

RESEARCH DESIGN IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: ANALYSIS ABOUT THE METHODOLOGICAL CULTURE OF RBPI'S PAPERS (1994-2017) ¹

Desenho de pesquisa em Relações Internacionais: análise da cultura metodológica nos artigos da RBPI (1994-2017)

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ABSTRACT

To what extent is the approval of papers in Brazilian journals of International Relations contingent upon the presence of a social inquiry design? To answer this question, we have built a database of the last 23 years of *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* publication. With this tool we evaluate the presence and absence of the main elements of a social inquiry design: research question, inference, public procedures, methods and results. Our working hypothesis claims that, in general, the RBPI's papers do not have a social inquiry design, in accordance with the literature assumptions that suggest a lack of methodological culture on IR subfield. Considering a population of 460 papers, some of the findings are: only 0.6% of the abstracts present all the five elements analysed, as well as 34% that do not present neither of them. Therefore, our main finding is in accordance with our initial hypothesis.

Keywords: Designing Social Inquiry; International Relations; *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* (RBPI).

RESUMO

Em que medida a aceitação de artigos em periódicos brasileiros de Relações Internacionais depende da presença de um desenho de pesquisa? Para responder essa pergunta construiu-se um banco de dados com as publicações dos últimos 23 anos da Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional (RBPI). Com essa ferramenta são avaliadas a presença e a ausência dos principais elementos de um desenho de pesquisa: pergunta de pesquisa, inferência, procedimentos públicos, métodos e resultados. Nossa hipótese de trabalho supõe que, em geral, os artigos da RBPI não possuem um desenho de pesquisa, condição consonante com as premissas da literatura que sugerem uma falta de cultura metodológica nas produções da área de Relações Internacionais. Considerando uma população de 460 artigos, alguns dos achados são: apenas 0,6% dos resumos apresentam todos os cinco elementos de um desenho de pesquisa, ao passo que 34% não apresentam nenhum deles. Portanto, nosso principal resultado corrobora a hipótese inicial.

Palavras-chave: Desenho de Pesquisa; Relações Internacionais; Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional (RBPI).

INTRODUCTION

To what extent is the approval of papers in the Brazilian Journal of International Relations contingent upon the presence of a social inquiry design? To answer this question, the *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* (RBPI) was chosen as a sample. This journal is the most traditional one on international relations subfield in Brazil. It was created during the development of the Independent Foreign Policy, indicating that its production closely follows what happens in the Brazilian foreign policy arena.

Our empirical strategy is centered on the analysis of RBPI's abstracts, published from 1994 to 2017, which were collected and classified according to the presence (1) and absence (0) of the main elements of a social inquiry design: research question; inference; public procedures; methods; and results (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, p.7-9). The database is available on Open Society Foundations (OSF) for replication⁵. The core bibliography used to establish this classification was the *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* by King, Keohane and Verba (KKV). Assuming that the first edition of the book was printed in 1994, the analysis starts in 1994 and ends in 2017 the latest available edition of RBPI.

KKV's work is for a range of academics a turning point on how they designed their research, especially because of the emphasis on the importance of qualitative and quantitative inference. Also, it represented the popularization of methodological issues in Social Science. In the meantime, it was very criticized by scholars who believe that are two inferences logics. Besides this dispute, the prior contribution of KKV's book is their concern with a well-designed research to "produce valid inference" (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, p.3).

It is relevant to mention that International Relations (IR), since its establishment, deals with epistemological and ontological issues. The methodological rigor became a topic of discussion after the behaviorism revolution, in 1950. Nevertheless, at that time, the assumptions of generalization were not unanimous. IR scholars have strengthened the chains of Philosophy, Economy, History, and Law as a traditional approach. However, there was no dialogue between these fields. The traditional approach was supported by the strong influence of diplomats, military and decision makers (Lessa, 2005a, p.3; Carr 2001, pp.3-4, 25-27).

After World War I public opinion began to pressure the government for a foreign policy democratization and to the dissemination of knowledge among the academy (Lessa, 2005a, p.1; Carr 2001, p.3-4; 25-27). Throughout the 20th century, Brazilian International Relations were restricted to the History of Diplomacy, once it was close to History Analysis (Lessa, 2005a, p.4). After 1990, the Brazilian International Relations field became more intense, stimulated by the globalization and the complexity of the post-Cold War scenario. Thus, the Brazilian universities began to demand interdisciplinary knowledge and multiple theoretical approaches in the courses, as an institutional requirement (Lessa 2005a, pp.5-10).

