

# 2

## COMING UP WITH A RESEARCH QUESTION

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Qualitative research is exciting because it asks questions about people's everyday lives and experiences. As a qualitative researcher you will have the privilege of exploring the 'significant truths' in people's lives (Bakan, 1996: 5). That is an amazing prospect, but if you are delving into people's lives and asking questions about real experiences, you need to get those questions right. This chapter will help you do just that.

### **In a nutshell: research questions**

This chapter will look at:

- Why it is important to come up with a sound research question, or set of inter-related questions.
- How to decide upon a research area.
- How to identify a research topic or issue.
- How to formulate your research question.

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### **Clear questions are important**

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A clear and appropriate research question, or set of interrelated questions, forms the foundation of good research. But excellent research questions are not easy to write. This is why we have devoted an entire chapter to exploring how to come up with a good research question.

A good research question forms the basis of good research because it allows you to identify what you want to know. As Payne and Payne note, 'in research we work from "knowing less" towards "knowing more" (2004: 114). So, identifying



what you want to know more about is vital. However, at the beginning of a project students can be vague about what they want to know, and vague questions can lead to an unfocused project. Your aim therefore is to write a clearly articulated question, or set of interrelated questions, which allow you to go about finding answers in a focused and coherent way.

One of the reasons why writing a good research question is difficult is because there are potentially an infinite number of research questions that might be asked. Deciding upon 'the one for you' can be time-consuming and potentially stressful. Without a research question it is impossible to know how or what to research. Most students realise that if they do not know what they are asking they have little hope of finding any answers, but this may only add further stress to an already tense situation.

Common problems that you may also encounter when coming up with a research question include:

- Deciding which area to look at from a range of issues that have interested you in your degree.
- Not being able to think of any area or topic you find sufficiently interesting to focus a major piece of work on.
- Knowing which area you want to focus on (for example, health) but not a specific topic.
- Knowing what area and topic but finding it difficult to clearly articulate a question.

For many students, then, coming up with a research question is challenging, but this chapter will guide you through the processes involved and make this experience easier. To do so, I'll look at some of the pitfalls and problems in choosing a research question and offer suggestions for producing a good one.

## Deciding on a research area

The first step in deciding on your research question is to identify the area (such as health, childhood or crime) in which you want to research. You can decide which area to focus on by considering areas that you enjoyed in your course, and what the staff members in your department are prepared to supervise.

Choosing to look at an area you already have some familiarity with is useful because it gives you some knowledge of the sorts of issues that are covered, and ideas for relevant research to read to develop your ideas. This will then help you to identify the topic you wish to explore in your project.

Deciding on an area to study involves a match between identifying an area you find sufficiently interesting to study and an area that a member of staff in your institution is prepared to supervise. Choosing an area that's already taught means that you're likely to find a supervisor with an interest in this area. Another way to match your interests to a supervisor is to use your departmental





webpages to explore staff research interests in your department. It is often to your advantage if your project fits in with the interests of your supervisor, and in some departments you may be expected to undertake a project closely allied to the interests of a member of academic staff. Just make sure that you give serious consideration to the area you choose to base your research in – and make sure that a qualitative project is relevant and possible.

### Top tips: choosing a research area

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Which area of psychology am I most interested in?
- Why?
- What is it that interests me about that area?
- Is qualitative research relevant to that area?

### Identifying a research topic

Having identified a research area, your next step is to identify a topic within that area that you are interested in or care about. Do not make your choice frivolously. You are likely to be working on your research for several months, it will require intensive periods of focus, and it will probably be the piece of work that you feel you have the most ownership of. Your topic needs to be able to hold your interest for some time.

For some students choosing a topic is easy – they have a burning ambition to research a specific issue and they know how they're going to do it. For these students – possibly the enviable few – suggestions for help with choosing a research topic may be unnecessary. Nevertheless, even for this group consideration of the appropriateness of the research topic is relevant. If you don't know unequivocally what you want to research, then the following suggestions may help.

