

Quantitative Research Characteristics

In quantitative research the major characteristics are:

- ◆ Describing a research problem through a description of trends or a need for an explanation of the relationship among variables
- ◆ Providing a major role for the literature through suggesting the research questions to be asked and justifying the research problem and creating a need for the direction (purpose statement and research questions or hypotheses) of the study
- ◆ Creating purpose statements, research questions, and hypotheses that are specific, narrow, measurable, and observable
- ◆ Collecting numeric data from a large number of people using instruments with preset questions and responses
- ◆ Analyzing trends, comparing groups, or relating variables using statistical analysis, and interpreting results by comparing them with prior predictions and past research
- ◆ Writing the research report using standard, fixed structures and evaluation criteria, and taking an objective, unbiased approach

In *quantitative research*, the investigator *identifies a research problem* based on trends in the field or on the need to explain why something occurs. Describing a trend means that the research problem can be answered best by a study in which the researcher seeks to establish the overall tendency of responses from individuals and to note how this tendency varies among people. For example, you might seek to learn how voters describe their attitudes toward a bond issue. Results from this study can inform how a large population views an issue and the diversity of these views.

However, some quantitative research problems require that you explain how one variable affects another. *Variables* are an attribute (e.g., attitude toward the school bond issue) or characteristic of individuals (e.g., gender) that researchers study. By explaining a relation among variables, you are interested in determining whether one or more variables might influence another variable. For example, quantitative researchers may seek to know why certain voters voted against the school bond issue. The variables, gender and attitude toward the quality of the schools, may influence individuals' vote on the bond issue.

For example, examine the sample quantitative article—the parent involvement study—at the end of this chapter. The authors in the parent involvement study (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005) are less interested in describing the level of parent involvement in secondary-level schooling and more interested in examining the relationship between four factors—parents' role construction, self-efficacy, perceptions of teacher invitations, and perceptions of adolescent invitations—as predictors of parent involvement at home and at school. To examine this relation, they collect survey data from 770 parents of children in Grades 7, 8, and 9 (American system equivalents to Canadian schools). Thus, the problem being addressed is that we know little about what factors relate to parental involvement in secondary-level schooling. Assessing whether certain factors predict an outcome is best suited to quantitative research.

In *reviewing the literature* in quantitative research, you will typically see a substantial literature review at the beginning of the study. Thus, the literature plays a major role in two ways: justifying the need for the research problem and suggesting potential purposes and research questions for the study. Justifying the research problem means that you use the literature to document the importance of the issue examined in the study. To accomplish this, you search the literature, locate studies that identify the problem as important to examine, and then cite this literature in the opening sections of a research report.

The literature also creates a need for the study, as expressed specifically in the purpose statement and the research questions or hypotheses. You identify in the literature

key variables, relations, and trends, and use these to provide direction for your research questions and hypotheses. A literature review on college students, for example, may show that we know little about the problem of binge drinking. Existing literature, however, may identify the importance of peer groups and styles of interacting among student peer groups. Thus, important research questions might address how peers and their interaction styles influence binge drinking on college campuses. In this way, the literature in a quantitative study both documents the need to study the problem and provides direction for the research questions.

In the quantitative parent involvement study (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005), the authors cite extensive literature at the beginning of the article. In these paragraphs, the authors rely on the model of the parent involvement process, and they discuss the literature surrounding each of the four major factors that are expected to influence parental involvement. They begin by reviewing the literature about the demographic or personal factors such as family size and educational level, then they proceed to review the literature about the major factors in the study that they predict will influence parental involvement—parents' role construction, parents' self-efficacy, parents' perceptions of teacher invitations, and parents' perceptions of student invitations. In this way, the introduction establishes the research that has been reported in the literature on each of the four factors in the study and foreshadows the research questions that will be addressed in the study.

In *quantitative research questions*, you ask specific, narrow questions to obtain measurable and observable data on variables. The major statements and questions of direction in a study—the purpose statement, the research questions, and the hypotheses—are specific and narrow because you identify only a few variables to study. From a study of these variables, you obtain measures or assessments on an instrument or record scores on a scale from observations. For example, in a study of adolescent career choices, the variable, the role of the school counselor, narrows the study to a specific variable from among many variables that might be studied (e.g., role of parents, personal investment by student). To examine the impact of the school counselor on adolescent career choices, data must be obtained from the students.

