



Social Work: for a Theoretical-Empirical, Qualitative, “Multiple and Hybrid” Research

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Abstract

The analysis of "the method," "the methods," and the type of research in the field of Social Work studies from a theoretical-conceptual point of view, leads to the exploration and explanation of several epistemological and methodological issues and problems. These aspects, while common to all social sciences, nevertheless, according to some scholars, are challenged not only by the unique nature of the professional role and discipline within this sector, but also, and above all, by the specific nature of the particular object of study, which consists, according to an illustrative but non-exhaustive definition of "a heterogeneous set of voluntary and regulatory activities, carried out by public and/or private entities, on behalf of vulnerable and needy individuals." This uniqueness not only impacts and influences the choice of method, methods, and type of investigation applicable to this particular field of study, but also suggests, indeed requires, the adoption of a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. This study aims to explain why an exclusively qualitative research approach is untenable in the field of social work; instead, it proposes and promotes a “multiple and hybrid” mixed-methods, qualitative-quantitative approach. This approach seeks to mitigate, though not entirely eliminate, the risks associated with the researcher’s potential exploitation of the subject matter or questionable inaction, while ensuring a responsible presence in society that is grounded in a broadly shared scientific consensus.

Keywords: *Social Work; Social Work Research; Research Methodology; Mixed Methods; Qualitative and Quantitative Research.*

1. Social Work: Method, Methods and Typology of Research

The analysis of "the method," "the methods," and the typology of research in the field of Social Work studies from a theoretical-conceptual standpoint, prompts us to address and explore several epistemological and methodological issues and problems. These aspects concern the analysis of "the method," understood as the steps required to achieve a model of knowledge that can be considered scientific; the "typology" of feasible investigations, which can be classified as exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory; and "the methods," or data collection techniques, which can be described as participant

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observation, documentary analysis, focus groups, experiments, interviews, and questionnaires (Statera, 1990; Bailey, 1995; Boudon, 1996; Guidicini, 1996; Ferrari, 1997: 45-51; 2010: 80-143; Corbetta, 1999; Healy, 2008; Hugman, 2010; Schwarzer et al., 2016; Alston et al., 2025). They therefore require discussion and examination in light of old and new contrasts inherent in the adoption of a qualitative rather than quantitative approach in this particular field of study. These are in-depth studies that, if they allow us to analyse the foundations, limits and potential of research in this particular sector, then lead us to evaluate them in the light of the scientific debate that over the years has animated and continues to animate both the research and the affirmation of a professional identity of the institutions, bodies, public and/or private subjects that operate in, and pertain to, the world of Social Work, as well as, and no less importantly, the claim for an autonomous space within which to fully place the science, the discipline, in fact the various sciences and disciplines, that pertain to this particular research sector (Fargion 2009; Dal Pra Ponticelli & Pieroni, 2005; Healy, 2008; Gui, 2009; Hugman, 2010; Schwarzer et al., 2016; Alston et al., 2025).

These are themes and problems that, while common to all social sciences, some scholars argue, are not only affected by the unique professional role and discipline of this sector, but also, and above all, by the specificity of the object of study, which consists, according to an illustrative but certainly not exhaustive or definitive definition, of "a heterogeneous set of voluntary and regulatory activities, carried out by public and/or private entities, on behalf of vulnerable and needy individuals" (Fargion, 2009; Biffi & Pasini 2022).

This uniqueness not only impacts and influences the choice of method, methods, and type of investigation applicable in this particular field of study, but also, given the object of analysis, suggests, even requires, the adoption of a method, methods, and type of research based exclusively on a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. Since the qualitative approach would be better able to place the observer in close and direct contact with the reality being observed and interpreted, leaving him free to express, even on an intuitive level, the results of his analysis; rather than inducing him to measure and quantify data expressed in lifeless mathematical quantities, which instead risks distancing him from the reality being investigated, preventing him from grasping all the most relevant and significant aspects of the phenomenon being analyzed (Fargion, 2009).

2. For a Definition of Social Work: Science among Social Sciences

If Social Work can be defined in very different ways depending on the knowledge paradigm adopted, or by way of example and not exhaustively as: the sector that is dedicated to the relationships between institutionalized forms of aid to needy and disadvantaged subjects, of mutual solidarity, on the one hand, and society, on the other (Treves, 1988: 5; Diomede Canevini, 2005); the sub-subsystem of the overall social system that deals with the maintenance of the social model and the management of social tensions, transmitting values through primary and secondary socialization processes (Parsons [1951] (1965)); that particular social sphere that deals with a specific mode of social action regulated by legal and social norms, capable of providing a specific contribution to different action projects, both individual and collective (Ferrari, 1997: 56); well, if these are some of the definitions that can be adopted, then there is no doubt that Social Work, falling within the range of studies and disciplines pertaining to the social sciences, inevitably draws inspiration from them and ultimately conforms to them: as a first approximation both in terms of method, methods, the type of investigations that can be

carried out, and in terms of adopting a qualitative and/or quantitative approach (Di Fraia & Risi, 2019; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025; Risi et al., 2026).

