

and the tendency of some to form specific questions based on traditional training. To reach the overarching question, I ask qualitative researchers to state the broadest question they could possibly pose about their studies.

This central question can be encoded with the language of a tradition of inquiry. Morse (1994) speaks directly to this issue as she reviews the types of research questions. Although she does not refer to biographies or case studies, she mentions that one finds "descriptive" questions of cultures in an ethnography, "process" questions in grounded theory studies, and "meaning" questions in phenomenological studies. For example, I reviewed the five studies presented in Chapter 3 for their central research questions.

In the life history of Vonnie Lee, Angrosino (1994) does not pose a central question, but I can infer from statements about the purpose of the study that the central question might be, "How would the life history of a man with mental retardation be described and analyzed?" In the phenomenological study of the caring interactions between nurse and patient, Riemen (1986) poses the central question succinctly in the opening of the article: "From the perspective of the client, what is the essential structure of a caring nurse-client interaction?" (p. 86). In the grounded theory study of 11 women's survival and coping with childhood sexual abuse, Morrow and Smith (1995) do not present a central question in the introduction, but they mention several broad questions that guided their interviewing of the women: "Tell me, as much as you are comfortable sharing with me right now, what happened to you when you were sexually abused" and "What are the primary ways in which you survived?" (p. 25). In the ethnographic account of the Principal Selection Committee, Wolcott (1994a) states his purpose for conducting the study rather than presenting a central question, but his question might have been, "How might the episode of the behavior of a small group of individuals selecting a principal be described and interpreted?" Finally, in our case study of a campus response to a gunman incident (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995), we asked five central guiding questions in our introduction: "What happened? Who was involved in response to the incident? What themes of response emerged during the eight-month period that followed this incident? What theoretical constructs helped us understand the campus response, and what constructs were unique to this case?" (p. 576).

Subquestions

An author typically presents a small number of subquestions that follow the central question. One model for conceptualizing these subquestions is to present them in two sets: issue questions and topical questions. According to Stake (1995), **issue subquestions** address the major concerns and perplexities to be resolved. The issue-oriented questions, for example,

are not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, historical, and especially personal contexts. . . . Issues draw us toward observing, even teasing out the problems of the case, the conflictual outpourings, the complex backgrounds of human concern. (Stake, 1995, p. 17)

Topical subquestions cover the anticipated needs for information. These questions, "call for information needed for description of the case. . . . A topical outline will be used by some researchers as the primary conceptual structure and by others as subordinate to the issue structure" (Stake, 1995, p. 25). I extend Stake's concept of topical questions to include specific procedures of data analysis and presentation in a tradition of inquiry. These "topics to be covered" can mirror the procedures the researcher intends to use in their tradition of inquiry and foreshadow what the reader will find later in the study. Several illustrations in the following present the issue and topical subquestion format for a study.

In writing a *biography*, Denzin (1989b) suggests that research questions follow an interpretive format and be formulated into a single statement, beginning with why, not how, and starting with one's own personal history and building on other information. From his own studies, Denzin illustrates types of issue questions: "How is emotion, as a form of consciousness, lived, experienced, articulated and felt?" "How do ordinary men and women live and experience the alcoholic self active alcoholism produces?" (p. 50).

Then, one could pose topical questions that relate to the manner or procedure in which the "substantive" questions are to be analyzed. These questions might include the following:

- What are the object experiences in this individual's life?
- What is the story that can be told from these experiences?

- What are some narrative segments that illustrate the meanings of this individual's life?
- What are some theories that relate to this individual's life?

In an example of a *phenomenological study*, Riemen (1986) poses this question in the nursing-caring interaction study: "What is essential for the experience to be described by the client as being a caring interaction?" (p. 91). Although this is a central question, it also is issue oriented. By adding a set of topical questions, one foreshadows the steps in the data analysis. For example, following Moustakas's (1994, p. 99) procedures, one might ask the following questions:

- What are the possible structural meanings of the experience?
- What are the underlying themes and contexts that account for the experience?
- What are the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts about the experience?
- What are the invariant structural themes that facilitate a description of the experience?

To illustrate both issue and topical questions in a study, Gritz (1995, p. 4) models this approach. She develops a phenomenological project to construct an understanding of "teacher professionalism" as it is understood by practicing elementary classroom teachers. She poses two sets of questions, one issue-oriented and the other topical:

Issue questions:

1. What does it mean (to practitioners) to be a professional teacher?
 - a. What are the structural meanings of teacher professionalism?
 - b. What are the underlying themes and contexts that account for this view of teacher professionalism?
 - c. What are the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts about "teacher professionalism"?
 - d. What are the invariant structural themes that facilitate a description of "teacher professionalism" as it is experienced by practicing elementary classroom teachers?

Topical questions:

2. What do professional teachers do?
3. What don't professional teachers do?
4. Describe one person who exemplifies the term *teacher professionalism*.
5. What is difficult/easy about being a professional educator?
6. How/when did you first become aware of being a professional?