In the quantitative parent involvement study (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005), the authors narrow and select a few factors that they predict will explain parental involvement. They state their purpose of the study and the major research questions. They say that they will examine four factors that influence parental involvement at home and at school, and then they identify the four factors that they predict will influence this involvement. Thus, their research questions are specific to four factors, and later in the method section, they explain how they will measure these factors.

In *quantitative data collection*, you use an instrument to measure the variables in the study. An *instrument* is a tool for measuring, observing, or documenting quantitative data. It contains specific questions and response possibilities that you establish or develop in advance of the study. Examples of instruments are survey questionnaires, standardized tests, and checklists that you might use to observe a student's or teacher's behaviors. You administer this instrument to participants and collect data in the form of numbers. For instance, you might collect responses based on students checking boxes on a form, or from checklists you complete as you watch a student perform a task in the classroom. The intent of this process is to apply the results (called *generalizing the results*) from a small number of people to a large number. The larger the number of individuals studied, the stronger the case for applying the results to a large number of people. For example, on a survey sent to 500 parents in a school district, the researcher seeks information about parents' attitudes toward the educational needs of pregnant teenagers in the schools. The researcher selects an instrument, "Attitudes toward Education of Pregnant

Teenagers,” found through a search of library resources. The 500 parents who receive this instrument represent a cross section of people from all socioeconomic levels in the school district. After collecting and analyzing this data, the investigator will draw conclusions about all parents in this school district based on the representative sample studied.

Data collection is also an integral part of the quantitative parent involvement study (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). The authors study a large number of parents (i.e., 770) of children in Grades 7, 8, and 9. They survey parents using an adaptation of the instrument, “Sharing the Dream! Parent Questionnaire,” as well as items on a questionnaire designed by other researchers to assess parents’ perceptions of student invitations. The survey items are translated into French to fit the Quebec context, and they gather quantifiable data (scores) on the survey. They discuss the scales used to collect the data and how they are scored (i.e., from 1 = *disagree very strongly* to 6 = *agree very strongly*).

In *quantitative data analysis*, you analyze the data using mathematical procedures, called *statistics*. These analyses consist of breaking down the data into parts to answer the research questions. Statistical procedures such as comparing groups or relating scores for individuals provide information to address the research questions or hypotheses. You then interpret the results of this analysis in light of initial predictions or prior studies. This interpretation is an explanation as to why the results turned out the way they did, and often you will explain how the results either support or refute the expected predictions in the study.

For example, in the parent involvement study (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005), the authors collect responses from the parents of secondary-level students who provide scores on the survey instrument. The survey has questions relating to each of the eight factors (or constructs) and the outcome measures as shown in Table 2. To examine the relation of factors to parental involvement, the researchers do not use all of the items on the survey because some were not good measures of the factors. They use a statistical program (i.e., factor analysis) to help them identify the most important questions for each of the four scales composed of items (or factors) in the study. With this reduced set of questions for each of the four factors in the study, they then conduct descriptive analysis (i.e., means and standard deviations as shown in Table 3), and use the statistical program of regression statistical analysis to predict whether the control or personal items or four predictors best explain the variation in scores for parent involvement. From Tables 4 and 5, we see what variables best explain the variation for each grade level (7, 8, 9) and for the two outcome measures of parent involvement at home and parent involvement at school. In short, the authors use statistical analysis consisting of three phases: factor analysis, descriptive analysis, and regression analysis. The ultimate goal was to relate variables to see what predictors (demographics or the four factors) best explain parental involvement. Then, in the implication section of the article, the authors discuss the main results of the study and compare their results with those found in other studies in the literature.

In *reporting and evaluating* quantitative research, the overall format for a study follows a predictable pattern: introduction, review of the literature, methods, results, and discussion. This form creates a standardized structure for quantitative studies. In addition, it also leads to specific criteria that you might use to judge the quality of a quantitative research report. For example, you examine a quantitative study to see if it has an extensive literature review; tests good research questions and hypotheses; uses rigorous, impartial data collection procedures; applies appropriate statistical procedures; and forms interpretations that naturally follow from the data.