If the term social sciences designates any observation and reflection on human activities in their mutual coordination, being disciplines that study the essential, constant and variable mechanisms that operate in associated human life or in the particular sector of life to which the specific branches and sub-branches into which they are divided refer or are referred, using findings from other sciences that deal with human relationships (Smelser [1994] 1996: 10-13); well, then, there is no doubt that Social Work, as a social science among social sciences, also lends itself to the development of forms of investigation that adopt both the method, typology and methods, as well as the qualitative and/or quantitative approach typical of the social sciences, without exception (Di Fraia & Risi, 2019; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025; Risi et al., 2026). All this through the construction of medium-range hypotheses susceptible to confirmation and/or denial by field research (Merton, 1968; 1970: 67ss), taking into account both the limitations and the potential of such forms of investigation.

In these terms, it must be emphasized that the selection of research method, the type of investigation to be conducted, the data collection techniques, and the qualitative and/or quantitative approach to be employed in Social Work should never depend on, or be influenced by, preconceived cultural and ideological, factual and empirical choices related to the pursuit of professed and pursued individual and/or collective interests and goals. Even less should it be motivated by the pursuit and affirmation of one's professional identity, nor by the claim, however legitimate, of an autonomous space within which to place the discipline(s) pertaining to the field of Social Work. Such decisions, once again, risk being influenced by unspecified, and therefore even more subtle and dangerous, cultural and ideological, factual and empirical choices related to professed and pursued interests and goals by individuals and/or even scientific communities.

3. Method, Methods, and Typologies of Research in Social Work: between Old and New Contrasts

To address and delve deeper into the proposed topic of asking what relevance a qualitative rather than quantitative approach can or should have in conducting research in the field of Social Work, it is necessary to reflect on the method of knowledge, the type of research, and the methods that can be adopted in light of certain epistemological and methodological issues and problems concerning the social sciences, which have been the subject of important debates in the past and which still today are of great importance due to the effects they can have on the social sciences and Social Work.

From this perspective, we must first ask ourselves what the method of social sciences consists of, and we can answer as a first approximation that it consists in the verification, in Popperian terms in the falsification (Kuhn [1957] (1972); [1962] (1978); Popper [1963] (1972); [1976] (1976); [1982-1983] 1984), of pre-established hypotheses or conceptual propositions that establish relational links between social phenomena. Covariance relationships between variables that appear referable and are placed within the scope of a theoretical reference model chosen and adopted by the researcher, exploratory, descriptive or explanatory of the social reality being investigated, hypotheses that will be the object of empirical verification through the use of adoptable data collection techniques (Statera, 1990; Bailey, 1995: 27-28; Boudon, 1996; Guidicini, 1996; Corbetta, 1999: 81-82; Damiani di Vergada Franzetti, 2022; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025).

In this regard, it should be noted that the Social Work researcher who intends to undertake research according to the scientific knowledge method shared by the social sciences must first ask themselves what type of research they want to conduct, or whether they intend to conduct exploratory research aimed at investigating new themes and problems; descriptive research, aimed solely at representing and describing reality, rather than explanatory research aimed at identifying the causes of the social phenomena studied (Bailey, 1995: 57-58; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025).

Having chosen the type of investigation, the Social Work researcher will outline the research design and purpose, that is, they will define and describe the context, the context in which the investigation will be conducted, specifying the purpose they intend to achieve, focusing on a specific theme or problem in relation to which they will question themselves, asking "how" or "why" something happens or a particular phenomenon occurs.

The Social Work researcher will subsequently have to choose a paradigm of knowledge, the theoretical model to adopt and use, even more than one of the theories currently available, each of which, while offering perspectives and insights relevant to the analysis of the phenomenon under consideration, may also be very different from the others, and may even conflict with them (Bailey, 1995: 37ss; Corbetta, 1999:81-82; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025).

