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Introducing and Focusing the Study

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.

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, phenomeno-logical, 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
• Biography (or oral history or life history) • Classical • Interpretive • Individual • Stories • Epiphanies	• Phenomenological study • Describe • Experiences • Meaning • Essence	• Grounded theory • Generate • Develop • Propositions • Process • Substantive theory	• Ethnography • Culture-sharing group • Cultural behavior and language • Cultural portrait • Cultural themes	• Case study • Bounded • Single or collective case • Event, process, program, individual

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:

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)

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)

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)

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)

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

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.

WRITING EXERCISES