In quantitative research, you also use procedures to ensure that your own personal biases and values do not influence the results. You use instruments that have proven value and that have reliable and valid scores from past uses. You design studies to control

for all variables that might introduce bias into a study. Finally, you report research without referring to yourself or your personal reaction.

In the quantitative parent involvement study (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005), the authors subdivide the research into standard sections typically found in quantitative studies. The study begins with an introduction that includes the literature review, purpose statement, and research questions; the methods; the results; the discussion; and, finally, the implications and limitations. The entire study conveys an impersonal, objective tone, and they do not bring either their biases or their personal opinions into the study. They use proven instruments to measure variables, and they employ multiple statistical procedures to build objectivity into the study.

Qualitative Research Characteristics

In qualitative research, we see different major characteristics at each stage of the research process:

- ◆ Exploring a problem and developing a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon
- ◆ Having the literature review play a minor role but justify the problem
- ◆ Stating the purpose and research questions in a general and broad way so as to the participants' experiences
- ◆ Collecting data based on words from a small number of individuals so that the participants' views are obtained
- ◆ Analyzing the data for description and themes using text analysis and interpreting the larger meaning of the findings
- ◆ Writing the report using flexible, emerging structures and evaluative criteria, and including the researchers' subjective reflexivity and bias

Qualitative research is best suited to address a *research problem* in which you do not know the variables and need to explore. The literature might yield little information about the phenomenon of study, and you need to learn more from participants through exploration. For example, the literature may not adequately address the use of sign language in distance education courses. A qualitative research study is needed to explore this phenomenon from the perspective of distance education students. Unquestionably, using sign language in such courses is complex and may not have been examined in the prior literature. A *central phenomenon* is the key concept, idea, or process studied in qualitative research. Thus, the research problem of the difficulty in teaching children who are deaf requires both an exploration (because we need to better know how to teach these children) and an understanding (because of its complexity) of the process of teaching and learning.

The authors in the sample article on mothers' trust in school principals (Shelden et al., 2010) build a case for the importance of trust in the opening passages of the article. They suggest that it is an important issue, and that it has a positive effect on student outcomes. They then narrow the discussion to trust of school leaders and then to parents of children with disabilities, and then finally to the relationships between home and school partnerships for students with disabilities. They point out the problem of possible discrepant viewpoints between parents and schools—a potential problem that needs to be addressed. They then discuss the need for exploring further the critical role of principals in establishing trust in the relationships between families of children with disabilities and education professionals. In sum, they open the article by discussing the important central phenomenon of trust and exploring the potential discrepant viewpoints between

mothers of individuals with disabilities and principals. They say that they view trust as the “central phenomenon requiring exploration and understanding” (p. 161).

In qualitative research, the *literature review* plays a less substantial role at the beginning of the study than in quantitative research. In qualitative research, although you may review the literature to justify the need to study the research problem, the literature does not provide major direction for the research questions. The reason for this is that qualitative research relies more on the views of participants in the study and less on the direction identified in the literature by the researcher. Thus, to use the literature to foreshadow or specify the direction for the study is inconsistent with the qualitative approach of learning from participants. For example, one qualitative researcher who studied bullying in the schools cited several studies at the beginning of the research to provide evidence for the problem but did not use the literature to specify the research questions. Instead, this researcher attempted to answer in the research the most general, open question possible, “What is bullying?,” and to learn how students constructed their view of this experience.

In the illustrative sample qualitative study by Shelden et al. (2010), the authors begin the article by citing numerous studies from the literature. This literature review is not to identify specific questions that need to be answered; instead, the literature review establishes the meaning and importance of the central phenomenon of trust—why it is important and the relationships needed in schools that involve parents and educational teams, including principals. In this article, there is no separate literature review section, and the literature is used to justify the importance of studying the potential problem of the relationships between parents (i.e., mothers) and the schools (i.e., principals).

In qualitative research, the *purpose statement* and the *research questions* are stated so that you can best learn from participants. You research a single phenomenon of interest and state this phenomenon in a purpose statement. A qualitative study that examines the “professionalism” of teachers, for example, asks high school teachers, “What does it mean to be a professional?” This question focuses on understanding a single idea—being a professional—and the responses to it will yield qualitative data such as quotations.

