

# 6



## Introducing and Focusing the Study

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The design of a qualitative study proceeds beyond the philosophical assumptions, perspectives, and theories into the introduction of a study. This introduction consists of stating the problem or issue leading to the study, formulating the central purpose of the study, and providing the research questions. Consistent with my view in this book, all three aspects of an introduction need to be related to a researcher's tradition of inquiry. To accomplish this, I return to two ideas mentioned in Chapter 1. In writing the problem, the purpose, and the questions, researchers have an opportunity for **encoding** with terms that signal to a reader the specific tradition being used. Also, researchers can use **foreshadowing** of ideas to be developed later within the specific data analysis procedures of a tradition. In this chapter, I develop how this might be accomplished and provide several examples from qualitative studies.

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### Questions for Discussion

- ▼ How does the problem statement, the issue or need for the study, reflect different "sources" of information, frame the existing literature, and relate to the foci of the traditions of inquiry in qualitative research?

- ▼ How does one pose the central research question in a study so that it encodes a tradition and foreshadows it?
- ▼ How can subquestions be presented in a study to both reflect the issues being explored and foreshadow the topics that will be presented in the analysis and qualitative report?

### THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the first few paragraphs of a study, the researcher introduces the "problem" leading to the study. The term problem may be a misnomer, and individuals unfamiliar with writing research may struggle with this writing passage. Rather than calling this passage the "problem statement," it might be clearer if we call it the "need for the study." Why is this study needed, I ask? I address considering the "source" for the problem, framing it within the extant literature, and encoding and foreshadowing the text for a tradition of inquiry.

Research methods books (e.g., Marshall & Rossman, 1995) advance several needs or sources for conducting scholarly research. These needs may be based on personal experience with an issue, job-related problems, an adviser's research agenda, and/or the scholarly literature. Often the paragraphs denoting the problem will refer to one or more of these rationales. The strongest and most scholarly rationale for a study, I believe, follows from a documented need in the literature for increased understanding and dialogue about an issue. As suggested by Barritt (1986), the rationale

is not the discovery of new elements, as in natural scientific study, but rather the heightening of awareness for experience which has been forgotten and overlooked. By heightening awareness and creating dialogue, it is hoped research can lead to better understanding of the way things appear to someone else and through that insight lead to improvements in practice. (p. 20)

Besides dialogue and understanding, a qualitative study may fill a void in existing literature, establish a new line of thinking, or assess an issue with an understudied group or population.

Researchers also situate or frame their studies within the larger existing literature. Although opinions differ about the extent of litera-

ture needed before a study begins, the qualitative texts I have read (e.g., Marshall & Rossman, 1995) all refer to the need to review the literature so that one can describe the studies about the problem to date and position one's study and ground it within this literature. I have found it helpful to visually depict where my study fits into the larger literature. For example, one might develop a research map (Creswell, 1994) of extant literature, organizing thoughts from the broader literature to the specific topic of study. Alternatively, concept mapping (Maxwell, 1996) or a conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994) present two comparable visual renderings of ideas.

In addition to determining the source of the problem and framing it within the literature and concepts, qualitative researchers need to encode the problem discussion with language that foreshadows their tradition of inquiry. This can be done, I believe, by mentioning the foci of the tradition of choice (see Chapter 3 for the discussion of foci). In a problem statement for a biographical study, for example, I would expect the writer to mention the need for learning from an individual and why this particular individual is important to study. For a phenomenological study, I should hear from the author that we need to know more about the "experiences" of individuals about a phenomenon and the meaning they ascribe to these experiences. For a grounded theory study, a theory takes center stage, and I would expect to learn how we need to modify an existing theory because it ill suits a population or issue or how we need to generate a theory because no existing theoretical perspective fits a particular issue. In an ethnographic study, the problem statement might include thoughts about why we need to describe and interpret the cultural behavior of a group of people. For a case study, the researcher should focus on an event, process, or program for which we have no in-depth perspective on this "case." Conducting the case study provides a picture to help inform our practice or to see unexplored details of the case. Thus, the need for the study, or the problem leading to it, can be related to the specific focus of the tradition of choice.

### THE PURPOSE STATEMENT

This interrelationship between design and tradition continues with the purpose statement, the major objective or intent for the study that

provides an essential "road map" for the reader. As a critical statement in the entire qualitative study, it needs to be given careful attention and be written in clear and concise language. Unfortunately, all too many writers leave this statement implicit, causing readers extra work in deciphering the central thrust of a project. This need not be the case, and I offer a "script" of this statement (Creswell, 1994), a statement containing several sentences and blanks that an individual fills in:

The purpose of this \_\_\_\_\_ (biographical, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, case) study is (was? will be?) to \_\_\_\_\_ (understand? describe? develop? discover?) the \_\_\_\_\_ (central focus for the study) for \_\_\_\_\_ (the unit of analysis: a person? processes? groups? site?). At this stage in the research, the \_\_\_\_\_ (central focus being studied) will be generally defined as \_\_\_\_\_ (provide a general definition of the central concept).

