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Introducing Qualitative Research

In: Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide

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Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify key milestones in the evolution of qualitative research
- Discuss the definition of qualitative research
- Explore the concept of a generic form of qualitative research
- Discuss the purpose and structure of qualitative research questions
- Construct a qualitative research question

Introduction

Ambition
Desire
Curiosity
Trepidation
Frustration
Excitement
Fear
Confusion … and then we begin.

For beginning researchers, planning to undertake a qualitative study is motivated by a range of factors. For some it is a requirement of their employment that they achieve a PhD, the highest degree that a university awards. For others, engaging in this type of work results from a long-held desire to exercise their intellect; while curiosity is a characteristic that all potential researchers display. Once the decision is made to commence, most people experience trepidation at the prospect, quickly followed by frustration with university processes, culminating in excitement when they receive their ethics approval letter. For students of research, after their first initial supervisory meetings working through potential research questions and designs before being sent off to read, and read, and read; feelings of tension and confusion often begin to fill them with doubt.

Feelings of tension and confusion are more intense for qualitative researchers at the beginning of their career because of the complex lineage of many research designs. You may find you relate to the words of the doctoral candidate and supervisor in Box 1.1. In qualitative research

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the mandate that the design must match the question, and not the other way around, makes the situation even more complicated. Beginning researchers approach their higher degree studies with a research question of sorts, or at least a substantive area of enquiry that they wish to investigate. To be accepted into a program of study, a research proposal is written that includes a research design, however, there is often limited understanding of what this means in reality. As a result, it is normal for higher degree qualitative research students to spend the first 6–12 months of their candidature exploring not only their original methodological ideas, but also others that might provide a better fit with their research question – which is at the same time being refined.

Window into Qualitative Research

A poem by Michelle Redman-MacLaren (Doctoral candidate)

Tension
As I begin, Tension begins with me
How am I contributing today?
By sitting at my desk, growing my brain
How is this healing the world?
Tension snickers ‘your ego is back’
Her soft, knowing chuckle
Reminding me of my familiar foe
The need to produce, to work, to do
A gentle counterpoint required.
A sabbatical, a journey, a spiritual quest
A quieting of doing
A louding of being
My challenge now and throughout
My PhD

A poem by Ysanne Chapman (Supervisor)

In Waiting
The expectant student
always looking for that first word
that springboards into fluency –
Spilling forth a thousand words

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And a thousand more
grabbing at the pages
before the brain silences the fingers.

This chapter will explore the evolution of qualitative research and how a changing society has contributed to the field of enquiry as it stands today. The purpose and outcomes of a qualitative study will be discussed, and generic concepts relevant to this approach to research will be outlined. To conclude the chapter, we will explain what makes a research question work well and provide you with some strategies to build a strong foundation for your own study.

You and Qualitative Research

Take a minute to jot down a few words that describe your understanding of qualitative research. How do you feel about the prospect of undertaking a study using a qualitative methodology?

The Evolution of Qualitative Research

Tracing the evolution of qualitative research is traditionally linked to periods of time, beginning with early ethnographies (Vidich and Lyman, 2000) conducted between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries as a part of explorers' voyages to the 'New World' and the colonialization of both vast tracts of land and the traditional owners of that land. Ethnography during this time, and on into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was founded on the premise that the researcher was a detached observer of cultures other than their own, falling in line with scientific thought at that time, which perceived the world as an entity for which there were general, uniform laws to explain both the physical world and the causal relationships that supported its being (Erickson, 2011). It was not until the late nineteenth century that the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey wrote of a form of social inquiry that aimed to understand human experience, as opposed to garnering proof for the purpose of prediction and ultimately generalization. Dilthey's 'science of the spirit' (Erickson, 2011: 44) informed the work of early phenomenologist's and anthropologists. At the beginning of the twentieth century the genre of realist ethnography, positioning researchers as objectively able to capture the totality of community life through careful observation and interview, dominated qualitative research. In the United States (US), a tradition of community ethnographic studies was established in the Chicago School of Sociology that continued to be anchored in a realist, or positivist ontology. Scholars at this institution later developed the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer,