In this sense IR in Brazil were developed through exploratory research and it was, strongly, based on interpretations. For a long time, there was no rigorous hypothesis tests, using qualitative or quantitative techniques. Consequently, the expected effect of the analysis of RBPI's abstracts is an absence of social inquiry design on the published papers.

⁵ To check the RBPI database: <https://mfr.osf.io/render?url=https%3A%2F%2Fosf.io%2Fhfybd%2Fdownload>

This research is an exploratory study. It does not intend to establish any causal mechanism. It is based on a descriptive inference⁶ and uses the Statistical Package for the Social Science Software, to establish measures of frequency and percentage. Following this introduction, the paper has other four sessions: a literature review about Social Science Research Design; a discussion about the context of the production of knowledge in International Relations, and the development of the RBPI; an explanation of our empirical strategy; and on the last one is presented the main findings and the answer to our research question.

LITERATURE REVIEW - A SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH DESIGN

Science consists on a strategy to understand and explain the social and natural world, using for that verifiable statements, governed by a logical consistency. It seeks to explain disturbing facts and to produce falsifiable predictions. Therefore, every scientific explanation is an attempt. To transform explanations into science, the explanations must resist rigorous refutation efforts (Clark *et. al.* 2013, p.20).

Science, then, is a method (and a culture) which, at that moment, better responds to the real-world issues. For this reason, the scientific method comprises the critical pursuit of knowledge, where circularly the results are subject to logical tests in order to corroborate or refute evidences, answers, questions and doubts (Clark *et. al.* 2013, pp.20-21).

For this reason, science is not an accumulation of observations or a collection of facts or numbers, but, in fact, it is the formulation of a problem. It is on the problem's formulation where the relation between knowledge and ignorance subsist. Each problem arises from the discovery that something is not in accordance with the supposed knowledge; from the finding of an internal contradiction between the supposed knowledge and the facts; or, from the discovery of an apparent contradiction between the supposed knowledge and the supposed facts (Popper 2004, pp.14-15).

In this sense, science and scientific knowledge are improved by method. As well as, the method is strengthened on the search of falsifications (Popper 2004, pp.26-27), understood as causal explanations. In these terms, the study of politics becomes much more interesting when it adopts this scientific pattern and it is no longer just a report of political facts (Kellstedt and Whitten, 2015, p.27). In other words, a research design that allows the scientist to deepen in his object of study, in order to enable a detailed understanding through a causal explanation and to generate valid inferences with scientificity (Rezende 2017b, p.103).

Therefore, since the 1990s, Political Science field undergoes a process of methodological resumption, with the aim of consolidating a new pattern of scientificity centered on causal inferences. This renewal was, also, a consequence of the seminal book of King, Keohane and Verba

⁶ Our descriptive inference tries to respect the criterias established by King, Keohane and Verba (1994, p.63): unbiased, efficiency and consistency. Our uncertainties and research limitations are expressed on the empirical strategy.

(1994), in which the authors emphasize the importance of the study of political science be guided by research designs, capable of generating valid causal inferences across experimental or observational data (Mahoney, 2010, pp.120-121; Rezende, 2017a, p.243; 2017b, pp.103-104).

The strategies applied on the research designs try to solve the “fundamental problem of causal inference” (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, p.208). This problem stems from the fact that “it is not possible to observe at the same time a given unit of analysis as treatment and control” (Rezende, 2017a, p.244). That is, it is not possible to generate valid causal inferences without resorting to counterfactuals and well-designed researches. Thus, the inferential quality is linked to the quality of the designs (Rezende 2017a, p.244).

Thus, without an accurate research design little progress can be made on the process of generating valid knowledge. Once, the designs are directly associated with causation process, they were responsible to make a credibility revolution in Political Science (Rezende, 2017a, p.245). This credibility arises from the understanding that research design has more value than the analysis itself, it confers inferential quality (Rezende 2017b, pp.103-105).