The Social Work researcher will then outline one or more hypotheses, an answer to the question posed, which consists of asking "how come" or "why" something happened or is happening. This identifies a causal link between the phenomenon being analyzed, possibly considered an effect, and its related phenomenon, considered a cause, with the goal of identifying a correlation between phenomena or a correlation between variables relating to the phenomena being investigated (Bailey, 1995: 73; Corbetta, 1999: 85; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025).

The Social Work researcher will then select a data collection technique suitable for gathering the information deemed relevant and necessary for empirically testing the hypotheses put forward in relation to the selected research topic: possibly by interviewing the subjects involved; preparing a written questionnaire to submit to them; analyzing any documentation they may have produced; implementing forms of participant observation regarding the subjects and the context under consideration; possibly by conducting an experiment targeting the subjects involved; or even by establishing a focus group, a group of expert individuals able to express ideas and opinions on the issues and problems surrounding the phenomenon being analyzed (Bailey, 1995: 103ss; Corbetta, 1999: 169ss; Lazarsfeld, [1967] 1969; Marradi, 1976; 1980); Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025)

Obviously, all of this can only be done after having identified the universe of cases to be studied, consisting of the set of subjects or documents that will be the object of analysis, and having outlined the guidelines for constructing a sample that can be considered sufficient and representative: that is, suitable for measuring the variables to be analyzed, as well as realistically describing the set of cases chosen to be studied (Bailey, 1995: 103ss; Corbetta, 1999: 103-122; De Rose, 2018).

Having collected the data, the Social Work researcher will analyze and interpret it, formulating a plausible sociological answer to the question posed. While this answer cannot be exhaustive, in the sense of being able to comprehensively and simultaneously capture all the variables relating to the phenomenon being analyzed, it can, indeed must reasonably aim, in probabilistic terms, if not to explain and understand all the reasons, therefore all the "causes" underlying the phenomenon being analyzed, in other words, the

variables that appear most likely to impact it, then it can, must aim to explore, describe, and explain the phenomenon or phenomena being considered, in light of the correlations between variables that may have been intuited and/or identified, with the exception of those excluded following previously conducted hypothetical falsification processes.

While the above outlines, in an illustrative and non-exhaustive manner, the method or methods of theoretical-empirical social research in the field of Social Work, consisting of the steps to be taken to acquire a form of knowledge that can be considered scientific, and the data collection techniques to be used to gather empirical evidence, then there is no doubt that the analysis of the method or methods alone does not exhaust the relevant aspects for conducting an investigation in the field of Social Work from the perspective of adopting a qualitative or quantitative approach, since the researcher must preliminarily ask himself what type of research he intends to conduct, or whether it should consist of descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory research (Damiani di Vergada Franzetti, 2022).

Essentially, Social Work researchers must question the objective, the expected outcome they wish to achieve with their research. Researchers must ask themselves whether the empirical research they intend to conduct should be merely descriptive, consisting of an investigation aimed at providing a statistical-descriptive survey of the phenomenon under consideration; or whether it should be explanatory, consisting of an investigation aimed at explaining and understanding the phenomenon under investigation, identifying the phenomena that appear most likely to influence it in light of the asserted and hypothesized correlations between variables; or whether it should be exploratory, consisting of a flexible preliminary investigation aimed at investigating new and open, multifaceted and complex themes and problems, in order to delineate their contours, define them, and explore their content in greater depth, acquiring new and broader information and knowledge, thus identifying applicable theoretical models or proposing new ones, and even outlining new hypotheses for possible future research (Albano & Testa, 2022).

These typologies appear to be oriented, depending on the case, towards providing statistical-descriptive findings on the phenomenon under consideration, formulating explanatory interpretations and/or conclusive results, confirming pre-established hypotheses, proposing and supporting profound insights, aimed at outlining and exploring the chosen field of investigation or even identifying new ones, formulating new research questions, conducting feasibility studies, verifying the feasibility of studies already conducted; however, they are characterized by a flexible structure, an approach, and a degree of adaptability on the part of the researcher, more or less open to an investigation scenario that often appears to be changeable and shifting. These aspects often make them susceptible to change, transformation, and even blending into one another.

