

Methodological Quality and Characteristics of the Undergraduate Psychology Theses of a Private University of Peru

Calidad metodológica y características de las tesis de pregrado de psicología de una universidad privada del Perú

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Received on 6-22-18 Reviewed on 6-30-18 Approved on 9-17-18 Online on 9-19-18


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Cite as:

Mamani Benito, O. (2018). Methodological Quality and Characteristics of the Undergraduate Psychology Theses of a Private University of Peru. *Propósitos y Representaciones*, 6(2), 301-338. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20511/pyr2018.v6n2.224>

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Summary

The objective was to determine the methodological quality and identify the characteristics of the psychology theses approved in the 2014-2017 period of a private university in Peru. The study is descriptive and bibliometric, in which the study population was 161 theses approved in the period 2014 - 2017, out of which 149 extensive files available in the institutional repository were analyzed. The grading format of the final report of research works created at the National University of Trujillo was used as an instrument. The main results indicate that 72.5% of the theses were carried out by two authors, 81.2% correspond to the correlation type, 66.4% were focused on the clinical and health psychology research line, 47% involved the school population, mostly adolescents (69.1%) and only 6% of the works were published. On the other hand, regarding the methodological quality, it was found that the majority of the theses (83) showed good quality, and with respect to their components, low scores were found in background (.57), sample size (.58), statistical analysis (.43), contrast design (.49) and discussion (.53). It is concluded that the theses defended in the 2014- 2017 period are characterized by being of non-experimental design, mostly their school study population is adolescents and maintain a quality between regular and good, showing methodological deficiencies in the statistical management.

Keywords: Methodological quality, thesis, scientific production, psychology

Resumen

Se tuvo como objetivo determinar la calidad metodológica e identificar las características de las tesis de psicología aprobadas en el periodo 2014 – 2017 en una universidad privada de Perú. Corresponde a un estudio descriptivo-bibliométrico, donde la población de estudio fueron 161 tesis aprobadas en el periodo 2014 – 2017, de las cuales se analizaron 149 archivos en extenso disponibles en el repositorio institucional. Se utilizó como instrumento el formato de calificación del informe final de trabajos de investigación creado en la Universidad Nacional de Trujillo. Los principales resultados indican que el 72.5% de las tesis fueron realizadas por dos autores, el 81.2% corresponde al tipo correlacional, el 66.4% se orienta a la línea de investigación de psicología clínica y de la salud, el 47% involucró población escolar en su mayoría adolescentes (69.1%) y solo el 6% de los trabajos lograron ser publicados; en cambio, respecto a la calidad metodológica se halló que la mayoría de tesis (83) evidenciaron una calidad buena, y respecto a sus componentes se encontraron puntuaciones bajas en antecedentes (.57), tamaño muestral (.58), análisis estadístico (.43), diseño de contrastación (.49) y discusión (.53). Se concluye que las tesis sustentadas en el periodo 2014 – 2017 se caracterizan por ser de diseño no experimental, involucran mayormente población de estudio escolar en edad adolescente y mantienen una calidad entre regular a buena, evidenciando deficiencias metodológicas sobre todo en el manejo estadístico.

Palabras clave: Calidad metodológica; Tesis; Producción científica; Psicología

Introduction

The degree theses are the main input for student scientific production, however, the reality of university students in Peru shows that this is not being valued as a factor that contributes to the generation of new knowledge (Atamari-Anahui, Roque-Roque, Robles-Mendoza, Nina Moreno, & Falcón-Huanchauri, 2015; Miyahira, 2015; Taype-Rondán, Carbajal-Castro, Arrunategui-Salas, & Chambi-torres, 2012)descriptive. Materials: Pre-graduate theses approved during 2000-2009. Interventions: Permission was obtained to access theses at the University library. A search for separate theses was conducted utilizing Google Scholar to find dates of publication. Personal scientific production of both theses consultants and jurors was also researched. Results were tabulated in Microsoft Excel 2010 and presented descriptively. Main outcome measures: Theses publication, scientific production of tutors and juries. Results: During 2000-2009, 2 667 students graduated, 74 theses were approved, and only two were published. Twenty-one out of 67 consultants (31.3% but rather as only a requirement, that according to Portocarrero (2014), is considered a peak that the student often does not know how to reach, thus causing the students to look for the simplest way to do it in order to complete the process and defend their thesis as soon as possible.

