

Chapter 5: Intro video script

You should choose a research design that is capable of answering your research questions.

To do that, you need to be aware of the implications of different types of research question for how you might answer them.

A useful starting point is to consider each of the three generic types of research question that we introduced earlier: what, why and how type questions.

What-type questions are fundamentally concerned with description and can include questions about 'who', 'how many', 'when', 'how much,' and so on.

Description often involves comparison between groups or at different points in time and may use classification schemes to help reduce complexity.

Quantitative approaches to description typically involve drawing conclusions about a larger population on the basis of a smaller sample in terms of key variables of interest such as people's age, income or attitudes.

Qualitative approaches to description, on the other hand, are likely to be concerned with understanding things in depth and in context, often from the perspective of those involved in a particular situation.

'Why'-type research questions seek explanations for why something is happening, often in terms of cause and effect.

Some researchers advocate using specific criteria by which we can establish claims about causality.

These criteria are often seen as implying the need for deductive, theory-testing research designs, particularly experiments, although other quantitative designs are also used.

Alternative approaches exist, however. These stress such things as the need to focus on the causal mechanisms that bring about an effect, to incorporate people's reasoning in our explanations and to acknowledge the challenges created by causal complexity in the real world.

This creates opportunities to use research designs such as case study and grounded theory in our efforts to explain why things are happening.

'How' type research questions seek explanations in terms of the processes through which things come about over time.

This might involve studying how entities such as organisations change and develop, using computer simulation to model complex behaviour or focusing on social processes to understand how social reality is constituted, reproduced and maintained by people's everyday actions and interactions. Selecting an appropriate research design involves thinking carefully about what you are trying to achieve and how a particular approach might help you.

Being aware of the nature of different research questions is an important starting point in making that selection.