If there is no doubt that the method, the research methods, the same typologies of investigation pertaining to the world of Social Work are characterised and distinguished from each other by multiple aspects, contrasts and aporias, consisting, as regards the method, in the fact of being distinguished into merely theoretical or empirical research; or, as regards the survey techniques, in the fact of being distinguished into quantitative rather than qualitative techniques; or again in the fact that exploratory, descriptive or explanatory investigations tend in turn to be distinguished into qualitative rather than quantitative (Statera, 1990: 45-68; Bailey, 1995: 57-58; Boudon, 1996: 19-22; Guidicini, 1996; Corbetta, 1999; Gobo, 2001; Silverman, 2002; Silverman, 2008; Caliendo & Gandini, 2021; Sena, 2021; Cardano & Gariglio, 2022); then there is no doubt that, since the method, the research methods, the same typology of investigations constitute the forms of symbolic mediation (Crespi, 1994; 2002); indeed, rather than being distinguished by the

qualitative or quantitative approach that would characterize and/or denote them, they share a fundamental commonality: their continuous interaction and comparison with experiential data. This circumstance, while leading to important epistemological and methodological reflections, appears capable of producing significant concrete effects in addressing the dilemma of whether a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach should be more important in the field of Social Work.

4. Forms of Knowledge and Symbolic Mediation: between “Individualistic Subjectivism” and “Theoretical Dogmatism”

To address the dilemma posed, namely whether a qualitative rather than quantitative approach should be adopted in conducting social work research, it is necessary to reflect on the findings of sociological analysis, focusing on the aspects shared by the method, methods, and type of investigation in social work, namely that they are all forms of symbolic mediation in constant contact with experience (Crespi, 1994; 2002). From this perspective, these are investigative tools that can be considered paradigms of knowledge; they do not represent objective and immutable realities, much less reveal self-evident and indisputable truths. Because they express points of view on phenomena, consisting of representations and appearances of reality, extremely complex, as they are composed of numerous perspectives, corresponding to as many facets, as are the variables (of variables) that constitute them: consisting primarily, but not exclusively, of symbolic or symbolized entities, as are both human actions and relationships, as well as the ways in which they become the object of diffusion and communication (Ferrari, 1997: 38).

In these terms, forms of symbolic mediation such as method, methods, and research typology, as forms of knowledge that a scientific community adopts and accepts as tools for understanding and communicating among its members, take on a paradigmatic character. This expression refers to a model of knowledge that, as long as it allows for the resolution of problems posed by experience, is not called into question; however, if the solution to the problems posed by experience eludes the heuristic capabilities of this form of knowledge, then it is questioned, resorting to alternative forms of knowledge and new tools of knowledge (Kuhn, [1957] (1972); [1962] (1978); Popper, [1963] (1972); [1976] (1976); [1982-1983] 1984; Ferrari, 1997: 38).

This is an epistemology capable of generating rather evident risks: on the one hand, if knowledge proceeds through forms of knowledge that experience can continually refute, remaining alive and using forms of symbolic mediation (method, methods, typology of research) until they are called into question, then such forms of knowledge risk not offering absolute and irrevocable certainties; on the other, if knowledge consists of an agreement among members of a scientific community on a body of models of knowledge consisting of forms of symbolic mediation (method, methods, typology of research), constituting at the same time both an essential shared reference for scientific communication and the recognition and legitimacy of the members of that scientific community, then such forms of knowledge risk becoming absolute, even immutable, certainties.

In these terms, if we emphasize the hypothetical and refutable nature of forms of knowledge, of forms of symbolic mediation (method, methods, and research typology), then we can be led to an irresolvable skepticism about their ability to provide an explanation for things, falling into a form of "individualistic subjectivism." From a different perspective, if we instead emphasize the communicative nature of forms of knowledge, of forms of symbolic mediation (method, methods, research typology), then

we can be led to practice them as unchangeable dogmas, removed from any form of discussion and debate, excluding from the scientific community anyone who questions them, even in part, falling into a form of "theoretical dogmatism".

There is no doubt that the social sciences, the various disciplines that constitute them and into which they are divided, and ultimately Social Work itself, often run the risk of falling into one or another of the extremes described, if not into actual contradictions or irreconcilable aporias.

Scholars, while claiming to base their theories on observation, to respect the method, methods, and typology of investigation deemed appropriate in light of the particular object of study, often fall into truly extreme forms of "individualistic subjectivism," maintaining that every fact and event can only be the fruit of perceptions, representations dependent on the particular experiences of individuals, the relationships, and the contexts in which they unfold and develop, including those concerning the researcher who aims to study them (Ferrari, 1997: 39). By incurring real forms of incommunicability, of impossibility of comparison or even just of simple comparison between scholars and between the data collected, paradoxically falling into real forms of "theoretical dogmatism", even more insidious because they are hidden by pre-established ideological and cultural orientations, factual and empirical, interests and aims, professed and pursued, which make them extremely dangerous and can even be defined as forms of "dogmatic subjectivism".