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1969), based on the work of Mead (1934), which moved qualitative research into a sphere of relativism that was ‘proudly anti-positivistic’ (Fine, 1993: 64). Strauss was a student of Mead and Blumer, who together with Glaser (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) began to question the appropriateness of a scientific method of verification, developing the alternative methodology of grounded theory while generating a sociological theory of dying (Glaser and Strauss, 1965).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 1994, 2011, 2005) have iteratively argued a conceptualization of the history of the field of qualitative research in eight moments (Box 1.2), of which the first two, traditional (1900–1950) and modernist or ‘golden age’ (1950–1970) include our discussion to this point, with a number of qualitative researchers during this time gravitating from the foundationalism of positivistic thought to a position more akin to constructivism (Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006). Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2003) struggle with the use of Denzin and Lincoln's heuristic, arguing that the development of qualitative research is far from linear after what they term the ‘ruptures of 1968’ (p. 6), even though linearity is not the original authors’ intent believing instead that each of the eight moments ‘overlap and coexist in the present’ (Denzin, 2011: xv). Juxtaposing a clearly delineated timeline against this broad overarching statement of coexistence can result in a state of confusion, unless one considers these moments not as phases, but as the point of origin for particular schools of thought, many of which will be explored in Part II in relation to contemporary qualitative methodologies.

Denzin and Lincoln's Moments of Qualitative Inquiry

Years	Moment
1900–1950	Traditional
1950–1970	Modernist or ‘Golden Age’
1970–1986	Blurred Genres
1986–1990	Crisis of Representation
1990–1995	Postmodernism
1995–2000	Post-experimental Inquiry
2000–2004	The Methodologically-Contested Present
2005–Present	Fractured Future

So what happened in 1968? A number of momentous events made it an amazing year to be alive (if you were old enough to understand what was happening). US engagement in the Vietnam War sparks a series of often-violent protests across the world. Dr Martin Luther King was assassinated on the 4th of April, with a subsequent wave of race riots lasting days in a

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number of major American cities. Ironically, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the US Civil Rights Act seven days later and James Anderson, Jr., the first black US Marine, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. In the United Kingdom, the anti-immigration speech *Rivers of Blood* was delivered in response to the passing of an act of parliament (the *Race Relations Act 1968*) generating immense social controversy in this country. France was led to the brink of a communist revolution with a million students and workers marching through Paris in response to Charles de Gaulle's government. Again in the US, militant student protests occurred at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Howard University, and Columbia University in New York City. Nuclear weapons testing proliferated in the US, and France exploded its first hydrogen bomb. The US presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in connection to the Arab Israeli conflict in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein came into power in Iraq as the result of a coup d'état, while Pope Paul VI published the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* condemning birth control. The women's liberation movement gained traction with a large demonstration against the Miss America pageant. CNN launched the investigative journalism television show, *60 Minutes*, Richard Nixon was elected the President of the United States and *Apollo 8* orbited the moon (Dunnigan and Hartman-Strom, unknown).

The social and political ruptures of 1968 impacted profoundly on the way qualitative researchers perceived themselves during this time, including: their role, their place in the world and the relationship they sustain with participants throughout the research process, including the presentation of findings. In 1967, Howard Becker, an eminent scholar and member of the second wave Chicago School, presages many of the methodological dilemmas that dominate the literature to come. In his presidential address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems, entitled *Whose Side Are We On?* (Becker, 1967), he disabuses the notion that sociological researchers can be value free. The extensive critique and resultant development of Becker's original thesis (Atkinson et al., 2003), that there is no such thing as value free research, is representative of much that has been written about qualitative research in the past four plus decades. Many of the standards that contemporary qualitative researchers account for in the design and implementation of their studies stem from these methodological discussions and debates. Erickson (2011), in his historical account of qualitative inquiry in social and educational research, likens the fifteen years from 1967 onwards to a ‘firestorm of criticism of realist general ethnography’ (p. 49) resulting in part from the growing influence of Native American, African American and feminist researchers concerned with power, oppression, the researcher's position in a study, and the importance of reflexivity. In particular, qualitative researchers, committed to action research, identify 1970 as a turning point when many broke away from universities as centres of research that they considered unsympathetic to

