

MODULE 2: LEARNING

Learning & Having Fun with Research Methods

Lesson 6: Qualitative vs Quantitative Methods

Guiding Questions

- What is the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods?

This module is basically a crash course in research methods. Some of this information will apply to you and your research, and some will not, but it is important to have a foundation and become more familiar with research terminology and methods, especially the ones you plan to implement. With the methods that are more relevant to you, stop and spend more time researching specifically about them. Essentially, qualitative methods gather data not in the form of numbers but rather, through interviews and observations. The data is organized into themes and descriptions, and conclusions are usually subjective, based on the perspectives of the participants. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, collect numerical data that is analyzed statistically, providing more objective conclusions to a study.

Based on your research question, objectives, and familiarity with methods, you will ultimately choose one of these approaches (or mixed methods if you want a challenge and a deeper/more diverse range of data).

Qualitative research is focused on meaning and experience rather than predicting outcomes. Instead of finding a cause and effect relationship, qualitative researchers are more concerned with the quality and substance of an experience (Willing, 2013). According to Trochim (2006), qualitative research aims to provide the researcher with direct experience and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. It helps to extract information that is very detailed and rich. This research method is particularly useful in understanding complex and sensitive issues (Trochim, 2006).

Quantitative and qualitative research methods have their value and drawbacks. Qualitative research tends to produce richer and more detailed data, but quantitative data can also be quite detailed. In terms of qualitative data, it is not always organized and there are many ways that it can be analyzed. Because it is so detailed, it makes it difficult to generalize. However, the detail does provide rich insight into the phenomenon and participants being studied (Trochim, 2006). There are a multitude of strengths and limitations to these two approaches, which are summarized below:

Advantages of Qualitative Research:

- Generates rich and detailed information
- Useful in investigating complex/sensitive issues

Disadvantages of Qualitative Research:

- Time-consuming

- Labor intensive
- Yields results that may not be as generalizable for policy-making or decision-making
- Expensive
- Less able to be generalized
- Data is more subjective and up to interpretation, usually in the form of words, pictures, or objects
- The outcome is not predictable or may not be known to researcher in advance
- Researcher tends to become subjectively immersed in the data

Advantages of Quantitative Research:

- More concerned with numerical data
- Able to test hypothesis
- More efficient than qualitative research
- Researcher remains objectively separated from the data
- Study is carefully designed before data is collected
- The researcher knows what he/she is looking for well in advance

Disadvantages of Quantitative Research:

- Typically not as detailed data as qualitative methods
- May miss contextual detail (Neill, 2007)

References:

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