From a different perspective, however, we are witnessing the opposite phenomenon, when scholars, while declaring that they want to base their theories on observation, proclaiming respect for the method, the methods and the typology of investigations, instead fall into real forms of "theoretical dogmatism", consisting of continuous references to the purity of the paradigms, of the forms of symbolic mediation used, practicing total closures, often authentic ostracism towards those who do not share them and do not practice them, denying the facts any relevance, other than that of supporting and verifying the theoretical models, the forms of symbolic mediation, the method, the methods and the typology of research practiced and supported up to that point (Ferrari, 1997: 39). Once again, we encounter real forms of incommunicability and the impossibility of comparison or even of comparing scholars and the data collected, paradoxically encountering real forms of "individualistic subjectivism", even more hidden and insidious because they are concealed by preconceived ideological and cultural orientations, factual and empirical, interests and goals, professed and pursued, which make them decidedly more dangerous, even leading to the rise of a sort of "individualistic dogmatism".

There is no doubt that these are aspects capable of determining a continuous tension and confusion between facts and values, which are difficult to separate and which should always be kept as distinct as possible.

In light of the above reflections, if there is no doubt that one cannot agree with the assertion that Social Work should solely rely on a method, a type of investigation, or methods that favor a qualitative approach, running the risk of exposing itself to, and incurring, forms of "dogmatic subjectivism" and/or "individualistic dogmatism" that are too hidden, then it is also certain that one cannot agree with the assertion that Social Work should solely rely on a method, a type of investigation, and techniques for observing reality that are exclusively oriented towards a quantitative approach, also running the risk of exposing itself to, and incurring, once again forms of "dogmatic subjectivism" and/or "individualistic dogmatism."

In one case, in fact, it means denying the facts as such, translating them into perceptions that are difficult to communicate without resorting to emotional languages,

influenced by the ideological and cultural, factual and empirical choices, the interests and aims, professed and pursued, not only of those who formulated them, but also of those who chose to make them their own; in the other, it means instead forcibly reducing them to pre-established models of knowledge, on the construction of which, once again, the ideological and cultural, factual and empirical orientation, the interests and aims, professed and pursued, not only of those who formulated them, but also of those who chose to make them their own, weigh in a way that is not always declared but certainly significant .

The awareness that forms of symbolic mediation, such as method, methods, research typology, and the qualitative and/or quantitative approach to research, can be challenged by the emergence of new problems posed by experience, shapes and develops the critical spirit inherent to the scientific spirit. The reduction of forms of symbolic mediation, of every paradigm, of the method of knowledge, of methods and typology of research, of the qualitative and qualitative approach, to a coherent set of expressions or acts of communication, is perfectly in keeping with the acquired awareness, among all sociologists, that every human relationship, despite presenting aspects of objectivity, such as the shared reference of social actors to visible objects or measurable events, can still be expressed through forms of symbolic and conventional mediation.

The forms of knowledge, the forms of symbolic mediation of the social sciences, and therefore the method, the methods, the typology of research, the qualitative or quantitative approach itself, thus come to coincide with the different scientific representations of human society or, if you prefer, with the different perspectives from which society is viewed, as a whole or in its parts: these perspectives appear and are unilateral in that they are refutable and open to different interpretations, despite tending towards their maximum reliability and clarity.

5. Theoretical and Empirical Research, Survey Techniques, Types of Qualitative and Quantitative Research

If by sociological method we mean the path to achieve a result or a form of knowledge that can be called scientific, consisting in the explanation and understanding of observed social phenomena, then it is inevitable that this seemingly clear and straightforward definition conceals and is subject to contradictions and aporias, relating to the current relationship between theory and empirical observation. These aspects relate to the dilemma of whether knowledge should consist in, or be acquired solely through, the development of theoretical works that expose, organize, and systematize more or less general concepts; or whether knowledge should consist in, or be acquired solely through the development of empirical works that expose, organize, and systematize information drawn from field observations.

This is a contradiction that, on the one hand, presupposes the idea that knowledge must derive solely from and consist of empirical observation of reality, considered objective and external to the observer, with a quantitative empirical approach prevailing. On the other hand, it presupposes the idea that knowledge must derive solely from and consist of theoretical analysis, based on both data or secondary sources and the researcher's intuition, with a qualitative theoretical approach prevailing.

It should be emphasized, however, that the opposition between theory and empiricism has weakened over time, undergoing transformations and continuous adjustments: from a naive empiricism, based on the misleading equation "visible appearance = reality," to a critical role for empirical research, for experiential data, in relation to theory and concepts.