The researcher, by this logic, must “think the world in terms of models” (Kellstedt and Whitten 2015, p.3) and follow four basic statements: (i) inference; (ii) public procedures; (iii) uncertainty conclusions; (iv) methods (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, pp.8-10). Also, in the early stages of the research, they must think about: (i) research question; (ii) theory; (iii) data quality (iv) use of available data (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, p.13).

A scientific research involves both logic and creativity (Kellstedt and Whitten 2015, p.75) thus, to produce a real evolution, the researcher ought to make the theory dialogues with the data, “explaining as much as possible with as little as possible” (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, p.29). Uncertainty is an essential part of inferential logic, and on behalf of proposing a falsifiable, refutable and testable theory, some methodologists opt for quantitative strategies, while others believe that just qualitative techniques can account for all the complexity of the current phenomena.

According to King, Keohane and Verba (1994, p.28) all scientific research has stylistic errors. Reporting uncertainties is part of the transparency of any rigorous scientific inquiry. This skepticism stimulates the researcher to seek for the reliability and accuracy of the data. So, the first step of any research is the descriptive inference, after that the researcher can address the explanation of the effects and possible cause-and-effect relationships in an explanatory research. Through all this process the idea of refuting competing explanations is imperative, so the conclusions are circumstantial and must be available for replication, improving data and theory (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, p. 28-33).

On King, Keohane and Verba’s (1994, p.3) point of view qualitative and quantitative logics are guided by a “unified logic of inference”, the differences between them are “stylistic and methodologically and substantively unimportant” (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, p.4). In this

sense, it is not established a hierarchy among these research types, both are important, only a well-done design can identify the more appropriate (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994).

The box below summarizes these differences in an attempt to illustrate that the choice for one of them or their combination is directly linked with the research design.

| Quantitative | Qualitative |
|---|---------------------------|
| Numerical Measurements | No Numerical Measurements |
| Algebraic Models | Verbal Models |
| Statistical Methods | Methods for "Small-N" |
| Test causal hypotheses and generalize results | Explain and Interpret |
| Replicable measurements | Specific facts or events |
| General Description | Full Detail |

Box 1. Differences between Quantitative and Qualitative styles of research. **Source:** Developed by the authors, based on King, Keohane and Verba 1994, p.3-4.

Furthermore, the box suggests that one of the characteristics for the qualitative style is a small number of cases (small-N) which is, in general, applied to the IR researches. In this field qualitative comparative analysis, case studies, ethnographic and historical analysis are more frequent, while quantitative approaches are less usual. On the other hand, the quantitative research is characterized by its higher degree of standardization, which allows the display of procedures and makes the replication and contestation of the findings more tangible (Cano, 2012, p.109).

Hence, the main difference between quantitative and qualitative techniques is the emphasis, while quantitative research is concerned with over-accurate measurement to compare frequencies, the qualitative ones aim to gain a deeper understanding of the context to interpret the reality. In this sense, the researcher, ideally, should know as many techniques as possible, to choose the one that best fits the purpose of the research project or, better yet, incorporate several of them in the same design (Cano 2012, p.108-109).

Although in Political Science arena there is a hegemony of quantitative techniques, as a result of the North American teaching models, we will see on the next topic the context in which IR emerges, the creation of the main scientific journal of the area (RBPI) and the evolution of the field in Brazilian universities, in order to situate the reader on the national scientific scene.

CONTEXT - PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN IR AND RBPI

The constitution of the IR field of studies in Brazil was a Herculean task (Miyamoto, 1999, p.83). The course emerged during an unfavorable political context and its late consolidation resulted from the collective work of a few dedicated professionals. On the development of the field, it is possible to identify three important phases⁷: the birth, in the late 1950s, marked by the launch of the RBPI; the growth, during the 1970s, through the conception of a bachelor's degree at Brasília University (UnB); and the consolidation, with the expansion of post-graduation programs, mainly in the south-southeast axis.

Taking into consideration this periodization, the RBPI is a milestone for IR in Brazil. The journal "is the oldest Brazilian publishing enterprise" (Almeida, 1998, p.42, our translation). It was thought in a meeting of intellectuals and diplomats at the Brazilian Institute of International Relations (IBRI), on January 27, 1954. Four years later, on March 1958, it was printed for the first time. The main objective was "disseminate materials and documents related to international politics as well as to international relations in Brazil and to Brazilian thinking and practice on foreign policy issues" (Almeida, 1998, p.45, our translation).

