

FAQ 1: When is it better to do qualitative or quantitative research?

What's the issue?

To some extent all questions may be approached either quantitatively or qualitatively. It all depends on the chief goal. Are you interested in a systematic approach, in order to produce comparable, generalisable data, or do you want to produce a “thick” description of a particular case/group/situation/context? Each option involves different kinds of planning, which may best be followed by a particular research design. Nevertheless, combination or mixed methods approaches prove to be very useful in many situations, and seem to solve many of the problems that arise from adopting a single methodological approach.

Common practice

- Surveys are highly formal and standardized (researchers should be able to anticipate all pertinent questions), while fieldwork/ethnographic methods are informal and open to unexpected data (indicating little control over events).
- Quantitative methods are best for comparing data in a systematic way, making generalizations to the whole population, or testing theories with a hypothesis. This is particularly so when comparing or generalizing information extensively within and from a specific population or between different populations (some of them configured within particular geographical or socio-spatial units, such as countries, regions, etc.).
- A qualitative approach is best for exploring a subject about which you don't know much in advance, or, for the opposite reason, when you want to grasp the meanings, motives, reasons, patterns, etc., usually unnoticed in standardized approaches, such as those you would get with a survey.
- In short, to find quantitative differences in children's behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes, quantitative methods are employed, but to find and illuminate meanings related to these differences, qualitative methods are used.

Questions to consider

What kinds of questions should be translated into what types of research strategy? Are all problems quantifiable? Or should some be presented only qualitatively? Do you want to generalize your findings to the whole population? Are you after deep meanings rather than numbers?

Pitfalls to avoid

- Try to avoid going after quantitative methods just because they provide generalisable results, which many consider as more appropriate and valid.
- Try not to use particular methods just because it seems like a part of your “research tradition”.
- Think carefully what the research problem is and go for the method that that particular research question “dictates” should be used.

Example of a quantitative study: EU Kids Online II

In 2010 the EU Kids Online network organized a major, in-home survey of a representative sample of 25,142 children in 25 European countries. The respondents were internet-using children as well as one of their parents. The main aim of the survey was (i) to collect robust and comparable findings regarding the incidence of online risk among European children; (ii) pinpointing which children were particularly at risk and why, by examining vulnerability factors (at both individual and country levels); and (iii) examining the operation and effectiveness of parental regulation and awareness strategies, and children's own coping responses to risk, including their media literacy. For information on the research design, questions used, and results see: Livingstone *et al.* (2011a, 2011b).

Not all quantitative studies mobilize these kinds of resources; nonetheless, their objectives remain identical: to obtain large amounts of information, under the same standardized conditions, in order that they can be treated, analysed, and interpreted statistically. One of the main advantages of quantitative methods is precisely the

possibility of making comparisons and enabling generalizations. This explains the popularity of surveys. But they also present some limitations. The number of questions is always limited, not to mention their scope, and some subjects may be difficult to translate into “closed questions”, especially if dealing with sensitive subjects or when searching for meaning and understanding.

Example of a qualitative study: EU NET ADB

The EU NET ADB project used a qualitative approach to study what they labelled as “internet addictive behaviour” to examine behavioural patterns variously described in the literature as, for example, internet addiction, internet abuse, internet dependence, compulsive internet use, excessive internet use, pathological and problematic internet use, and internet use disorder (see Dreier *et al.*, 2012). Given the dynamic nature of internet use the researchers thought that a qualitative approach was appropriate, building on the view that methodologies employed to examine internet use along with its ensuing consequences should keep pace with the continuous transformation of digital landscape and be regularly revised accounting for new forms of internet use and functions. The researchers came to the conclusion that as the phenomenon of internet addictive behaviour was relatively “new”, and no formal theory or formal diagnostic criteria had been developed, grounded theory was a good fit for this process-oriented exploratory study.

Examples of combined approaches

Only at an abstract (or purist) epistemological level are quantitative and qualitative approaches likely to be presented as completely incompatible. In most cases, a combination of methods may prove to be more useful. Under different research circumstances both strategies can be (and usually are) combined. In fact, quantitative and qualitative mean different things in different situations. The actual form this combination will take depends, on the one hand, on the objectives and, on the other hand, on research development.

The quantitative SAFT study used data resulting from “free” qualitative methodology (see Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2004) to formulate questions and to provide explanations and insights for the interpretation of the quantitative data.

In the project Children and their Changing Media Environment (Livingstone, 2002; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001), a qualitative study preceded a quantitative one, which proved to be very helpful when interpreting the quantitative data (Livingstone & Lemish, 2001); the same happened with the UK Children Go Online research project. As the authors of the study noticed, “Though often insightful in suggesting themes or trends, qualitative research is best complemented by quantitative research in order to judge the scale and significance of the findings” (Livingstone & Bober, 2004).

References and further resources

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