For a *grounded theory study*, the topical subquestions might be posed as aspects of the coding steps such as open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and the development of propositions:

- What are the general categories to emerge in a first review of the data? (open coding)
- Given the phenomenon of interest, what caused it? What contextual and intervening conditions influenced it? What strategies or outcomes resulted from it? What were the consequences of these strategies? (axial coding)

For example, in Mastera's (1995) dissertation proposal, she advances a study of the process of revising the general education curriculum in three private baccalaureate colleges. Her plan calls for both issue and topical questions. The issue questions that guide her study are "What is the theory that explains the change process in the revision of general education curricula on three college campuses?" and "How does the chief academic officer participate in the process on each campus?" She then poses several topical subquestions specifically related to open and axial coding:

1. How did the process unfold?
2. What were the major events or benchmarks in the process?
3. What were the obstacles to change?
4. Who were the important participants? How did they participate in the process?
5. What were the outcomes?

In another study, Valerio (1995) uses grounded theory questions directly related to the steps in grounded theory data analysis:

The overarching question for my grounded theory research study is: What theory explains why teenage girls become pregnant? The sub-questions follow the paradigm for developing a theoretical model. The questions seek to explore each of the interview coding steps and include: What are the general categories to emerge in open coding? What central phenomenon emerges? What are its causal conditions? What specific interaction issues and larger conditions have been influential? What are the resulting associated strategies and outcomes? (p. 3)

In an *ethnography*, one might present topical subquestions that relate to (a) a description of the context, (b) an analysis of the major themes, and (c) the interpretation of cultural behavior (Wolcott, 1994b). Alternatively, using Spradley (1979, 1980), these topical subquestions might reflect Spradley's 12 steps in his "decision research sequence." They might be as follows:

- What is the social situation to be studied?
- How does one go about observing this situation?
- What is recorded about this situation?
- What is observed about this situation?
- What cultural domains emerge from studying this situation?
- What more specific, focused observations can be made?
- What taxonomy emerges from these focused observations?
- Looking more selectively, what observations can be made?
- What components emerge from these observations?
- What themes emerge?
- What is the emerging cultural inventory?
- How does one write the ethnography?

In using good question format for our gunman *case study* (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995), I would redraft our questions as

presented in the article. To foreshadow the case of a single campus and individuals on it, I would pose the central question, "What was the campus response to the gunman incident at the midwestern university?" and then I would present the issue subquestions guiding my study (although we present these questions more as central questions, as already noted):

1. What happened?
2. Who was involved in response to the incident?
3. What themes of response emerged during the 8-month period that followed this incident?
4. What theoretical constructs helped us understand the campus response?
5. What constructs were unique to this case? (p. 576)

Then, I would present the topical procedural questions:

1. How might the campus (case), and the events following the incident, be described? (description of the case)
2. What themes emerge from gathering information about the case? (analysis of the case materials)
3. How would I interpret these themes within larger social and psychological theories? (lessons learned from the case surrounded by the literature)

These illustrations show that, in a qualitative study, one can write subquestions that address issues on the topic being explored and use terms that encode the work within a tradition. Also, topical subquestions can foreshadow the steps in the procedures of data collection, analysis, and narrative format construction.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I addressed three topics related to introducing and focusing a qualitative study: the problem statement, the purpose

statement, and the research questions. Although I discussed general features of designing each section in a qualitative study, I related the topic to traditions of inquiry. The problem statement should indicate the source of the issue leading to the study, be framed in terms of existing literature, and be related to the focus of a specific tradition of inquiry. The purpose statement also should include terms that encode the statement for a specific tradition. By including comments about the site or people to be studied, it foreshadows the tradition as well. The research questions continue this encoding for a tradition in the central question, the overarching question being addressed in the study. Following the central question are subquestions, and I expand a model presented by Stake (1995) that groups subquestions into two sets: issue subquestions, which address the major concerns in the study, and topical subquestions, which anticipate needs for information. These anticipated needs, I further contend, can be presented as steps or phases in data analysis and reporting the study. Thus, they foreshadow how the researcher will be presenting and analyzing the information within a tradition of inquiry. Examples show how both issue and topical subquestions can be designed with each of the five traditions of inquiry.

▼ ADDITIONAL READINGS

For writing problem statements in general, examine Marshall and Rossman (1995). For several basic principles in writing purpose statements, explore Creswell (1994) and references mentioned in my chapter on writing purpose statements. For a good overview of writing research questions, I recommend Miles and Huberman (1994). Also, in standard qualitative texts, most authors address qualitative research questions (e.g., Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Maxwell, 1996). I particularly like the conceptualization of issue and topical questions by Stake (1995). Also, the reader should examine qualitative journal articles and reports to find good illustrations of problem statements, purpose statements, and research questions.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1995). *Designing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Maxwell, J. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

EXERCISES

1. For the study you are designing, rewrite the central question you designed in the Exercises in Chapter 2 for your tradition of inquiry, following the guidelines in this chapter for good question construction.
2. In this chapter, I have presented a model for writing the subquestions in an issue and topical format. Write five to seven issue-oriented subquestions and five to seven topical or procedural subquestions in your tradition of inquiry for your study.