QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES

The third perspective in our typology of research concerns the process you adopt to find answers to your research questions. Broadly, there are two approaches to enquiry:

1. the structured approach;

2. the unstructured approach.

In the structured approach everything that forms the research process – objectives, design, sample, and the questions that you plan to ask of respondents – is predetermined. The unstructured approach, by contrast, allows flexibility in all these aspects of the process. The structured approach is more appropriate to determine the extent of a problem, issue or phenomenon, whereas the unstructured approach is predominantly used to explore its nature, in other words, variation/diversity per se in a phenomenon, issue, problem or attitude towards an issue. For example, if you want to research the different perspectives of an issue, the problems experienced by people living in a community or the different views people hold towards an issue, then these are better explored using unstructured enquiries.

On the other hand, to find out how many people have a particular perspective, how many people have a particular problem, or how many people hold a particular view, you need to have a structured approach to enquiry. Before undertaking a structured enquiry, in the author's opinion, an unstructured enquiry must be undertaken to ascertain the diversity in a phenomenon which can then be quantified through the structured enquiry. Both approaches have their place in research. Both have their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, you should not 'lock' yourself solely into a structured or unstructured approach.

The structured approach to enquiry is usually classified as quantitative research and unstructured as qualitative research. The choice between quantitative and qualitative approaches (or structured or unstructured) should depend upon: Aim of your enquiry – exploration, confirmation or quantification. Use of the findings – policy formulation or process understanding.