In the early years, the production had a historical approach. On a context of Military Dictatorship, thoughts of Mário Travassos, Golbery de Couto e Silva, Therezinha de Castro, as well as the notion of Brazilian Power were often articulated. Furthermore, the papers addressed the diplomacy and the military strategy (Miyamoto 1999, p.84).

At that moment, the Brazilian production on IR had a regional scope, dealing with topics such as (i) borders, (ii) export corridors, (iii) nuclear energy (iv) Itaipu. Nevertheless, the strong censorship inhibited a more elaborate articulation of ideas. "There were almost no people connected to the University with the possibility of making good analysis on most of the issues that were related to Brazilian foreign policy and, worse, International Relations" (Miyamoto 1999, p.86, our translation). The task of thinking about IR was attributed to diplomats and to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

During the 1970s, the Brazilian IR undergoes a meaningful change. This change was led by two research centers: UnB and the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ). At UnB the bachelor's course was strongly marked by a historical bias, due to the closeness of the course with the post-graduation in History. This contribution was further strengthened by the democratization process, which allowed gradual access to important documents. In parallel, the epistemological crisis of the 1980s gave rise to the IR institute at PUC-RJ, enabling an

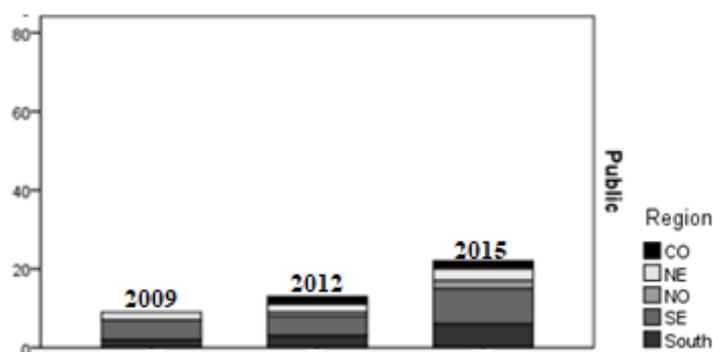
⁷ It is stressed that there was a "prehistory" of intellectual production in Brazilian IR, between the XIX and XX centuries, regarding diplomatic history with Pandiá Calógeras, Hélio Vianna and Delgado de Carvalho.

approximation with Law, Economy, History and Political Science fields⁸ (Lessa 2005a, pp.5-9; Lessa 2005b, pp.37-38; Miyamoto 2003, p.104, Vizontini 2005, p.18).

In the 1990s the Brazilian military regime was ended, the economy was stable, the basis for a region integration had been launched and it was the end of the bipolar order, in concert the IR was consolidated (Miyamoto, 1999, pp.87-90; 2003, p.106; Vizontini, 2005, p.18; Lessa, 2005b, p.10). At that time, it was remarkable the translation of classic works of IR by the Alexandre de Gusmão Foundation (FUNAG) (Vizontini, 2005, p.20); the establishment of the Brazilian Center for International Relations (Cebri) think tank; and, the conception of a “Brazilian thinking”⁹ about Brazilian Foreign Policy (Miyamoto 2003, p.104; Lessa 2005a, p.9).

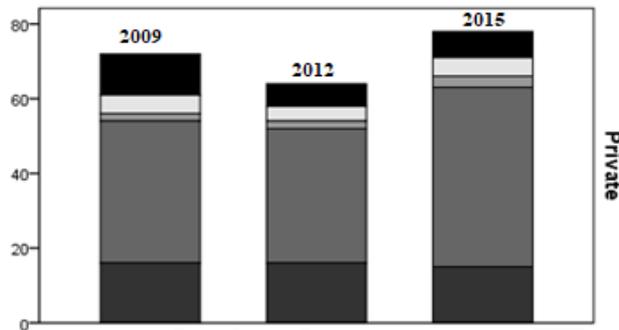
In concert with these events, RBPI, after some production crises, brought together a group of diplomats and researchers who assumed the task of relaunching the journal in 1993. At that time, the journal becomes, more than one editorial of Brazilian foreign policy analysis, and it started to contemplate the international political and economic agenda (Almeida, 1998, pp.42-45).

