the number of qualitative articles published as a proportion of the total articles published in each discipline in each decade. In assessing the impact of qualitative research on the disciplines, we opted for limiting our study to peer-reviewed, scholarly journal articles.

Results

A repeated measures ANOVA on proportions of articles published by decade showed a significant main effect for decade, $F(11, 22) = 3.63, p = .005$, indicating that the proportions of qualitative articles is increasing over time. Spearman rhos, used rather than Pearson rs because the data were skewed, showed that decade was significantly correlated with proportion of qualitative articles published for each discipline (for psychology, $\rho(N = 12) = .60, p = .039$; for social work, $\rho(N = 12) = .98, p < .000$; and for biology, $\rho(N = 12) = .85, p = .001$). There was no significant difference in the proportion of qualitative articles published by discipline, $F(2, 33) = 1.39, p = .264$. This graph shows the proportion of qualitative articles published over time in the three disciplines.



Discussion

The number of qualitative articles as a proportion of total articles published shows a substantial increase across time. Still, those proportions are tiny. One reason may be that education in qualitative methods has not caught up with interest. Although psychology undergraduates receive extensive training in conducting quantitative research, specific training in qualitative methods of data collection and analysis is less common (McMullen & Winston-Proctor, 2018), in spite of recent calls for more attention to qualitative research methodologies in the APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major (Halpern, 2010). Those working on guidelines for authors, reviewers, and editors are doing well to anticipate the need for a common understanding of what constitutes high quality qualitative research. In all three disciplines, those creating the guidelines speak of an ultimate goal of qualitative and quantitative integration—the use of the methods' complementary strengths in increasing knowledge.

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