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understanding the world in a way outside of 'conceptions of Cartesian rationality, dualism and "normal science'" (Fals Borda, 2006: 27). At this time, the publication of Freire's (1972)*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provided the impetus for many qualitative researchers to reposition themselves in relation to 'how and why' they engaged in the process of inquiry. Freire's battle cry to work '*with*, not *for*, the oppressed [so as to] make oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation' (Freire, 1972: 25) resonated with many, providing a platform for both participatory action research and critical ethnographic research. Shortly after this, Feyerabend published the seminal text *Against Method* (1975) where he argued that 'science knows no "bare facts" at all but that the "facts" that enter our knowledge are already viewed in a certain way and are, therefore, essentially ideational' (p. 19), adding more fuel to the firestorm raging through the modernist landscape of research.

Figure 1.1



In the late 1970s and early 1980s the conceptualization of paradigms of inquiry gained currency, with particular paradigms delimited through answering questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology (Guba, 1990; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). In the history of qualitative research this time was dominated by the 'paradigm wars' (Denzin, 2010), with postpositivists, constructivists and critical theorists all 'pushing back' against the dominant positivistic research culture, while at the same time competing with each other for legitimacy and recognition. In 1989 a landmark event, the *Alternative Paradigms Conference*, was held in San Francisco with the aim of clarifying and exploring issues of concern for scholars identifying with each of these three paradigms of thought (Guba, 1990). Reflecting back, Denzin (2010) identifies this process of respectful dialogue as signalling the end of the paradigm wars of the

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1980s, while positing there were two more conflicts to come; in the field of mixed-methods research where the incompatibility thesis of postpositivist and 'other' paradigms was debated in the 1990s/00s, and the current politicized conflict with regard to what constitutes valid evidence as an outcome of research (Hammersley, 2008; Denzin, 2009).

Qualitative Research

Teaching undergraduate research students for many years, out of necessity we have both addressed the idea of a 'common or garden variety' version of qualitative research. Breaking down the concept of qualitative research to simple component parts results in the lecturer rapidly moving to generic explanations of the research process as opposed to initially situating a design methodologically which requires the student to have a basic understanding of philosophical and often sociological thought, absent in the many practice-based professions in which qualitative research proliferates. A traditional, dichotomously situated, definition of qualitative research is that:

> … if researchers choose to gather experiential data more than measurements, they call their research 'qualitative' – but they still may emphasize either the particular or the general. If findings are drawn primarily from the aggregate of many individual observations, we call the study 'quantitative,' but the researcher still may emphasize either the particular or the general (Stake, 2010: 19).

This simple division of research into either qualitative or quantitative is largely rejected by qualitative methodologists as inadequate in describing the nuances and multiplicity of research designs (Flick, 2007) – however we would argue that in the current 'crisis' of evidence, Stake's definition resonates with many from outside qualitative research such as policymakers and funders (Birks and Mills, 2011). As an alternative to defining qualitative research by what it is not – quantitative – Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2001) consider qualitative research an umbrella term dimensionalized by discipline; methods; topic and substance; voices and text. The importance of the researcher's discipline in shaping the mores of qualitative methodologies shouldn't be underestimated, particularly in relation to the choice of topic and substance, and the place of voices and text. Method, however, is the one dimension that incorporates elements common to the majority of qualitative research studies – leading to the idea of generic planning and implementation processes. It's not unusual to read reports of research labelled 'qualitative', usually accompanied by a caveat term such as descriptive or exploratory. Naïve or methodologically free studies such as these are framed in terms of methods that often include: purposive sampling, the generation or collection of textual data as a result of observation and interviews, thematic analysis of the data and a reliance on measures of trustworthiness (Guba

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and Lincoln, 1989) to ensure rigour.

So what's wrong with conducting a generic 'qualitative research study'? While overall, the purpose of a qualitative research study is to examine phenomena that impact on the lived reality of individuals or groups in a particular cultural and social context, studies firmly anchored in a methodological school of thought are finely textured and nuanced – producing a much higher quality outcome. It is the question asked by the researcher that determines the methodology used and it is this choice of methodology that guides the researcher, already ensconced in their discipline, to consider dimensions of topic and substance, voice and text.