Consequently, the consolidation of the field led to the expansion of the International Relations course, which can be observed on the graphic below produced by ENADE/INEP data. The numbers show an increase of IR courses, as well as its highest concentration at Southeast region and a majority of private institutes.



⁸ The Law provided the studies of International Law, applied to the international norms and standards. In Economics, the subarea of International Political Economy was the one that received more attention. Political Science aligned with IR through the structuralist chain, as well as, foreign institutions (Ford Foundation), formed Brazilian professors in US Universities, in an attempt to increase research centers with a methodological approach. History, under the influence of French historiography, emphasized reflection and research on the History of International Relations (Lessa, 2005b).

⁹ This thought is shaped by a historical observation, subjective variables and “belief systems” (Lessa 2005a, p.11); interparadigmatic dialogue, which draws axiological questions to the ruptures and continuities of Foreign Policy; and in the universalism of foreign policy decision-making process. These three characteristics made the intellectual production of Brazil develops four paradigms: Liberal-Conservative, Developmental State, Normal State and Logistic State (Lessa 2005a, p.14).



Graphic 1: Public and Private Institutions by Region and Year. **Source:** Developed by the authors, based on synthesis reports of ENADE/INEP 2009, 2012, 2015.

With the consolidation of IR field another issue deserves attention, the absence of scientificity in the Brazilian intellectual production. According Medeiros and his partners (2016) there is a common confusion in IR literature between science and ideology and a frequently use of normative values. Taking into consideration the requirements of the KKV's revolution, the field failed to reach a methodological rigor associated to the binomial *research design-causal inference*. In this sense, the discipline remains without the status of scientificity (Rezende 2015, p.20-28), understood by Soares (2005, p.1) as "methodological heel". This expected effect is tested by our RBPI's analysis on the next section of this paper.

EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

Our empirical strategy contemplates an analysis of a population of 460 papers published in the *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* between 1994 and 2017. This journal shows a high impact factor of 0.371, an average value in the period 2010-2015. One of the highest indexes among Brazilian Social Science journals (ABEC Brasil, 2017).

The corpus selection was done taking into consideration the presence of the *abstract* - a publishing requirement, which occurred in 436 papers. The absence of abstracts consequently implied on the exclusion of 24 papers and on a reduction of the sample. In the total computation, we arrived at a corpus of 436 paper, shown on the table below:

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------|-----------|------------|
| Absent | 24 | 5,2 |
| Present | 436 | 94,7 |
| Total | 460 | 100 |

Table 1. Frequency of published abstracts. **Source:** Developed by the authors.

Also, we have taken into consideration possible biases on our corpus selection (i) the timeframe, soon after the publication of KKV's book; (ii) a journal from UnB, a University that is known to have a historical approach; (iii) the impossibility to check the rules of submission of each edition, the application form could not require an abstract, which may explain the absences,

especially on the first editions; (iv) the exclusively use of abstracts as an object of analysis, perhaps if we analyzed the full paper the research design could be better explained.

Although this could be potential bias, it is important to note that among all the Brazilian journals with the highest index (A1)¹⁰ on Political Science and International Relations area, this is the only one that the focus is strictly IR, besides that it adopts the continuous publication model, which allowed data for all years.

The elements analyzed followed such criteria: (a) Research Question - any claim that directly or indirectly presented questions as *how*, *what* and *why* about the real world; (b) Inference - descriptive or/and causal extrapolations of the reality; (c) Public Procedures - explicit of the method, logic and sources of the research, that enable replication and judgment of the results; (d) Methods - indication of methodological procedures, quantitative or qualitative, applied by the researchers to think about their problems; (e) Results - conclusions reached by the research (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, pp.13-26).

Three evaluators were randomly assigned to the papers, to avoid a judgment bias in a particular year. The evaluators analyzed every volume in sequence. It was a systematic process in which the value 1 symbolizes the presence and 0 the absence of one of the five components. After that the dataset was cleaned and imported to the Statistical Package for the Social Science Software, where were checked the frequencies and percentages for which one of the elements. Finally, to facilitate the comprehension and in attempt of capture a trend we elaborated some graphics.

