Exercise #2: “Qualitative” and “Quantitative” “Methods”

Due date and time: February 10, 3pm (note policy on the syllabus about late exercises)

Purpose: An occasion for you to reflect briefly on what many sociologists (and members of other social sciences) see as the Great Methodological Divide.

Your exercise should contain four parts, with enumerations separating each of the four parts. Parts 1 and 4 are the most important, although to receive credit you must do all four.

Tasks:

1. As best you can, provide original, positive, and appropriately encompassing definitions of “qualitative research” and “quantitative research.”

   By “original,” I mean a definition created by you, in your own words, and reflecting your own understanding of the distinction. Not only should you not copy definitions provided in some book, but you should likewise not model your definitions after definitions provided in some work.

   By “positive,” I do not mean “upbeat”, but I mean a definition formulated in terms of what it is rather than what it is not.

   By “appropriately encompassing,” I mean the definition should be inclusive of the various types of social science research that you know of that you would characterize as “qualitative” or “quantitative” research.

2. Imagine a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is “all social research I will do in my career will be ‘quantitative research’,” 100 is “all social research I will do in my career will be ‘qualitative research’,” and 50 is “I expect that the social research I do over the course of my career will be exactly half ‘qualitative’ and exactly half ‘quantitative’.” Rate yourself on this scale, making whatever rating seems most plausible to you at the moment at which you are doing this exercise.

   Disclaimers, caveats: your rating is not binding your future in any way; it will not be used to cognitively pigeonhole you somehow; you should not take the rating overly seriously; the only wrong answers you could give would be either no rating or one not in the interval 0 \( \leq x \leq 100 \).

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1 To be sure, research projects can include both “qualitative” and “quantitative” components, but even then the projects usually can be characterized as having a larger or more primary “qualitative” or “quantitative” emphasis.
3. Provide a guess as to what you expect the average rating will be for all students in the course. (Again, the only wrong answers here would be no guess or a guess not in the interval \(0 \geq x \leq 100\).)

4. Offer brief (1-2 paragraph) descriptions of two hypothetical (i.e., made-up, pretend) social science research projects in an area that you personally find substantively interesting. One project should employ a research strategy that would be regarded as “quantitative research,” while the other project should employ a research strategy that would be regarded as “qualitative research.” The “quantitative research” project you describe should be pursuing a research goal for which you think quantitative research is better suited for pursuing than is “qualitative research,” and vice versa for the “qualitative research” project you describe. The two projects should also be, at least in a broad sense, complementary, meaning the findings of each project may be enhanced / elaborated / made more understandable in light of the findings of the other.

The point here is not for you to provide some detailed account of the precise methods that your hypothetical project would employ. Instead, your description should describe (1) the goal of the project; (2) the research that would be conducted in pursuit of this goal; (3) a hypothetical example of what might be a major “finding” of this research; and (4) why, in your opinion, the specific goal of the project is better suited using “qualitative” / “quantitative” methods than using “quantitative” / “qualitative” methods.

Turning it in: Before the due date/time, you should e-mail your exercise to me at jfreese@ssc.wisc.edu with the subject line Completed Exercise 2. Please e-mail it with the text of the assignment in the body of the message (not as an attachment). You should still spell-check, etc., and you may use text formatting features [e.g., italics, boldface] if you are using an e-mail client that allows this.