Writing a Qualitative Research Question

Knowing how to write a research question that is clear and unambiguous, while allowing sufficient scope for the unexpected directions that a qualitative research study can take, is an important skill for the research student to develop. As you review texts discussing research design you will no doubt see reference to a wide variety of terminology. Research questions? Hypotheses? Aims? Objectives? The differences between each of these terms are often not clear and cause confusion in the novice researcher. An understanding of these differences in language and the purpose of using particular terminology is important in clarifying the researcher's thinking about their particular study.

Different researchers will define concepts relating to research using different language. Table 1.1 provides a summary of our definitions of terms used to describe a researcher's intention in relation to their proposed research and their use in practice.

In qualitative research, a well-constructed research question will guide the selection of an appropriate methodology and development of the research design. Underestimating the importance of ensuring clarity in the meaning, structure and intention of research questions can negatively impact on the ability of the researcher to find the answer to these questions (Bragge, 2010). Quality research questions potentiate quality research outcomes. Agee (2009) suggests that while a good research question does not automatically lead to good research, poorly-constructed questions will almost certainly impact on the quality of a study.

It should be expected that the research question, its aims and objectives may be modified as a research study progresses (more so in some qualitative designs than others) but this does not detract from the importance that the initial research question brings to the project as a whole. Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes (2010)propose that the research question promotes methodological congruence and furthermore provides direction for the use of research methods and strategies within a methodological framework. These authors refer to the 'permeable boundaries' that

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research questions permit within a ‘helpful and informative methodological space’ (p. 117).

Table 1.1 Defining Key Research Terms

Term	Definition	Usage
Topic	The research focus	Provides generic statement of the focus of the study
Research statement	A brief paragraph outlining the purpose and significance of the proposed research study	Summarizes the intent of the researcher
Hypothesis	A suggested or proposed explanation for a phenomenon	Common in quantitative research Used in qualitative research to hypothesize relationships
Research question	An interrogative statement of the research intent	Asserts the research intent Directs the study design
Aim	A statement of intent or anticipated outcome	Guides action towards the research goal
Objective	Aim or goal that includes reference to specific object or phenomenon to be achieved	Acts as a tangible subset of the stated research question or aims to support the research

Many readers will come to this text with an idea or topic area for research but have yet to formulate it into a researchable question. Some will have formulated a question yet are struggling to align it with an appropriate methodology. Others may come to a study with an unfocused or unmanageable topic area or in some cases, a hope that the topic will somehow simply show itself (Silverman, 2009). Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes (2010) warn that questions that are vague, broad or absent can potentially impede thorough, detailed and rigorous analysis.

One of the frustrations experienced by graduate students in the early stages of a study is their inability to establish a clear focus for their research. It is important here to point out that a lack of focus in the early stages of research is common and to be expected as a normal part of the process. A student's desire to know more about a topic through research is a result of a lack of knowledge about the subject matter and this deficit is evident in their inability to narrow the focus of the research. It is indeed the acquisition of a growing familiarity with the phenomenon of study that provides the impetus for continually refining the research question (Creswell and Tashakkori, 2007). As Agee (2009) points out, research question refinement is an iterative process.

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Nevertheless, in the early stages of a study an 'answerable' question must be formulated in order for the research to progress (Bragge, 2010). What makes a qualitative research question 'answerable' or 'good'? Agee (2009) suggests that the individual(s) who is/are the focus of the research and the situational context should be evident in the question. Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes (2010) also identify the study-context and setting as guiding parameters for the construction of research questions, along with instrumentalization (which we interpret as meaning the use of a research question as a tool to guide the conduct of the study) and epistemology, which once again refers to the constructive alignment that exists between the question posed and the overarching methodology. Agee (2009) adds that research questions should have a reflexive and ethical dimension and must be feasible for study in terms of the resources of the researcher.