Perhaps most straightforwardly, your chosen research topic might spring from something you have studied on your course, or that you have read about. There may be a particular topic that grabbed your attention when you encountered it on your course and which you did not have the opportunity to investigate fully at the time. If this resonates with your experience then in all likelihood your research idea will be grounded in relevant academic literature from the start, which is important in most qualitative research. The only exception to this is research using grounded theory methodology, which advocates reviewing the literature later in the research cycle rather than at the outset. Even here, however, Strauss and Corbin (1990) recognise that if you have



experience as a researcher you are likely to be influenced by previous knowledge and research throughout the research process (for further help and guidance on different methodological approaches in qualitative research see Chapter 7).

In contrast to the situations described above, if you have not yet studied any topics that really inspire you, then think about the topics and issues that distract you when you are supposed to be reading for an assignment, or that engage you in conversations, discussions and debates with colleagues and peers – or perhaps your tutor. Check out any ideas you have with your supervisor as something in one of these areas may be appropriate to research. Or, it may lead to a discussion with your supervisor that plants the seed of an idea you are keen to pursue.

Another potential vehicle for finding a suitable research topic is everyday experience. You may have encountered a specific problem or situation you feel is worthy of further investigation in which case a research project would perhaps be appropriate. If you have undertaken any relevant work experience then this too may be a useful source of ideas, as would any voluntary work you've done. If you've worked for a voluntary organisation you might find it useful to ask staff there if they have any research needs. For example, they might be interested in the experiences clients have of the service/organisation.

A further possibility is that your research topic may come from 'suggestions for future work' listed at the end of a research paper you have found interesting; though in this case it is advisable to undertake some literature searching and/or contact the author of the paper to see what 'future work' they have already undertaken. You will then be aware of any additional work undertaken by the researcher that is linked to the published research.

### Top tips: identifying a topic

- It is important to derive research questions from the literature, rather than simply from 'armchair speculation' or anecdotal musing.
- It is therefore important to take account of the research that has already been conducted in the area. In this way you do not run the risk of asking a research question that has been addressed and answered already!
- The only exception to the tips noted here is grounded theory (see Chapter 7) which advocates delaying the literature review until after data collection has started.

However, there are also a few words of caution to consider when choosing your research topic. Some students hone in on a research topic simply because it is of personal relevance to them. Although the topic may retain your interest and you may be committed to undertaking such a study, it is important to



recognise that some topics of personal relevance may also be deeply significant and difficult to research.

### Activity 1: topic ideas

Make a list of possible topics and issues you might like to investigate. Consider how and why you arrived at this list. Note any personal links with any of the topics and issues and consider how these may affect you and your study.

A final word of warning is that you need to ensure that your chosen topic is one that can actually be researched within the constraints of your project. This may sound obvious, but I am referring here to the need to consider the level at which you are working. For example, undergraduate research is generally not as complex as postgraduate research, and the time frame in which students have to work often limits what they can do. If you have an idea for a project that is too ambitious for the stage you're at, talk to your supervisor and see if you can find an aspect of the idea to focus your research project on.

To explore this further, we can consider the following example of an undergraduate project which has now developed into postgraduate study.

### Success story: working at different levels

Julie completed an undergraduate research project exploring a woman's experiences of being told that her two sons had learning disabilities. Julie used interpretive phenomenological analysis, which is suitable for exploring such significant experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In her undergraduate project, Julie explored her participant's experiences of realising there were problems with her sons' developmental progress and then having this confirmed by doctors. This project focused on that specific experience and was therefore a well-defined project that was achievable within the time and resources available.

After graduating, Julie went on to do an MSc and for her project she built on her undergraduate work by conducting a more complex project on three women's experiences of parenting children with learning disabilities. The development in complexity between undergraduate and postgraduate level was not, however, due to the larger sample size! Rather, it was because the postgraduate project was more complex in a number of ways. It was a much more wide-ranging project, which explored the impact of the children's disabilities on the participants' sense of identity. (For further information on interpretive phenomenological analysis see Chapter 7, and for more on how to develop ideas for future research from undergraduate projects see Chapter 10.)



Choosing a research topic requires you to go to the library and read, but do not become 'stuck' in this phase. You will find that you need to return repeatedly to the library and to published work throughout the research process. So, familiarise yourself with the available research but do not get bogged down. If there is no previous research this could be an indicator of an area 'ripe for study' or that the area may be difficult, or not relevant, to study (as illustrated by Sampat's experience, discussed below). For more on literature reviewing see Chapter 5.