Notice immediately that I have used several terms to encode the passage for a specific tradition of inquiry:

- ▼ *The writer identifies the specific tradition of inquiry being used in the study by mentioning the type.* The name of the tradition comes first in the passage, thus foreshadowing the inquiry approach for data collection, analysis, and report writing.
- ▼ *The writer encodes the passage with words that indicate the action of the researcher and the focus of the tradition.* For example, I associate words such as *understand* (useful in biographical studies), *describe* (useful in case studies, ethnographies, and phenomenologies), *develop* or *generate* (useful in grounded theory), and *discover* (useful in all traditions) with the traditions. As shown in Figure 6.1, I identify several words that researchers include in their purpose statements to encode the purpose statements for their traditions. These words indicate not only the researchers' actions but also the foci and outcomes of the studies.
- ▼ *The writer foreshadows data collection in this statement, whether he or she plans to study an individual (i.e., biography, possibly case study or ethnography), several individuals (i.e., grounded theory or phenomenol-*

Biography	Phenomenology	Grounded Theory	Ethnography	Case Study
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biography (or oral history or life history)</li> <li>• Classical</li> <li>• Interpretive</li> <li>• Individual</li> <li>• Stories</li> <li>• Epiphanies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phenomenological study</li> <li>• Describe</li> <li>• Experiences</li> <li>• Meaning</li> <li>• Essence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grounded theory</li> <li>• Generate</li> <li>• Develop</li> <li>• Propositions</li> <li>• Process</li> <li>• Substantive theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnography</li> <li>• Culture-sharing group</li> <li>• Cultural behavior and language</li> <li>• Cultural portrait</li> <li>• Cultural themes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case study</li> <li>• Bounded</li> <li>• Single or collective case</li> <li>• Event, process, program, individual</li> </ul>

Figure 6.1 Words to Use in Encoding the Purpose Statement

*ogy), a group (i.e., ethnography), or a site (i.e., program, event, activity, or place in a case study).*

- ▼ *I include the central focus and a general definition for it in the purpose statement.* This focus may be difficult to determine in any specificity in advance. But, for example, in a biography, a writer might define or describe the specific aspect of the life to be explored (e.g., life stages, childhood memories, the transition from adolescence to adulthood, attendance at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting). In a phenomenology, the central phenomenon to be explored might be specified such as the meaning of grief, anger, or even chess playing (Aanstoos, 1985). In grounded theory, the central phenomenon might be identified, although it is likely to change or be modified during data collection and analysis. In an ethnography, the writer might identify the key cultural concepts being examined such as roles, behaviors, acculturation, communication, myths, stories, or other concepts that the researcher plans to take into the field at the beginning of the study. Finally, in a case study such as an "intrinsic" case study, the writer might define the boundaries of the case, specifying how the case is bounded in time and place. If an "instrumental" case study is desired, then the researcher might specify and define generally the issue being examined in the case.

Several examples of purpose statements follow that illustrate the encoding and foreshadowing of traditions:

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**Example 6.1 A Biographical Example**

From a biography of Charles Darwin and field lessons learned while studying his documents:

In this essay, I raise nearly a dozen "interpretive asides," perhaps better called "speculations" (if not conjectures), that arose as I read and reflected upon the letters Darwin wrote to his family. (Smith, 1987, p. 9)

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**Example 6.2 A Phenomenological Example**

From a study of doctoral advisement relationships between women:

Given the intricacies of power and gender in the academy, what are doctoral advisement relationships between women advisors and women advisees really like? Because there were few studies exploring women doctoral students' experiences in the literature, a phenomenological study devoted to understanding women's lived experiences as advisees best lent itself to examining this question. (Heinrich, 1995, p. 449)

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**Example 6.3 A Grounded Theory Example**

From a grounded theory study of academic change in higher education:

The primary purpose of this article is to present a grounded theory of academic change that is based upon research guided by two major research questions: What are the major sources of academic change? What are the major processes through which academic change occurs? For purposes of this paper, grounded theory is defined as theory generated from data systematically obtained and analyzed through the constant comparative method. (Conrad, 1978, p. 101)

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**Example 6.4 An Ethnographic Example**

From an ethnography of "ballpark" culture:

This article examines how the work and the talk of stadium employees reinforce certain meanings of baseball in society, and it reveals how this

work and talk create and maintain ballpark culture. (Trujillo, 1992, p. 351)

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**Example 6.5 A Case Study Example**

From a case study using a feminist perspective to examine how men exploit women's labor in the sport of lawn bowls at the "Roseville Club":

Although scholars have shown that sport is fundamental in constituting and reproducing gender inequalities, little attention has been paid to sport and gender relations in later life. In this article we demonstrate how men exploit women's labor in the sport of lawn bowls, which is played predominately by older people. (Boyle & McKay, 1995, p. 556)

## THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Several of these examples illustrate the interweaving of problems, research questions, and purpose statements. For purposes of this discussion, I separate them out, although in practice some researchers combine them. But, in many instances, the research questions are distinct and easily found in a study. Once again, I find these questions to provide an opportunity to encode and foreshadow a tradition of inquiry.

### *The Central Question*

Several writers offer suggestions for writing qualitative research questions (e.g., Creswell, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These questions are open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional; restate the purpose of the study in more specific terms; start with words such as "what" or "how" rather than "why"; and are few in number (five to seven). They are posed in various forms, from the "grand tour" (Spradley, 1979, 1980) that asks, "Tell me about yourself," to more specific questions.

I recommend that a researcher reduce her or his entire study to a single, overarching question and several subquestions. Drafting this central question often takes considerable work because of its breadth