FINDINGS

For answering our research question: To what extent is the approval of papers in the Brazilian Journal of International Relations contingent upon the presence of a social inquiry design? First, we verified if the published papers on RBPI were concerned about a research design. As we can see on the table below the most recurrent category on the 436 abstracts analyzed was *research question*, with 133 occurrences, which represent 31%, whereas the least mentioned was the *public procedures*, observed only 27 times, which represent only 6%.

| | Presence | | Absence | |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| Research Question | 133 | 30,5% | 303 | 69,5% |
| Inference | 127 | 29,1% | 309 | 70,9% |

¹⁰ On the quadrennium 2013-2016 the journals classified as A1 by Qualis-CAPES were: Cadernos de Pesquisa, Cadernos de Saúde Pública, Dados, Opinião Pública, Revista de Administração de Empresas, Revista Brasileira de Estudos de População, Revista de Administração Pública, Revista de Economia Política, Revista de Sociologia e Política, Saúde e Sociedade.

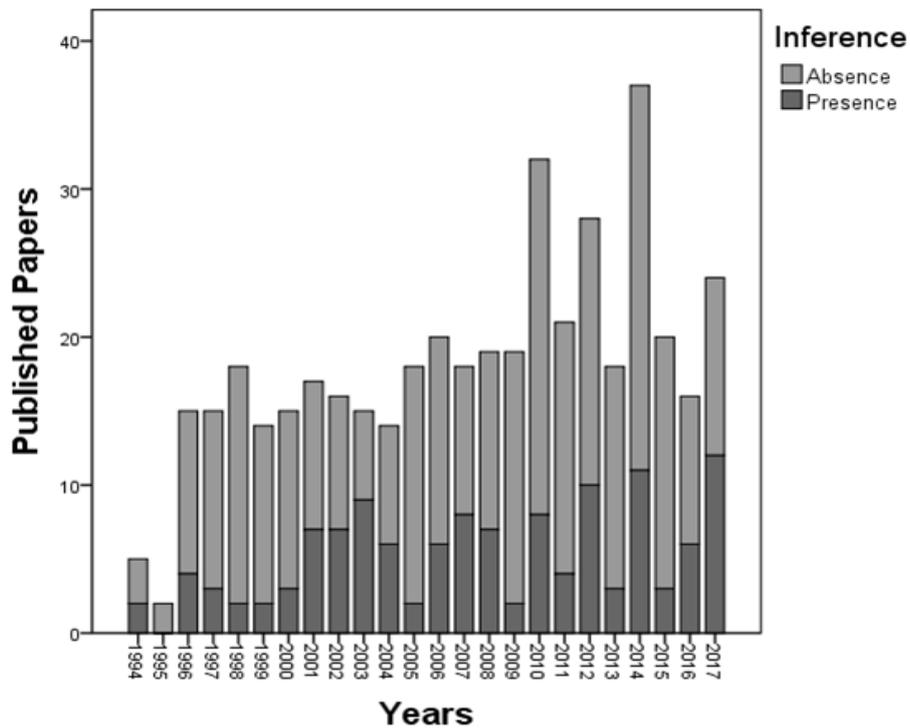
| | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----|-------|-----|-------|
| Public Procedures | 27 | 6,2% | 409 | 93,8% |
| Methods | 92 | 21,1% | 344 | 78,9% |
| Results | 107 | 24,5% | 329 | 75,5% |

Table 2. Research Design Elements. **Source:** Developed by the authors.

After that, we noticed that from the 436 papers, 147 (34%) presented none of the five elements of a research design, which means that they do not designed their research, or they were not able to demonstrate it on the abstracts. On the other hand, only three (0.6%), according to the analysis, reached all the necessary categories, presenting the five elements, established as essential for a research design.

The papers with all research design elements were: “*Notas e comentários sobre a dinâmica do comércio Brasil-África nas décadas de 1970 a 1990*” by Ivo de Santana, 2003, 46(2); “*Economic sanctions and human rights: an analysis of competing enforcement strategies in Latin America*”, by Cristiane de Andrade Lucena Carneiro, 2014, 57(1); and, “*What does the field of International Relations look like in South America?*”, by Marcelo de Almeida Medeiros, Israel Barnabé, Rodrigo Albuquerque and Rafael Lima, 2016, 59(1).