The neo-empiricist model, which places theoretical and conceptual abstraction as the starting point of the cognitive process, sees the social scientist as a subject engaged in a never-ending process, in which empirical and factual verification allows feedback on the theoretical and conceptual approach, adapting it to ongoing and new factual and experiential developments. A process that, while abstractly consisting of the selection of a theory and the formulation of hypotheses, concretely consisting of the implementation of empirical and factual verification, can lead to the abandonment, reformulation, or retention of the hypotheses thus outlined, culminating in a renewed and more sophisticated scrutiny aimed at identifying and formulating new hypotheses (Di Fraia & Risi, 2019; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025; Risi et al., 2026).

If what has just been described constitutes the method of knowledge, then there is no doubt that, with regard to the relationship between theory and empirical verification, between the researcher and the object of research, observation can never be completely "external" and neutral. If it is true that the researcher is in contact with the observed reality, to which he or she is never totally alienated or insensitive, then it is equally true that he or she operates immersed not only in a factual and empirical context, but also, above all, in a cultural and ideological universe: both dimensions characterized and shaped by and through the interests and goals professed and pursued, consciously and unconsciously, by social actors, including researchers. While these aspects provide parameters of knowledge necessary for making theoretical and conceptual, factual and empirical, choices, they nevertheless appear capable of consciously and/or unconsciously conditioning and influencing them, and in turn being influenced by them. But not only because the researcher, in dealing with, observing, analyzing, and interpreting facts and social reality in their supposedly stark, simple, and crude nature, seeking to assume as neutral and objective a point of view as possible, can in reality never escape the sphere of interference and interference from others, and, even worse, from his own, ultimately not only influencing and conditioning them, but being influenced by them himself (Palumbo & Garbarino, 2016).

There is no doubt, in fact, that the interpretative process implemented by the researcher, when he observes and reports secondary sources and data, events narrated and interpreted by others according to communication codes and survey techniques that can be very different from each other, inevitably tends to become complicated, further distancing himself from the empirical reality observed and from the theoretical and conceptual approach initially assumed (Ferrari, 1997: 49).

The facts and social reality, the sources and secondary data reported, the participation and intervention of new social actors, even indirectly, the communication codes used, and the interpretative procedures employed, sometimes very different, even conflicting, interfere with those of the researcher, distancing him or her not only from factual reality but also from the theoretical and conceptual reality assumed at the outset (Ferrari, 1997: 49).

From a different perspective, but still relevant to the analysis being conducted, it is necessary to focus instead on the methods of knowledge, on the collection of data and information of sociological relevance, which may or may not be quantified and expressed in mathematical quantities through the use of quantitative or qualitative survey techniques.

While it is true that the quantitative approach, having a heterogeneous reality as its object of analysis, assumes great sociological relevance, as it is capable of revealing, through the use of mathematical quantities, phenomena that would otherwise be unperceivable and/or even observable, it is also important to consider the quantitative

approach. It is true, then, that this approach has constantly become the object of criticism, both from those who profess scepticism towards empirical research and propose a purely theoretical conception of sociology, as well as, paradoxically, from those who support a rigorous and rigorous methodological empiricism, since there is no doubt that any collection of data or information always implies, and can never ignore, qualitative and value-based choices made by the researcher (Ferrari, 1997: 50; Di Fraia & Risi, 2019; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025; Risi et al., 2026).

Finally, regarding the different types of research that can be adopted, it should be noted that while they appear oriented, depending on the case and based on a seemingly certain and unambiguous definition, to provide statistical-descriptive findings on the phenomenon under consideration, to formulate explanatory interpretations and/or conclusive results, to confirm pre-established hypotheses, to propose and support profound insights, aimed at delineating and exploring the chosen field of investigation or even identifying new ones, formulating new research questions, conducting feasibility studies, and verifying the feasibility of studies already conducted, they are nevertheless characterized by a constantly flexible structure, by an approach and by a degree of adaptability of the researcher to the observed reality that is more or less open to a continuously variable and changing investigative scenario, such that they often transform and confuse one into the other, due to the overlapping and/or confusion of the qualitative and quantitative approaches which, upon closer inspection, is difficult to reconcile with the asserted and rigorous classification and typification proposed (Di Fraia & Risi, 2019; Nobile, 2022; Meraviglia, 2025; Risi et al., 2026).

In these terms, there is no doubt that in the field of Social Work the opposition or contrast between the quantitative and qualitative approaches must be considered not only erroneous, but even misleading, because there is no theoretical or empirical research, no data collection through survey techniques, no interpretation of data, no type of research, which does not impose, from beginning to end, qualitative choices, and this is true even, and above all, when empirical research is carried out, when empirical evidence is expressed in mathematical quantities or when descriptive, explanatory or descriptive research is carried out (Ferrari, 1997: 51).