Although this problem has been observed since the beginning of scientific research in universities, according to San Martin and Garcia (2006), the situation in Peru became critical in 1991 when legislative decree N°739 was issued. Based on this decree, the presentation and approval of a thesis to obtain a professional degree became only one of three options for obtaining a degree. In this context, the majority of students opted for refresher courses offered by the same universities as an alternative according to the Law. Subsequently, almost after a decade, the consequences came swiftly, since the production of knowledge denoted a crisis to such a degree that Peru was considered the country with the lowest projection of scientific production in 2015 (Moya-Anegón et al., 2014).

Given such situation, the state has been pressured to formulate strategies to change this reality. One of them is to re-state, in the new University Law, the significance of the thesis, considering it once again as an indispensable requirement for both obtaining an undergraduate degree and a professional degree. This is clearly done in order to boost student scientific production once again and, as León (2016)) refers to it in the current university context, the thesis should denote three meanings: a contribution to new knowledge, an opportunity to learn about how to research, and the certification of skills conferred by the university, thereby generating a new approach to the development of undergraduate research works, since for a long time theses in Peru were only focused on a more professional aspect rather than to scientific research. (Diaz & Sime, 2016).

In the field of psychology and mental health, although few studies analyze the production of new knowledge and quality of theses in Peru (Arias Gallegos, Ceballos Canaza, & Arpasi Catacora, 2015; León, 2016; Luna-Solís, 2015; Uribe, Márquez, Amador, & Chavez, 2011; Vera-Villaroel, Lopez-Lopez, Lillo, & Silva, 2011), the reality would not be far removed from research in other fields of science such as the case of medical schools, where for example Taype-Rondán et al. (2012), when analyzing the undergraduate theses approved between 2000 and 2009 at a university in Lima, found a low number of theses published in scientific journals. In a similar study, after analyzing all the theses approved between 2000 and 2012 at a provincial university, Atamari-Anahui et al. (2015) found that only 5% of 398 theses were published. In a similar vein, other studies related to the methodological quality of theses such as the study of Mandujano-Romero and Grajeda (2013) can be found. They analyzed 172 theses approved at a university in Cusco and found that only one of every five was acceptable. They also highlighted the significant deficiencies regarding the use of references and measurement instruments. However, other recent studies were also found, such as the one of Zavaleta-Reyes and Tresierra-Ayala (2017) who, after analyzing 837 theses approved between 2005 and 2014 at a university in Trujillo, found that in the

last 10 years the graduate theses show a good quality and there is a tendency towards improvement. Finally, a study conducted by Castro-Maldonado, Callirgos-Lozada, Caicedo-Pífil, Plasencia-Dueñas, and Díaz-Vélez (2015), who after analyzing 221 theses from a public university in Lima, found that the undergraduate work is predominantly inclined to be descriptive, based on outdated literature and inconsistent with health priorities, and by confirming the study in Cusco, they found that that publication was low.

At this point, it is also necessary to highlight the situation of scientific production in mental health in Peru. In that sense, reports of a few studies, such as that carried out by Luna-Solís (2015), who analyzed journals indexed in SCOPUS during 2011 - 2013, showed that Peru had only produced 26 articles accounting for 0.06% of the scientific production worldwide, thus concluding that this indicator implies shortage of scientific production, which corroborates what was indicated by Vera-Villaroel, Lopez-Lopez, Lillo, and Silva (2011) who concluded that Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Colombia showed better indicators in terms of production and impact.

For this reason, the researcher training from the undergraduate level is a great concern for the scientific community, since Latin America is the region with the lowest scientific production in the world (Corrales-Reyes & Dorta-Contreras, 2018); and the Peruvian context is not the exception, especially in the university environment where it is necessary to evaluate the methodological quality of undergraduate works as well as to describe its main trends in order to analyze the focus of the student scientific production. In that sense, the objective of this research is to determine the methodological quality and to describe the characteristics of the psychology theses defended in a private university in Lima.

Method

Research Design

A descriptive-bibliometric study of non-experimental design was conducted.

Population

The study population was 161 undergraduate theses of an Academic Professional School of Psychology approved between 2014 and 2017, which are available in the institutional repository belonging to a private university of Lima. For reasons and restrictions of the authors, 149 undergraduate theses were analyzed in extensive files; therefore, no calculation was made to find a representative sample because the analyzed population was accessible and attainable.

