

## THE PROBLEM OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: THE PLACE OF METHODOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

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### Abstract

We have tried to explore the place of methodology in contemporary research in social and humanistic sciences; to consider the status of the methodology facing SCI lists, scoring, proliferation of papers that threaten to jeopardize the quality and the status of the social sciences. The basic question we want to find the answer to is whether there has been a so-called crisis of methodology. Our goal is to draw attention to the quantification of quasi-research that does not provide concrete answers to the social problems they (should) investigate.

**Key words:** methodology, research, social sciences, quantity, quality.

## ПРОБЛЕМ ИСТРАЖИВАЊА У ДРУШТВЕНИМ НАУКАМА: МЕСТО МЕТОДОЛОГИЈЕ У САВРЕМЕНИМ ИСТРАЖИВАЊИМА

### Апстракт

Покушали смо да истражимо место методологије у савременим истраживањима у друштвеним и хуманистичким наукама; да размотримо статус методологије која се суочава са СЦИ листама, бодовањем, пролиферацијом радова који прете да угрозе квалитет и статус друштвених наука. Основно питање на које желимо да пронађемо одговор јесте да ли је дошло до такозване кризе методологије. Циљ нам је да скренемо пажњу на квантификацију квази истраживања која не дају конкретне одговоре на друштвене проблеме које (би требало) да истражују.

**Кључне речи:** методологија, истраживање, друштвене науке, квантитет, квалитет.

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### *INTRODUCTION*

The first and the most important step on which the further course of research and the relevance of the obtained results depend is to design a scientific research plan. The selection of relevant subject of research, the properly proposed hypothesis, the basic research questions, the selection of the representative sample and setting the research goals and tasks are only some of the steps in this mental activity (Andrić, 2017: 78-85). However, running the race for points and being published in the SCI/SSCI listed journals has resulted in the decline of quality of scientific papers in social sciences and the quantification of quasi research which do not deal with key social problems. More and more often the researchers skip the basic steps in conducting research or omit the research outlining. In the course of our academic and scientific work, we have noticed that there is a proliferation of papers which do not investigate important and current social problems. Here we will accept and emphasize the attitude of Milić and Znanjecki that the primary experience of sociologists represents a special source of information for (sociological) research (in Ilić & Veljković, 2016: 9).

In other words, in contemporary social sciences there are insufficient practical researches that deal with the needs and problems of a society. Instead of scientific discoveries, the attention of the academic public should be directed at pragmatic and applicative research. On the other hand, there is a proliferation of Internet surveys, to be more precise, the research based on online questionnaires (Petrović, 2014; Maliković, Švegar & Borković, 2017; Maliković, Švegar & Šomodžić, 2017). Despite many shortcomings, online researches are increasingly used both nationally and internationally, although their approach has not yet been sufficiently investigated. In the imposed race for points and being published in the SCI/SSCI listed journals, the scientists resort to “instant” researches which are reduced to cabinet work, classification and scientific explanations, while “live” field work and gathering of new data have been neglected.

### *CHARACTERISTICS AND PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES*

Traditionally, the research methods in social sciences are classified as qualitative and quantitative, and in the contemporary science, it is insisted upon the classification of methodology into qualitative and quantitative (Šuvaković, 2011: 396). Qualitative research describes phenomena with words, the phenomenon is not reduced, and the sample subjects are selected according to certain characteristics. In the last several decades, the more frequent use of qualitative methodology has been noticed and with the increase of qualitative researches there comes a need for more

precise standards of their quality control (Đurić, 2010; Milašinović & Kešetović, 2012). On the other hand, there is also an increase in online research within contemporary research. The Internet is not only a source of information, or the source of secondary sources, scientific papers and researches, but it has become one of the main tools of scientific research (Petrović, 2014: 63; Maliković, Švegar & Borković, 2017). Using online questionnaires and forms in social researches (psychology, pedagogy, sociology, economics, and political sciences) is on the rise, although their advantages and disadvantages, as well as their influence on social theory and the growth of scientific knowledge have not yet been fully investigated. Using online questionnaires, the data are gathered from respondents via the Internet (Internet questionnaires), and their main advantage is the speed of collection and processing of data, as well as low costs of conducting research. Then, the advantages of online research are in that it is easier and faster to obtain data, as well as to arrange them since they are already digitalized; it is easier to approach the respondents regardless of the geographic distance; the respondents are not limited in time for giving their responses; human errors are reduced; there is a possibility to select controlled samples. On the other hand, the most frequent objections include the rate of response and the sample representation, since only the individuals with the access to the Internet can participate in the research. Moreover, it is impossible to establish who answered to the questions and if the same individual has filled in the same questionnaire more than once. However, the problem of sampling is one of the greatest limitations (Petrović, 2014: 64-70). When outlining an online questionnaire, care should be taken strictly about the formulation of questions because of the absence of the examiner – the questions must be formulated clearly, precisely and unambiguously because the examiner is not there to explain and elaborate them. We would add that one serious shortcoming of such a manner of collecting data is also the inability to observe facial expressions and body language of the respondents, which are also a rich source of information when collecting data using traditional questionnaires - when there is a relationship established between an examiner and a respondent. The escalation in Internet (online) research has also influenced the methodology of social researches (Branković, 2013). The first change is the very shift to the research on the Internet. There is also a change in research framework in terms of time and space.