6. For a Qualitative-quantitative Theoretical-empirical Research

In light of the above considerations, it is essential to emphasize that the choice of method, whether to conduct theoretical or empirical research, the type of research itself (exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory), the topic or problem being investigated, the theories, hypotheses, or correlations between variables, the data collection techniques (qualitative or quantitative methods), the sample, its level of sufficiency and representativeness, the correlation of some variables rather than others, the choice of multiple variables, the construction or otherwise of statistical indices, the adoption of mathematical symbols, all these aspects, to provide a non-exhaustive list, belong to the sphere of qualitative and value-based decisions.

In these terms, there is no doubt that research can only be, always and in any case, qualitative, but not in the sense suggested in the first paragraph, when some scholars believe that the Social Work sector is, or should be, characterized by a uniqueness that can be reflected and influenced by the choice of method itself, the methods, and the type of investigations used in this field, which should be predominantly, if not exclusively, qualitative. If anything, for entirely different reasons, since the quantification of data, if it constitutes a way, often revealing, of expressing qualities through the use of formal

symbolism, then it always and in any case constitutes the outcome and expression of qualitative and/or value-based choices (Ferrari, 1997: 99).

Nonetheless, if it is true that social work researchers deal with data, consisting of evidence reflecting cultural and ideological, empirical and factual integration, with the outside world, with stimuli provided by the context, with subjective perceptions and selections both of the researcher and of the subjects interacting with them, open as they are to further subjective interpretations, then it is true that these are still data and information that exist and that the researcher must deal with, which he or she must always keep in mind and take into account.

Researchers must learn to engage with this data, respect it, communicate it, and compare it, especially with that collected by other researchers. However, it is especially important to emphasize that they must absolutely not, consciously or unconsciously, manipulate it to "save" their own calculations and results, or to verify their hypotheses. On the contrary, they must always be willing to criticize it and have it criticized, adopting a more self-critical than critical attitude and perspective toward the reality under investigation, lucidly and calmly accepting the possibility of "constructive failure".

Researchers, aware of the subjectivity of every methodological and qualifying process, must always maintain as much distance, objective, and neutral as possible with respect to the reality observed, knowing a priori that they will never be able to fully realize their intentions and efforts.

There is no doubt that the science of Social Work, as part of the social sciences and general sociology, shares with them not only the theoretical paradigms, but also the scientific method, the type of investigations and the data collection techniques.

And there is still no doubt that the science of Social Work, while maintaining its own individuality and autonomy, is inevitably affected by the methodological and epistemological battles that have characterized and continue to characterize the world of social sciences: first and foremost, the battle for its own visibility in terms of its acquired autonomy and independence from other social sciences; but not only that, also referring to the dispute regarding research and the affirmation of a professional identity for institutions, organizations, and public and/or private entities operating in the field of Social Work.

These aspects often express extreme positions, a true clash of sides, between those who assert the need for a theoretical or empirical social science: on the one hand, there are those who maintain that only observation and factual and empirical experience can lead to true forms of knowledge, believing that theory and concepts are valid only if oriented to confirming experience, denying theory any kind of validity; On the other hand, those who assert the need for a social science that is eminently theoretical and conceptual, believing that observation and experience are valid only when aimed at confirming theory, even denying observation any validity whatsoever.

This is, in fact, the same contradiction between those who advocate not only the choice of qualitative rather than quantitative survey techniques, but also those who advocate a type of sociological research that should conform to an eminently qualitative approach, based on direct observation, on the daily proximity between researcher and observed object, given that it involves field research, rather than a quantitative approach.

This is a debate that expands and extends to touch upon and encompass all epistemological and methodological issues pertaining to the social sciences and also to the world of Social Work. These issues directly impact the research that can be conducted in this particular field of study, focusing on the ways in which it is possible to acquire, communicate, and compare concepts, factual and empirical evidence, cultures, ideologies,

forms of knowledge, interests and goals, etc., pertaining to the world of Social Work and those directly or indirectly related or even connected to it.