Instruments

In order to evaluate the methodological quality of the thesis, the grading format of the final report of research works created at the National University of Trujillo was applied, and it was used in a similar study by Zavaleta-Reyes and Tresierra-Ayala (2017). It evaluates the correct use of the scientific method for the generation of knowledge by studying reality. This instrument consists of 15 items distributed in 6 components which evaluate: generalities, research plan, results, discussion, conclusions, bibliographic references and the abstract.

Regarding the instrument's validity and reliability, and in order to meet the objectives of this research, the instrument was validated by the opinion of five experts with experience in teaching research methodology and authors of scientific articles in indexed journals of the specialty. The average of evaluations was found using an index of agreement whose value was of .973, which indicates an optimal validity. Once the validity of the content was confirmed, a pilot test was carried out where the instrument was applied to a population of 30 theses from a

private university in the city of Juliaca, and an internal consistency indicator of .830 according to the Cronbach's Alpha was found, which shows an adequate reliability.

Procedure

Once extensive works were obtained, the following characteristics were gathered: the number of authors, campus, year of presentation, type of study, type of population, age group, research line and publication. Regarding this last point, a search in academic Google was carried out using the algorithm proposed by Mayta-Tristán and Mezones-Holguín (2009) which consists of writing the complete title in the academic google search engine. If there are no coincidences, then write the three keywords in combination with the surnames of the authors. Lastly, if no results are obtained, repeat the search in English.

In order to determine the methodological quality, the scores were categorized in 5 ranges of 3 points each, as follows: Very good quality (13-15), good (10-12), fair (7-9), poor (4-6) and very poor (1-3). Subsequently, the content of each work was analyzed by assessing its main sub-components namely: title (which should adequately inform the content of the research and the variables of the problem), type and design (in which the type of research should be properly identified based on the objective and contrast design), background (which implies providing background based on the problematic reality), justification (in which the theoretical, social and methodological value of the study must be explained accurately), problem (posed as a question using clear terms based on the problematic reality), objectives (which should answer only one question and be differentiated from the rest of secondary objectives), hypothesis (which must be explicit with scientific support and consistent with the problem posed), contrast design (assessing if the necessary procedures are applied to verify the hypothesis or to solve the problem), sample size (assessing if the formula used or the procedures that allow all calculations to be reproduced in order to find the sample are clearly specified), statistical analyses (assessing if the statistics are the most suitable for the contrast of the proposed hypotheses), results (assessing if the interpretation is focused on describing the values found without resorting

to personal comments), discussion (assessing if the explanation of the results is focused on the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses posed), conclusions (assessing if they logically flow from the results obtained and are consistent with the objectives set), bibliographic references (assessing if these are consistent with the research plan and in accordance with updated APA format), finally the abstract (which must be structured, concrete and consistent with the general text of the thesis).

Regarding the grading, this is based on a maximum of 15 points, therefore according to the calculations it could be determined that a score of 9.75 is equivalent to 13 on the 20-point grading system, which is established as a minimum passing grade.

Results

Descriptive analyses of the main characteristics of Psychology theses of the university in question, corresponding to the 2014 - 2017 period, were conducted. In addition, 149 out of 161 undergraduate graduate theses could be analyzed, the difference (12 graduate theses) could not be assessed because of restrictions of the authors who only authorized to show the cover and the abstract of their thesis.

The results included in table 1 show that 59.7% of the approved graduate theses correspond to the main campus located in the city of Lima, 15.4% correspond to another campus located in Tarapoto, and 24.8% to the campus located in the city of Juliaca. In addition, 49% of the total theses were executed in 2016, 32.2% in 2015, 11.4% in 2017 and 7.4% in 2014. Regarding the number of authors, it is observed that 72.5% of the graduate theses had two authors and only 27.5% had only one author. Regarding the type of common research, 81.2% correspond to correlational studies, 14.8% to descriptive studies, 2.7% to psychometric studies and only 1.3% correspond to studies involving intervention. As for correspondence with lines of research, 66.4% is focused on clinical psychology and health, 20.1% on positive psychology, 4.7% on educational psychology and organizational psychology (4.7%), 2.7% on psychometry and only 1.3% on social community psychology.