Some authors indicate that the problem of contemporary science is the commercialization of applied research at universities at the expense of basic research whose task is to expand human knowledge (Rončević & Pavkov-Hrvojević, 2018). The justification for this is decreased financing of basic research as an expensive investment. We are of the opinion that such an attitude is wrong and that it is necessary to invest into the development of science and scientific knowledge, the methodological problems

being among them. Without the development of methodology there is no development of individual sciences, since science and method are inseparable (Milić, 1978; Šušnjić, 2007; Milosavljević & Radosavljević, 2013). Some of the causes of reduced investment into basic research are of political nature, but we shall not deal with this issue in this paper.

More important here is the race for impact factor (IF).

The attempt to evaluate the quality of scientific researches in quantitative manner through IF measuring of scientific journals and citation of papers has resulted in the reduction of basic research being carried out. The considerable number of scientists is trying to get “liked” by editors of the leading journals and they select their experiments accordingly... (Rončević & Pavkov-Hrvojević, 2018)

The quantity of scientific papers has become more important than the quality of scientific results. Faced with the requirements set for career progress, IF, SCI, SSCI and other factors, academic scientists are largely forced to “flirt” with the quality of their papers in order to achieve a certain score. However, there is no applied research without basic research, since the applied research uses the knowledge acquired through basic research. Also, without basic research there is no development of methods and methodology. In recent decades, all over the European Union, it has been insisted upon the cooperation and connection of universities and industry, or in other words, on the harmonization of the basic and related research, since giving freedom to scientists gives better (practical) results (Rončević & Pavkov-Hrvojević, 2018).

Another important characteristic of contemporary science is the quality evaluation of universities and its influence on science and research work (Hodolčić, et al, 2011; Popović & Vujisić-Živković, 2012). Science and research work are one of the obligations at faculties/universities - the application of applied research and creation of new knowledge (Hodolčić, et al, 2011). In Europe, the quality of higher education is provided through evaluation and accreditation: evaluation is given by grades ranging from unsatisfactory, through conditional and good to excellent, while the accreditation evaluates if the previously defined standards have been fulfilled. In Serbia, the competence of a scientific-research organization (faculty, university or institute) is evaluated by numerous criteria which refer, among other things, to the number and quality of scientific and research projects in the previous 4 years which are (co)financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, to the current scientific and research projects (co)financed by the Ministry, to the scientific and research projects within international cooperation, then to the quality of the ongoing projects, to the structure of researchers per categories, etc. (Hodolčić, et al, 2011). In brief, the scientists and researchers are set criteria which can have two consequences: the increase

of quality of scientific research or the quantification of quasi research for the purpose of achieving scores.

The quality of research in education is one of the key methodological questions and it assures quantitative measuring of the research quality (Popović & Vujisić-Živković, 2012). Scientometrics is a scientific field which deals with the development of methods and techniques for the purpose of the structuring and application of quantitative indicators of evaluation and monitoring scientific development; the development of information system in the field of science; the study of the relationship between science and contemporary information-communication technology and revealing the relationship between intellectual and socio-organizational processes and the development of individual scientific areas. Evaluation of scientific and research work is carried out based on three criteria: originality, significance of research and scientific-methodological foundation of research (Popović & Vujisić-Živković, 2012: 25-26). Another criterion based on which the quality of certain research is evaluated is the *Research Excellence Framework* model in which citation index is the key criterion of quality evaluation (Popović & Vujisić-Živković, 2012: 26). However, in addition to many advantages implicit to scientific work evaluation, it results in quantitative methodology prevailing over qualitative. It also raises the question of whether it is possible to measure quality of research with quantitative indicators; if it is possible to use the same indicators to measure the quality of natural and social sciences and theoretical and applied research.

