

John Bratton: Writers on research methods distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research. The most basic distinction made is that quantitative research involves the use of numbers and statistics, whereas qualitative research uses words and direct observation. However, many researchers suggest that the differences are more profound, going to the very foundation of how knowledge can be created.

Quantitative research usually entails a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and practice; the prime motive is theory testing. It also incorporates the notion of positivism, and, third, it embodies a view of society as being an external objective reality.

If you contrast that with qualitative research, this takes a mainly inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research. Construction of theories and interpretation is the prime goal; it rejects positivism and places much more emphasis on how individuals interpret their life experiences. And, finally, it embodies a view of reality as a fluid property of individual creations.

But we've got to be careful not to put a wall between these two general orientations. The research process itself is complex, messy, and [rarely] follows these two, neat categories. Indeed, both orientations to research methods can be found within a single research project.

There are a number of things that impact on the research process, values, practical issues, and politics. Researchers are carriers of values and values impact the research process at all stages, including the choice of the topic to the interpretation of the data. Research can never be value free, so it's important that values are acknowledged and made explicit.

Practical issues confront the researcher. One important practical consideration is the choice of research orientation and methodology, these have to match the research question. For example, if the researcher is measuring the impact of new technology on the patterns of work, a quantitative strategy is probably the best way to go; on the other hand, if the focus is on how workers experience technological change, the researcher has to be sensitive to workers' perceptions and a qualitative approach is probably more appropriate.

There are also political influences on the research process. The fact that gatekeepers, typically human resource managers, mediate access into the organisation opens the door to political influence. Gatekeepers are interested in the researchers motives, and by vetting questions and deciding which employees can and cannot be surveyed or interviewed, gatekeepers can directly influence the research process itself.

In my experience it's the good employers that allow access into their organisations, but gaining access is always a matter of negotiation.