In the qualitative study of mothers’ trust in school principals (Shelden et al., 2010), the authors say that the study emerged from a broader study of the perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities on trust in education personnel. The authors raise this question, “What are the perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities on trust in school principals?” (p. 161). This is a general and broad question that seeks to understand (or “gain insight into,” p. 161) the perspectives of the mothers.

In qualitative research, you *collect data* to learn from the participants in the study and develop forms, called *protocols*, for recording data as the study proceeds. These forms pose general questions so that the participants can provide answers to the questions. Often questions on these forms will change and emerge during data collection. Examples of these forms include an *interview protocol*, which consists of four or five questions, or an *observational protocol*, in which the researcher records notes about the behavior of participants. Moreover, you gather text (word) or image (picture) data. Transcribed audio recordings form a database composed of words. Observing participants in their work or family setting, you take notes that will become a qualitative database. When researchers ask young children to write their thoughts in a diary, these diary entries, too, become a text database. With each form of data, you will gather as much information as possible to collect detailed accounts for a final research report.

In our sample qualitative study by Shelden et al. (2010), the authors recruited a sample of mothers of school-age children with disabilities, and conducted interviews with 16 of these parents. In the journal article, the authors provide the eight open-ended

questions that they asked. These interviews enabled them to probe for further information, elaboration, and clarification of responses, while maintaining a “feeling of openness” to the participants’ responses.

In qualitative research typically you gather a text database, so the *data analysis* of text consists of dividing it into groups of sentences, called *text segments*, and determining the meaning of each group of sentences. Rather than using statistics, you analyze words or pictures to describe the central phenomenon under study. The result may be a description of individual people or places. In some qualitative studies, the entire report is mostly a long description of several individuals. The result may also include themes or broad categories that represent your findings. In qualitative studies in which you both describe individuals and identify themes, a rich, complex picture emerges. From this complex picture, you make an interpretation of the meaning of the data by reflecting on how the findings relate to existing research; by stating a personal reflection about the significance of the lessons learned during the study; or by drawing out larger, more abstract meanings.

In the study of mothers’ perspectives of trust in school principals (Shelden et al., 2010), we can see these data analysis steps. The authors analyzed text data based on audiotaped and transcribed verbatim passages as mentioned in the section on interviews. In their section on data analysis, they talk about the “line-by-line coding” of their data in which they used the words of the participants to form categories. They provide in Table 1 a detailed descriptive portrait of participants in their study, noting the ethnicity, type of disability, grade level, and other personal information. In the results section we find the various themes that they identified, such as principal attributes and principal actions. In the conclusion section, they review all of these findings, thereby creating a complex picture of the relationship between mothers and school leaders. Although their personal reflections are minimal in this study, the authors discuss their challenges in recruiting participants to the study and how they sought to protect the identity of the participants.

In *reporting* qualitative research you employ a wide range of formats to report your studies. Although the overall general form follows the standard steps in the process of research, the sequence of these “parts” of research tends to vary from one qualitative report to another. A study may begin with a long, personal narrative told in story form or with a more objective, scientific report that resembles quantitative research. With such variability, it is not surprising that the standards for evaluating qualitative research also are flexible. Good qualitative reports, however, need to be realistic and persuasive to convince the reader that the study is an accurate and credible account. Qualitative reports typically contain extensive data collection to convey the complexity of the phenomenon or process. The data analysis reflects description and themes as well as the interrelation of themes. In addition, you discuss your role or position in a research study, called *being reflexive*. This means that you reflect on your own biases, values, and assumptions and actively write them into the research. This may also involve discussing personal experiences and identifying how you collaborated with participants during phases of the project. You may also discuss how your experiences and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Asian American perspectives) affect the interpretations and conclusions drawn in the study.

In the sample study of mothers’ trust in school principals (Shelden et al., 2010), the authors used more of a scientific structure than a literary structure for writing their article. This may have been done because of the requirements of the journal to address certain aspects (e.g., methods, results, discussion). However, the article did depart from the traditional structure by not having a separate literature review section; instead, the literature review was incorporated into the introduction to establish the importance of the central phenomenon—trust—and to develop a need for the study. The authors did employ the

personal pronoun “we” in referring to themselves in the study, a subjective orientation typically associated with qualitative, literary writing. As mentioned earlier, references to themselves, and especially how their backgrounds shaped their interpretation, were absent.

