



## Running Case Study 5

### Choosing between numbers and letters

Last weekend Rebecca visited her parents and while they were sitting around the fireplace Rebecca told her parents about her thesis. Not surprisingly her father, a clergyman, and her mother, a teacher, had a lot to say about her topic. Her father referred to Philipp Melchthon, whose reasoning was still based on Aristotelean philosophy and heavily opposed by Martin Luther. He also advised her to read Descartes and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; her mother added that you cannot talk about ethics without knowing the work of Immanuel Kant. Rebecca replied that she was studying businesses and she was not in humanities, as both her parents were. It was not her aim to discuss different views on ethics or even develop a new ethics. Her interest was more to find out why some people behave more ethically than others. Therefore, she would not need to read all these classics. To be honest, she had tried to read some of those philosophers and although she discovered some interesting thoughts, she often could not follow what they were writing about. You cannot understand the philosophers by reading their works, you need to study them. Her parents couldn't believe that you could study something without having a good idea what it is. But she told them that one professor at her school studies the effects of patents on competitiveness and she doubts that he knows a lot about patent law, application procedures or the technologies involved.

When she took the train back from her parents' place to Maastricht, she was thinking about the discussion with her parents the evening before. One thing she knew for sure: she would not engage in a qualitative study. It seemed to her that such a study would require a lot of background knowledge. She did not have that background knowledge and it would require her to take at least some introductory classes in philosophy. Without that she wouldn't be able to conduct open interviews. Next to her theoretical deficits, she also did not have any field experience. She had never cheated in an exam and had never engaged in plagiarism. Thus, a quantitative study in which she could rely on a structured questionnaire and pre-defined answer categories seemed to her the perfect approach to match her research interest and her own capabilities. She already started to design an online survey.

Mehmet was in doubt how he could investigate what he was interested in. The only certainty was that he wanted to write his thesis on migrant entrepreneurs. But how should he proceed. In the meantime, he had read a lot of articles. Those in the more prestigious journals, at least according to the journal list that circulated at his university, were quantitative, but he enjoyed reading the qualitative studies much more. His impression was that the quantitative studies just proved what everybody knew anyway. Is it necessary to interview thousands of people to show that people with self-employed parents are more likely to start a business and that people better embedded in networks are more successful, as well as people who start businesses in growing sectors? His grandmother could have told him that and she had just three years of school. Young entrepreneurs would not learn how to start a business successfully from numbers and regressions, but rather from good examples. These examples would serve as role models, documenting that even people with unfavourable characteristics, such as low education, could become successful entrepreneurs if they have the right ideas, the persistence in believing in them, good contacts and the willingness to work hard. These were the ingredients for success and maybe sometimes a bit of luck would also be helpful.

The more he thought about success stories of migrant entrepreneurs, the more he doubted whether collecting such stories would be the right approach. Not every business starter was successful; he had even read somewhere that half of them fail within the first two years, but you never heard their stories. Just a week ago, Mehmet had seen the closure sign at a fashion shop a few blocks down from his home. The idea of the shop was really nice. The two sisters sold modern fashion from Turkish designers at prices comparable to those of major fashion labels, such as Mexx or Oasis. He was also sure that they were hard-working; he had often seen light in the back room of the shop late at night. Thus, why did they fail? He could not imagine that the personal characteristics of the two sisters were responsible for their failure. It must have been external factors. Maybe it was not wise to open the shop in this neighbourhood; many of the Turks living here had

rather traditional values and the fashion offered was rather stylish. Another reason could have been that the two sisters had studied in Amsterdam – actually in the same programme as his sister – but they grew up in Ede, a provincial town in the east. On the other hand they were well connected to fashion ateliers in Turkey. Suppose Mehmet could find out why the fashion store failed, would that enable him to explain migrant business failures? Could he transfer what he learnt from one case to another case? Maybe a mixed approach was most useful: use some quantitative information to give a good description of migrant businesses in Amsterdam and then enrich this information with in-depth interviews. That was the way to go.

- 1 Discuss whether it was wise that Mehmet opted for a mainly qualitative research, while Rebecca opted for a mainly quantitative research. Could you imagine making a different choice than the two?
- 2 Classify Rebecca's and Mehmet's research along the dimensions of research.
- 3 How could Mehmet and Rebecca show that suggested relations are really causal?