We can single out the three most often used indicators to measure the quality of scientific research today: 1) the place of publishing, 2) the citation index, and 3) the number of accesses to research in electronic data bases (Popović & Vujisić-Živković, 2012: 29). The place of publishing, or the journal status refers to the already mentioned SSCI and ERIH lists and it is of great significance, since it refers to the number of points important for the researcher, as well and for certain scientific-research organization. The journal status and citation index are significant in the selection and career progress of professors and researchers, since it provides objective evaluation criteria. However, these criteria have deficiencies/shortcomings as well.

Empirical-quantitative research discourse in a journal's publishing practice results in paradoxical situations, for instance when articles are categorized. Considering that the "Act on editing of scientific journals" from 2005 defines the original scientific paper as "the article which presents previously unpublished results of someone's own research using a scientific method", in journals dealing with education almost all papers using historical or comparative methodology, as well as those which have philosophical, anthropological, culturological or similar approach are categorized as review ar-

ticles (“the article which contains original, detailed and critical review of a research problem or area in which the author has given certain contribution, visible based on autocitations”). Originality does not “provide” the position within the category of “original scientific papers”, but the approach itself, taking by this as an a priori important evaluation criterion one methodological approach, while others are excluded or ranked as lower, regardless of other quality criteria which are possibly satisfactory, so there is a question of logic and consequence of this, allegedly objective evaluation. (Popović & Vujisić-Živković, 2012: 30-31).

This rather long quotation corroborates our question if it is possible, based on the same criteria, to evaluate theoretical and empirical research, the research in natural and social sciences, or qualitative and quantitative researches. If we look at the citation index, one paper or research can be cited as an example of methodologically good or bad; the scientists can cite each other in order to reach IF, and subsequently there is a proliferation of autocitations. As for the total number of accesses to research in electronic data bases, not all data bases are publicly accessible and free of charge (Popović & Vujisić-Živković, 2012: 31-32).

Finally, the global ranking of universities has led to the comparison of research and research results at a global level (Gačanović, 2010). The authors point out that a lot of problems result from this, in other words, that simple lists (we have already mentioned SSCI and ERIH) can become a source of information regarding the quality of faculties and scientific and research work (Gačanović, 2010: 185). On the other hand, ranking leads to a new form of competition (Gačanović, 2010: 186-187). The majority of authors dealing with this issue agree that it is problematic to compare and evaluate, based on the same criteria, the results and the quality of research in natural and social sciences, or theoretical and practical research (see: Šuvaković, 2011). Also, there is (again) a problem of the possibility to evaluate the quality by quantitative indicators (Gačanović, 2010: 186-187). Some of the reasons (national and global) to rank universities, journals and the results of scientific research are to inform the future students on the quality of education offered and to inform on the academic quality of programs at all level of studies (Gačanović, 2010: 189). However, ranking and ranking lists are met with many criticisms and disapprovals, primarily because of the quantification of quality and the imposed competition of quality. In this rat's race, the quantification of papers and research at the expense of quality inevitably happens.

Some authors have noticed that the sociologists in Serbia pay very little attention to methodological problems, although they are the indicator of development in a certain science (Stojšin & Vidicki, 2018). We have already underlined the significance of methods and that the development of a science depends on the development of its methods. The

methodological problems imply logical-epistemological issues regarding a scientific method, the principles of scientific knowledge, considering problems on application, advantages and disadvantages of certain research methods and techniques for gathering and processing of data and similar (Stojšin & Vidicki, 2018: 76). The analysis of one of the leading sociological journals *Sociological Review* (*Социолошки преглед*) has shown that methodological articles make 3.2% of the total number of articles from the first issue to the last issue before the beginning of the analysis (Stojšin & Vidicki, 2018: 78). In the first issue from 1938, out of 17 articles, the significant 15 are dealing with methodological problems, among which we have the relationship of sociology and other sciences and subject delimitation, the development of sociology in other countries and the development of methodology (Stojšin & Vidicki, 2018: 78). However, the analysis of the issues starting from volume two in 1961 until today has shown that the majority of scientists (sociologists) have not paid great attention to methodological problems. Over the entire observed period from 1961 to 2017, an average of 1.2 methodology-related articles were published, in other words 0.8 scientific works with the subject of methodology and 0.4 reviews annually. The largest number of methodological articles were published in 1970s (27.9%) or 2.1 article a year, which represents the most fruitful period for scientific papers. As for reviews, the most fruitful were 1960s, with even 11.8% of the total number of articles on methodology. The fewest methodology-related articles were published in the periods from 2000 to 2009 (10.2%) and from 2010 to 2017 (only 7.2%) (Stojšin & Vidicki, 2018: 79-80).

