3 Methods of Research

PART A

Many valuable investigations are carried out without a detailed knowledge of methods of research. However, you will enrich your research experience and have a better understanding of the whole field of research if you take some time to study the various methods that researchers use to obtain their information. In fact, if you are carrying out your research as part of an educational course, it is probably mandatory for you to do this.

There are many methods of researching a topic and it is impossible to do justice to any particular research method within the confines of this book. However, the main research methods are explained and from these you should gain ideas as to their suitability for your purpose. Once you have settled on several possible research methods, you should then pursue further reading in that area. The Bibliography at the end of this book will point you in the right direction, or your tutor/supervisor and librarian should be able to advise you.

It is not written in stone that you may only use one method of research. It may be far better to combine several research methods in order to achieve a well-balanced and meaningful conclusion.

When you begin to read about particular research methods in depth, you may find that the language used is difficult to understand; because all professions adopt their own jargon to ease communication between experts within that field. Academic researchers are no different to the medical or legal professions. Your best way of overcoming the problem is to keep updating your list of new vocabulary and meanings (see Glossary of new terms, pp. 31–2) and refer to it whenever necessary.

Qualitative versus quantitative research

Most research uses either qualitative or quantitative research. If you look at the dictionary definition for these two words, you will see that for qualitative it says relating to distinctions based on quality and for quantitative involving or relating to considerations of amount or size. Taking these words a step further back to their roots (see Table 3.1), may help you to understand the broad differences.
TABLE 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some definitions of quantity</th>
<th>Some definitions of quality</th>
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<tr>
<td>A specified or definite amount</td>
<td>Character or nature of something</td>
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<tr>
<td>The aspect of anything that can be measured</td>
<td>Distinguishing characteristic or attribute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A large or considerable amount</td>
<td>Degree or standard of excellence</td>
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The majority of research methods can accommodate a qualitative or quantitative approach, sometimes both, depending on the topic and research process adopted.

Bouma and Atkinson summarise the difference between these two research procedures succinctly:

The difference might be summarised by saying that quantitative research is structured, logical, measured, and wide. Qualitative research is more intuitive, subjective, and deep. This implies that some subjects are best investigated using quantitative whilst in others, qualitative approaches will give better results. In some cases both methods can be used. (Bouma and Atkinson 1995:208)

► Qualitative research

Qualitative research often lends itself to small-scale research where the researcher is engaging in unstructured interviews, life histories and observations. If the researcher is involved closely with an individual or a small group of individuals in the research process, one-to-one personal qualitative research helps to cultivate a better understanding of the experiences that have taken place.

For example, if the area of research is within the classroom, and the researcher has decided to investigate whether infant school children with summer birthdays are disadvantaged because of their age, regular qualitative interview research, maybe alongside other methods, would enable the researcher to gently build up a rapport with the children and coax relevant information that would otherwise be missed with a quantitative approach.

In the qualitative research process the researcher tries to interact with those they study, a relationship is fostered and personal interaction takes place. The language of a particular study is likely to be first person and personal. The researcher may lay their own values and biases on the