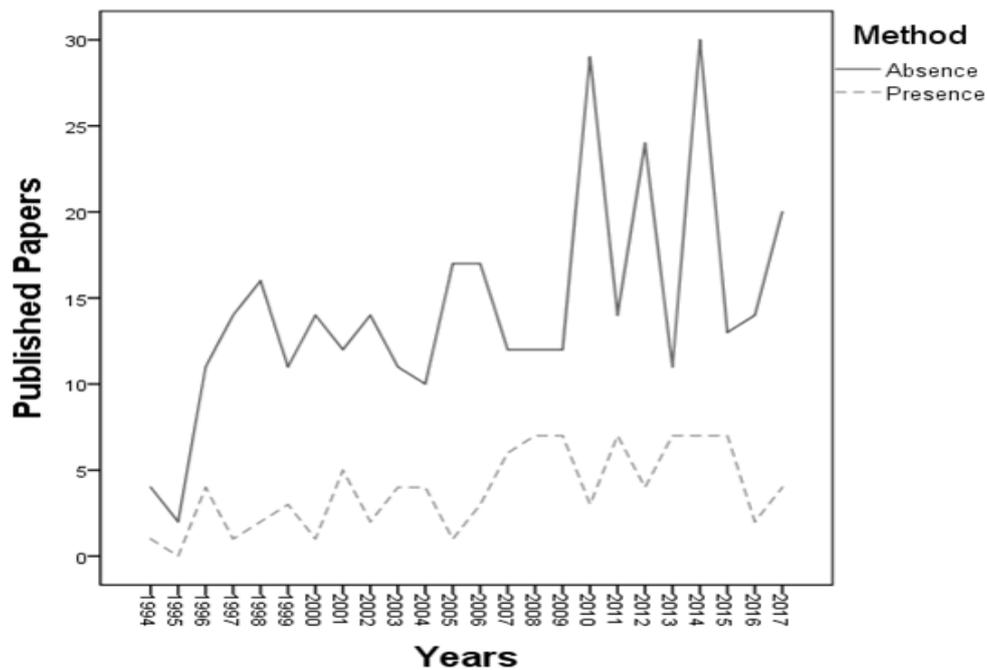
Furthermore, it is important to mention a progressive increase on inference occurrence, although not yet stabilized, which is possible to verify on the graphic below. This increase is in accordance with Rezende’s findings (2017a, p.132), when the author says that the production in Political Science field is being “adjusted” to the inferential rules. However, it is not yet possible to affirm a transformation of beliefs, practices and values, since, despite the growth the graphic still fluctuates a lot.



Graphic 2. Evolution of Inference Occurrence from 1994 to 2017. **Source:** Developed by the authors.

Another aspect that deserves attention is the very low use of methods, at least on the abstracts. The dashed line on the Graphic.3 represents the number of published papers that somehow mentioned the use of methods. In general, the most frequent method was the case analysis; researches about a specific country, alliance or war were the most usual. At the same time, a smaller proportion of the studies mentioned the use of discourse analysis, comparisons and empirical tests¹¹. Among the techniques, interviews were often applied, and also the review of primary sources. Moreover, many scholars have shown great appreciation for a historical contribution.

¹¹ Quantitative techniques were not named on the abstracts, but the empirical strategy description possibly indicates the use of techniques like regression models.



Graphic 3. The Use of Methods from 1994 to 2017. **Source:** Developed by the authors.

Thus, accordingly the empirical analysis of the RBPI’s abstracts, published from 1994 to 2017, we can answer that the presence of a social inquiry design is not contingent upon the acceptance of the paper. To reach this conclusion we analyzed the frequency and the percentage of five elements of an ideal research design. Our inference is descriptive, which means that we summarize data and then we classify it. We verified empirically the non-occurrence of design, using descriptive statistics and binary data.

Following public procedures assumptions and the gold standard for scientific research (King, 1995, pp.382-383), the database created to classify the five essential elements of a research design is published, as well as we tried to explain with transparency on how exactly we collect and analyse the data. In this way we encourage the re-analyzing of our findings, by a replication process, to confirm or challenge the results (Janz, 2015, p.3). Once, “the way science moves forward is by making ourselves vulnerable to being wrong” (King, 1995, p.451).

All in all, futures reflections about this topic could propose a mechanism of causality, to explain the absence of research design, for now, as we are not aiming to offer an analytical view, our results indicate a very low methodological rigor in RBPI’s papers, which is in accordance to the core literature about Brazilian International Relations, strongly based on historical approach.

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