While there is no doubt that quantitative comparison is based on constructed variables and indices, measured mathematically, then denying the measurement of variables, the very construction of indices, would reduce comparison to a mere comparison of different subjective perceptions, even among multiple observers. It would even be excluded when the observed realities, or the same reality as a whole, appear too distant and different from one another to be approached and addressed based on the cultural and ideological, empirical and factual orientation, and the interests and goals professed and pursued by each researcher. From a different perspective, if there is no doubt that qualitative comparison is based on direct observation and the free interpretation of reality, then denying the possibility of directly observing reality, of interpreting it freely and intuitively, would reduce comparison to the measurement and quantification of data expressed in lifeless mathematical quantities. This could distance the researcher from the reality being investigated, preventing him or her from grasping even the most relevant aspects of the phenomenon under consideration. This could even exclude the researcher when the observed realities, or the reality itself as a whole, appear too distant and different from one another to be approached and addressed based on the cultural and ideological, empirical and factual orientation, and the interests and goals professed and pursued by each researcher.

7. Conclusions: towards a “Multiple and Hybrid”, Theoretical-Empirical, Quali-Quantitative Research

With regard to the aspects just described, these are epistemological and methodological conflicts that have often led, and continue to lead, to the impossibility of gathering data (often incomparable and incommensurable, whether qualitative or quantitative) and to the failure of any multicultural or intercultural research process or project, even one that was correctly conceived. These issues are clearly highlighted by recent boycotts of scientific collaboration projects with Israeli or US universities.

These controversies, while they have subsided over the past few years, nevertheless appear ever ready to resurface in an almost cyclical, if not taxonomic, manner, in light not only of cultural and ideological, empirical and factual approaches, but also of poorly concealed and never openly declared, yet ever-present, individual and/or collective interests and goals. The contrast between theoretical and empirical social sciences, between qualitative and quantitative research methods and types, appears less clear-cut today than it has in the past, and proponents of one or the other option now seem to be making mutual concessions and openings.

The contrast between theoretical and empirical research, between quantitative and qualitative survey techniques, between quantitative and qualitative research types, while constituting a distinction that may also be appropriate to the object of investigation, cannot be assumed a priori in the field of Social Work.

From this perspective, and to address the dilemma posed initially, while there is no doubt that the science of Social Work can, indeed must, orient itself toward qualitative-quantitative theoretical-empirical research in the sense specified, adopting the method, data collection techniques, and research typology of the qualitative-quantitative social sciences, without exception; there is no doubt, then, that this must occur in order to enable the acquisition of the most comprehensive information about the phenomena being studied.

Provided, indeed, that this information can, indeed must, be communicated, exchanged, and compared with that of other scientists, the Social Work researcher adopting a more self-critical than critical attitude toward the reality under investigation, willingly accepting the possibility of a "constructive failure," the possibility of being contradicted at any time, both by himself and by other social scientists.

There is no doubt that the reflections made and the proposed research approach are essentially theoretical-conceptual in nature, necessitating the proposal and specification of concrete remedies to facilitate greater sharing and wider dissemination of information regarding scientific research, whether already underway or yet to be initiated, in this regard, it is necessary to outline, albeit briefly and incompletely, "multiple and hybrid" research approach.

Adopting a "multiple and hybrid" research approach entails not only employing a theoretical-empirical method characterized by the use of multiple theoretical models, which may differ from or even contradict one another, but also undertaking a form of inquiry that is simultaneously exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory, that involves using multiple empirical data-collection techniques qualitative, quantitative or a combination of both (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Amaturro & Punziano 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Mauceri, 2024).

Furthermore, resolving the initial dilemma requires preparing a feasibility study for the proposed research, as well as a preliminary description of the methods and type of research to be employed. This involves establishing a "multiple and hybrid" research protocol capable of describing and explaining the specific steps taken or planned regarding the chosen subject of inquiry. This protocol should be shared voluntarily with, and submitted to, other researchers or research groups, thereby implementing a form of "peer review." This process ensures a critical evaluation of the work (whether completed or planned) by specialists and experts in the same or related fields, whether before the research begins, is formalized, or is published, or even while it is in progress, thereby guaranteeing a high level of quality, validity, and originality in the research process.

While these tools and remedies may not entirely eliminate the risks associated with easy exploitation or suspected inaction, they do enable the research outputs to achieve a high level of scientific rigor, specifically through the broader dissemination and sharing of information regarding the theoretical-empirical, qualitative-quantitative, and "multiple/hybrid" research process undertaken. This allows decisions concerning the choice of method(s) and research type to be subjected, if not to actual falsification processes in the Popperian sense, at least to processes of critical review that are as widely shared and disseminated as possible; for if it is true that the only false perspective is the one claiming to be true, then, paradoxically, the only true perspective will be the one proven false (Ortega & Gasset, 1943; Treves, 1988).

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