Regarding the type of population, it is observed that 47% of the studies involved school population, 20.8% university, 12.1% community, 8.7% hospital, and in lower percentages, penitentiary (3.4%), ecclesiastical (3.4%), health centers (2.7%) and other populations (2%). Likewise, regarding the age group, 69.1% of the studies involve adolescents, 18.1% adults, 11.4% seniors, and only 1.3% children. Finally, regarding the rate of thesis publication, it is observed that only 6% (9 theses) were published in indexed scientific journals, while 94% or 140 not yet.

Table 1.

Characteristics of the psychology theses of a private university in Peru. 2014 - 2017 Period.

		N	%
Campus	Lima	89	59,7
	Tarapoto	23	15,4
	Juliaca	37	24,8
Year of completion	2014	11	7,4
	2015	48	32,2
	2016	73	49,0
	2017	17	11,4
Number of authors	1	41	27,5
	2	108	72,5
Type of study	Descriptive	22	14,8
	Correlational	121	81,2
	Intervention	2	1,3
	Psychometric	4	2,7
Research line	Positive Psychology	30	20,1
	Clinical and Health	99	66,4
	Educational	7	4,7
	Social and community	2	1,3
	Organizational	7	4,7
	Psychometry	4	2,7

Type of population	Hospital	13	8.7
	Health Center	4	2.7
	Community	18	12.1
	School	70	47.0
	University	31	20.8
	Penitentiary	5	3.4
	Ecclesiastical	5	3.4
	Other	3	2.0
Age group	Child	2	1.3
	Adolescent	103	69.1
	Adult	27	18.1
	Senior	17	11.4
Publication	Yes	9	6.0
	No	140	94.0

Regarding the methodological quality of the theses analyzed, table 2 summarizes, in a general manner, the main indicators according to the year of approval. This table also shows that 83 graduate theses obtained a grade in the good category, 51 in the fair category, 13 in the very good category and only 2 in the poor category. It should be noted that none of them showed a very poor category.

Table 2.

Quality of the psychology theses of a private university in Peru. 2014 - 2017 Period.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Poor	1	0	1	0	2
Fair	3	14	31	3	51
Good	6	33	33	11	83
Very good	1	1	8	3	13
Total	11	48	73	17	149

In the same context, table 3 shows in detail the analysis of the assessment of the main components in the graduate theses approved in the 2014 - 2017 period. In general, it is observed that on average the theses show a score of

10.4 which corresponds to 13.9 on a 20-point grading system. This, in turn, demonstrates a passing grade. Also, when analyzing the annual averages, it can be observed that there is a tendency to improve over time (2014 = 13.69; 2015 = 13.6; 2016 = 13.28 and 2017 = 15.01). Regarding the components, the items with the highest average scores include: title (.96), problem (.87), objectives (.80), results (.87) and conclusions (.80). While, low scores were found in the following items: background (.57) sample size (.58), statistical analysis (.43), contrast design (.49) and discussion (.53), which indicates methodological deficiencies in these sections.

Table 3.

Grading of psychology thesis paper per year. 2014 - 2017 Period.

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	Average
Title	0.95	0.98	0.97	0.94	0.96
Abstract	0.86	0.94	0.83	0.85	0.87
Problem	0.68	0.81	0.84	0.85	0.8
Objectives	0.73	0.81	0.86	0.85	0.81
Justification	0.64	0.57	0.66	0.65	0.63
Background	0.50	0.50	0.53	0.74	0.57
Type of research	0.64	0.64	0.60	0.94	0.71
Sample size	0.68	0.59	0.51	0.53	0.58
Hypothesis	0.55	0.54	0.58	0.82	0.62
Statistical analysis	0.64	0.47	0.32	0.29	0.43
Results	0.95	0.95	0.82	0.76	0.87
Contrast design	0.55	0.44	0.27	0.71	0.49
Discussion	0.50	0.50	0.51	0.62	0.53
Conclusions	0.68	0.78	0.84	0.88	0.8
Bibliographic references	0.73	0.68	0.84	0.82	0.77
Total	10.27	10.20	9.96	11.26	10.4
20-point grading system	13.69	13.6	13.28	15.01	13.9
Total reports	11	48	73	17	149

