Research efforts in health professions education (HPE) are often framed in terms of opposing perspectives. Most notably, HPE scholars tend to describe research approaches as either inductive or deductive and to categorize research methodologies as either qualitative or quantitative. These perspectives are frequently conflated: qualitative research is equated with inductive approaches (from data to theory), and quantitative research with deductive approaches (from theory to data). However, inductive and deductive research approaches exist on a spectrum, and the research methodologies investigators use (be they quantitative or qualitative) may sit anywhere along that spectrum. Here, we present examples of approaches to research using qualitative and quantitative data that demonstrate the spectrum from inductive to deductive.

Uncoupling quantitative research from deductive approaches, and qualitative research from inductive approaches, allows HPE scholars to engage in more sophisticated research. Working along the whole spectrum of inductive and deductive research approaches, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, can facilitate the construction of new findings, the development of theory, and the refinement of concepts central to HPE.