What then does a 'good' research question look like? We need to draw on Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes' (2010) element of 'instrumentation' to answer this question. The intent of the outcome of the study will determine the interrogative that heralds the question's content. Closed questions are of no use in qualitative research as they have no scope. For example, the question 'Do farmers experience depression following prolonged drought' calls for a yes or no answer and does not give the necessary direction to the study. Interrogatives such as 'how' or 'what' generally provide a broad opening for a research question. If the researcher proposes to explicate the process, then 'how' questions should be used, e.g., 'How do female engineers in the Middle East achieve professional development in the work place?' Studies that attempt to examine an individual's experience of a phenomenon will usually be phrased from a 'what' or 'how' perspective, e.g., 'What is the experience of Sudanese refugees attempting to resettle in urban American environments?' or 'How do children of military service personnel experience transition to new schools following relocation?' The desire to explore and describe may be formed as a 'why' statement, such as 'Why does post-natal depression occur more often following the birth of a second child?'

This last example brings us to an important point. Neither your research question nor the study that follows can be founded on any pre-existing assumptions. Agee (2009) warns against such pre-suppositions as these stifle the discovery of meaning that characterizes qualitative research. Be clear about how your study sits in the context of existing disciplinary knowledge otherwise you risk building your study on a faulty foundation.

Drawing from this discussion and our own experience, we propose the following principles for the development of an effective research question. The researcher needs to ask whether the research question:

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- **Is answerable in terms of the researcher's expertise and available resources**
- **Is free from assumptions that are not based in valid evidence**
- **Contains only one question rather than a number of questions strung together**
- **Is phrased as an open-ended question**
- **Makes reference to the context of the phenomena of interest**
- **Includes reference to participant individuals or groups**
- **Uses language that indicates the philosophical position of the researcher**
- **Is concise, stating the question briefly and with clarity**

Depending on the nature and stage of the study, few or all of these principles may be addressed. The intent of these principles is to give you some guidance in the construction of your own research question without being regarded as hard-and-fast rules.

Effective Research Questions

Review a research question you are currently working with or select one from a published piece of work to which you have access. Using the above principles as a guide, evaluate the research question and identify any ways in which the research question could be improved. Attempt to rephrase the question in your own words to ensure it is more appropriate for its purpose.

It is important to note that a research study may contain more than one research question as Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes (2010) found. We concur with Agee (2009), however, that a single overarching research question is necessary to guide the study, with sub-questions being used as and if necessary. You may find, however, that your inclusion of distinct aims and objectives may be sufficient to support your research question, particularly in the early stages of your study.

Conclusion

Qualitative research has evolved over recent decades to achieve credibility for its ability to explore the human condition and its many truths. Undertaking a study using a qualitative methodology requires an understanding of the philosophy that underpins the proposed research design. The development of a research question that reflects the intent of the research and directs its conduct is pivotal to success in qualitative research. This chapter has explored concepts relevant to qualitative inquiry and has outlined generic processes in the planning and implementation of a study based on a well-constructed research question. As you

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progress through this text, you will no doubt return to this chapter to revise and reground your understanding of qualitative research.

Key Points

- Embarking on a qualitative research study can be a daunting process accompanied by mixed emotions
- The evolution of qualitative research can be linked to specific periods of time, beginning with the ethnographic movement that commenced in the early fifteenth century
- While generic qualitative research exists as a concept, such an approach removes the philosophical anchor of a situational methodology
- A well-constructed research question directs the selection of methodology and provides guidance for conducting of a qualitative study

Critical Thinking Questions

- How have historical milestones influenced the evolution of research in the qualitative paradigm and its position in contemporary social enquiry?
- What are your thoughts on the concept of generic qualitative research? Does the absence of a methodological anchor diminish the value of a qualitative study?
- How important is the research question in the conceptualization and implementation of a research study? How much scope should be given for the evolution of a qualitative research question as a study progresses?

Suggested Further Reading

‘David Silverman's second edition of this book provides a refreshing introduction to doing and debating qualitative research. An antidote to the standard textbook, this new edition shows how research can be methodologically inventive, empirically rigorous, theoretically-alive and practically relevant. Using materials ranging from photographs to novels and newspaper stories, the book demonstrates that getting to grips with qualitative methods means asking ourselves fundamental questions about how we are influenced by contemporary culture. By drawing on examples from websites and social media in the new edition, Silverman's text

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acknowledges how our social worlds are changing and explores new arenas for data collection. A new Glossary of Received Ideas aims to challenge conventional understandings of terms central to qualitative research and will inform, amuse and stimulate readers' (SAGE Publications, 2013).

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