Discussion

It has been found that 72.5% of the theses were written by two authors, which means that the students consider that its preparation is more feasible

when they have the support of a colleague. Likewise, the fact that 81.2% of research works are correlational and only 1.3% are related to interventions would be related to the attitude shown by the students working on their thesis (Mamani, 2015) since their priority when dealing with their graduate thesis would only be to defend it as soon as possible, rather than the motivation to contribute to the generation of new knowledge. On the other hand, the fact that 66.4% of research works have been focused on clinical psychology and health, and the fact that 47% of them have considered a school-adolescent population (69.1%), would be due to circumstances linked to the place of professional internships of the students who generally try to present and execute their graduate theses during the last academic semesters. In addition to this, it should be considered that such university maintains agreements mainly with educational institutions, such as schools, institutes and the healthcare sector, thus creating alliances with hospitals and health centers. These places would be considered as first option by the students to propose and implement their thesis projects.

Another finding corroborates what exists in the scientific literature reports, which has to do with the indicator of theses publication. This indicator shows that only 6% of the works were published in an indexed specialized scientific journal. This result is similar to those reported by Castro-Maldonado et al. (2015), who after analyzing 221 theses, found that only 4.1% were published. Likewise, the study carried out by Taype-Rondán et al. (2012), who after analyzing 74 undergraduate theses, found that only two were published. Finally, the study carried out by Atamari-Anahui et al. (2015) reported only 5% of 398 published graduate theses. An explanation of this reality can be found by understanding the dynamics of the advisory process between the student and the advisor. On the one hand, there are few students who want to carry out research in order to publish (Toro-Huamanchumo, Failoc-Rojas, & Díaz-Vélez, 2015) and on the other hand, the role of the thesis advisors is not as expected, since instead of promoting the accomplishment of works with social impact and publications to stimulate the student scientific production,

their role is only to fulfill a responsibility that finishes when the students defend their theses (Atamari-Anahui, Sucasaca-Rodríguez, & Marroquin-Santa Cruz, 2016; Oyola-García, 2015).

Moving on to another important subject that has to do with the methodological quality of the theses, the findings of this study show that more than half of the analyzed works have good quality (83) and that most of them (51) have fair quality. These results are similar to the findings of Zavaleta-Reyes and Tresierra-Ayala (2017), who after analyzing 837 graduate theses in a medical school, found that 60.3% have good quality and 22.3% fair quality. However, the findings of Mandujano-Romero and Grajeda (2013) are the opposite. After analyzing 284 theses for obtaining the professional degree of General Practitioner, they found that only 20.3% showed an acceptable quality. In this regard, perhaps this difference can be clearly explained by the fact that research policies are different in each university, and considering the line of knowledge, there are clear differences when it comes to carrying out and evaluating scientific research in both the School of Medicine and the School of Psychology.

When analyzing the main components of the graduate theses in depth, methodological deficiencies were discovered in the development of the background (.57) which do not show a relationship with the problematic reality. Also, when specifying the sample size (.58), the criteria used are not adequately specified, which does not allow the calculations made to be reproduced. Similarly, when justifying the statistical analysis used (.43), the procedures for hypothesis testing are not specified with complete objectivity (statistical analysis = .43), which also influences the results since the hypothesis test procedure is not visualized (contrast design = .49). Lastly, as for discussion, it was found that the writing is focused on a general interpretation and does not include an argument on the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses posed (discussion = .53). These results differ from the findings of Mandujano-Romero and Grajeda (2013), who after analyzing 284 medicine theses, found methodological deficiencies in aspects such as:

bibliographic references, study unit and operationalization of variables; as well as differences with respect to the work of Zavaleta-Reyes and Tresierra-Ayala (2017) who, after analyzing 885 graduate theses, found deficiencies in the components of hypothesis, conclusions, abstract and justification. Perhaps an explanation for these differences could be underlined by identifying that the study population in these research works differs completely from that in the present study.

In conclusion, despite the need for scientific research on Psychology to address the different psychosocial problems of the country (Aiquipa, Ramos, Curay, & Guizaldo, 2018), such as violence, femicide, corruption, among other latent problems, it is clear that there are few studies proposed in the university in these areas, and even those studies show serious limitations in their methodological quality and correspond to basic studies that demonstrate little intention of carrying out works with greater social impact such as the experimental ones. All of this significantly limits not only the country's student scientific production, but also the process of training new researchers for Peru.

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