The solution to the crisis of contemporary methodology can be found in action research at lower levels of education. In this kind of research, the problems are identified by the practicing teachers (and not by professional researchers) in order to advance and improve educational practice, which gives them the role of researchers. In order to stop this crisis of methodology, i.e. in order for it to continue to develop and improve through contemporary research, it is necessary that the teachers are given education in methodology. Many weaknesses of the educational process result from insufficient methodological knowledge among teachers for engaging in scientific and research work, and the disregard for strict methodological procedure.

The appropriate methodological education includes the skills to analyse pedagogical reality, the capability of theoretical foundation of the subject and the goal of research as well as the selection of adequate research methods, procedures and instruments, then creative application of certain theoretical postulates in constituting research models, the explanation and presentation of research results, as well as the determination of possible models and postulates for

application of research results in order to improve the educational practice. (Maksimović & Bandur, 2013: 600)

Methodological education and teacher training should start during the studies (especially in social sciences), which would form their methodological orientation, and the basic skills that the teachers should learn include the basic scientific methods, the use of the results of scientific research, understanding the language of science which belongs to the discipline they are working in, mastering the techniques of intellectual work (browsing and studying literature, the rules of citation and the listing of references), the knowledge of basic methodological and logical rules, the knowledge of scientific methods for gathering data, the knowledge of scientific methods, the knowledge and respect of ethical rules and the standards of scientific and research work, scientific criticism, etc. (Maksimović & Bandur, 2013: 600-601).

### *CONCLUSION*

Contemporary science and scientific-research institutions are facing numerous challenges and changes. Globalization and the development of the Internet have made it easier to collect data and accelerated the research process, which has led to changes in methodological research. There is easier access to information, and the manner of gathering and arranging data is accelerated, but this has led to the commercialization of research. The race for achieving scores, on the one hand, has created “healthy” competition and the increase of researches, while on the other hand, multiplication of quasi research and neglect of methodological issues in scientific research work is increasing, which has slowed down the development of methodology.

In contemporary science there is a so-called crisis of methodology. In their work, scientists either completely omit the research outline or omit certain parts of the outline. This practice is particularly present in social science and the humanities on the whole. In addition to this, methodological problems are not given sufficient attention in scientific articles published in journals. Also, some authors single out the increase of applied researches in comparison with the basic researches as the problem of contemporary science.

National and global ranking of researches and universities, including the researchers, is another characteristic of contemporary science. Scientists-researchers, science and research institutions and scientific journals have been drawn into a new form of competition and quality evaluation based on quantitative indicators. The quality of research in education is one of the key methodological issues; however, we cannot evaluate the quality of theoretical and practical researches, or the researches in social and natural sciences, based on the same criteria and in-



dicators. It is necessary, first of all, at the national level, to find a way to overcome the global indicators of evaluation of quality of research and science and research institutions.

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## **ПРОБЛЕМ ИСТРАЖИВАЊА У ДРУШТВЕНИМ НАУКАМА: МЕСТО МЕТОДОЛОГИЈЕ У САВРЕМЕНИМ ИСТРАЖИВАЊИМА**

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### **Резиме**

Савремена друштвена истраживања суочавају се са кризом методологије. Пред научнике-истраживаче постављају се захтеви цитираности, индексирања, рангирања, СЦИ листе, импакт фактора, и сл., што доводи до пролиферације истраживања на уштрб квалитета. Вредновање научно-истраживачког рада је свакако кључно за развој науке и методологије, али и за сам квалитет рада. Међутим, изнова се поставља питање да ли је исправно према истим критеријумима оцењивати и рангирати истраживаче и истраживања у друштвеним и природним наукама, квалитативна и квантитативна истраживања, теоријска и примењена, с обзиром на њихов карактер и методологију. У раду смо говорили о импакт факторима, квалитету и рангирају научних радова, часописа и универзитета којима је заједнички циљ подизање квалитета научно-истраживачког рада, али и о неопходности методолошког образовања и обучавања наставника.