Similarities and Differences between Quantitative and Qualitative Research

At this point you may be asking how quantitative research and qualitative research are similar and different. In terms of similarity, both forms of research follow the six steps in the process of research. There are minor differences, as well, in the introduction to a study—the research problem section—in that both sections need to establish the importance of the problem. In quantitative research the research problem section is used to direct the types of questions or hypotheses asked in the study, whereas in qualitative research the research problem discussion is typically used to establish the importance of the central idea. These differences are apparent in the comparison of the introduction to the quantitative parent involvement study (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005) and the qualitative mothers’ trust in school principals study (Shelden et al., 2010).

Another similarity exists in the data collection procedures. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection may employ similar approaches, such as interviews or observations. However, quantitative approaches use more closed-ended approaches in which the researcher identifies set response categories (e.g., strongly agree, strongly disagree, and so forth), whereas qualitative approaches use more open-ended approaches in which the inquirer asks general questions of participants, and the participants shape the response possibilities (e.g., in an interview with a teacher, a qualitative researcher might ask: What does professional development mean to you?).

There are distinct differences that go beyond the forms of gathering data. In data analysis, the procedures are quite different. In quantitative research, the investigator relies on statistical analysis (mathematical analysis) of the data, which is typically in numeric form. In qualitative research, statistics are not used to analyze the data; instead, the inquirer analyzes words (e.g., transcriptions from interviews) or images (e.g., photographs). Rather than relying on statistical procedures, the qualitative researcher analyzes the words to group them into larger meanings of understanding, such as codes, categories, or themes. The reporting formats are also typically different, with the quantitative structure following the typical introduction, literature review, methods, results, and conclusion sections. In qualitative research, some of these sections may be missing (e.g., the literature review in the Shelden et al., 2010 study), and the format may be more of a literary opening with a personal vignette or passage, an unfolding story, the use of extensive quotes from participants, and personal reflections from the researcher.

It should also be mentioned that rather than viewing quantitative and qualitative as two end points in a dichotomy, but rather as different points on a continuum. Studies may contain some elements of the characteristics of quantitative research and some elements of qualitative research. However, studies do *tend* to lean toward one approach or the other, and knowing the characteristics associated with each type of research enables a researcher to assess whether a particular study favors either quantitative or qualitative research.

How do you choose whether to use a quantitative or a qualitative approach? Three factors are important. First, match your approach to your research problem. Remember that the problems best suited for quantitative research are those in which trends or explanations need to be made. For qualitative research, the problems need to be explored to obtain a deep understanding. Second, your approach needs to fit the audience(s) for the research report. Educators write for several audiences, such as policy makers, faculty and

graduate committees, editors and review boards, evaluators of grant proposals, and individuals in schools or educational settings. It is important that the audience(s) be familiar with the approach used in a study. Third, relate your approach to your personal experience and training. A quantitative researcher typically has taken some courses or training in measurement, statistics, and quantitative data collection, such as experiments, correlational designs, or survey techniques. Qualitative researchers need experience in field studies in which they practice gathering information in a setting and learning the skills of observing or interviewing individuals. Coursework or experience in analyzing text data is helpful, as well as in research designs such as grounded theory, ethnography, or narrative research. Some individuals have experience and training in approaches to research that combine both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as mixed methods research or action research.

Research Designs Associated with Quantitative and Qualitative Research

It is not enough to know the steps in the process of research, and that quantitative and qualitative procedures differ at each step. This text will also go into detailed procedures involved in quantitative, qualitative, and combined research. **Research designs** are the specific procedures involved in the research process: data collection, data analysis, and report writing. Figure 1.4 illustrates how the steps in the research process relate to quantitative and qualitative research and advances eight different research designs, used by educational researchers, discussed in this book.

Experimental Designs

Some quantitative researchers seek to test whether an educational practice or idea makes a difference for individuals. Experimental research procedures are ideally suited for