### Success story: refining and refocusing the research question

Sampat was interested in doing her undergraduate project on how British men in their 70s experienced and coped with the loneliness resulting from their sons leaving home for the first time. Sampat went to the library to search for relevant literature, and was surprised to find there was virtually no published academic research on this topic. Coming from India, Sampat's personal experience indicated that this was a major psychological issue within society. However, in the UK most young men leave their parental home when their parents are younger than 70. Indeed, the changing demographics of family life in the UK mean that many sons do not live with their fathers at all. So, an issue that is pertinent to life in India did not appear to be much researched in the UK. Possibly this is because it is a concern that is relevant for a relatively small proportion of men in their 70s in the UK. It is possible that social change in the UK means that this is increasingly becoming an issue, and it could therefore be a topic that is ripe for study. But, given the time constraints of undergraduate research, Sampat's supervisor helped her to explore the possibilities of developing a research study in a related area such as 'empty-nest' syndrome, loneliness and the ageing process.

### In a nutshell: choosing a topic

So far, I have identified the following key points about developing research questions.

- It is important to formulate a sound and appropriate research question.
- There are a number of ways to identify your research area.
- Within this area, you will need to select a research topic.
- When developing your ideas you need to be aware of what is appropriate for the level of study that you are undertaking.



## Developing your research question

### Can the topic be researched qualitatively?

So, having decided that the topic you have chosen can be researched at the level at which you are working, the next thing to ensure is that it can be researched qualitatively. Discussions of research methods and research methodology often centre on the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches and there have been many attempts to define qualitative research and to differentiate it from quantitative research (Silverman, 2006). However, there is still no consensus as qualitative research cannot be neatly pigeonholed because it includes a number of different approaches. Yet, in practice, as researchers we must – and do – make a decision as to whether or not the topic (and research question) we wish to investigate can be researched qualitatively. So the question then is – on what basis do we make that decision?

Quantitative research tends to focus upon things such as measuring a number of variables against one another and it often focuses on research topics in overarching and general ways. If you wish to explore the meaning of a topic or issue then qualitative research is more appropriate. Qualitative research enables exploration of dimensions of the social world: features of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of research participants, the ways in which social processes, institutions, discourses and relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they create.

In determining whether your project is one where qualitative methods are suitable, it is really your research question that is crucial. Many topics are suited to qualitative and quantitative research but it is the research question that tells us which of these two will be most suitable for any given project. For example, the topic of interventions for stroke patients can be investigated using a quantitative approach (Chatterton et al., 2008) or by exploring the qualitative experience of that intervention (Ewan et al., 2010). It is the research question that makes the difference, not the research topic. Although qualitative and quantitative methods do share features (for example, methods in both traditions involve systematic and detailed analysis of data with the aim of addressing a specific aim or research question) they tend to be suited to different things.

#### **In a nutshell: what are qualitative methods good at?**

- Qualitative data tends to be in the form of texts or images, which are analysed in their 'raw' form without coding them numerically.

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- Qualitative projects tend to be focused on how participants make sense of things, and what their perspectives are.
- Qualitative methods are often most useful for examining a range of perspectives within data and are good at picking out inconsistencies (rather than smoothing them out by using mean scores).

The most important point here is that different methods tend to bring different assumptions with them, and tend to do different things, which means that they will vary in how suitable they are for addressing any specific research question. These differences are just as apparent between different qualitative approaches as they are between qualitative and quantitative approaches (see Chapter 1 for more on this). So, as your research progresses it will be important to keep checking whether your question fits with the methods you have chosen. In later chapters (particularly Chapters 6 and 7) we will give you more information and guidance on this; the key thing is to keep returning to the issue of whether your research question is a good one for qualitative research and to remind yourself to keep reviewing this as you progress, modifying your question as necessary.

### Want to know more about philosophy and research?

For useful explanations of the philosophical assumptions relevant to different research approaches see:

Sullivan, C. (2010) Theory and method in qualitative research. In M. A. Forrester (ed.) *Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage. pp. 15–38.

### Activity 2: can the topic be researched qualitatively?

Ask yourself, which of these topics and issues can be researched qualitatively?

- 1 The link between playing violent computer games and violent behaviour in children aged 10–15.
- 2 The link between living near to someone and being friends with them.
- 3 The experience of living with an autistic child.
- 4 The success of a healthy eating programme in schools.

Answers are at the end of the chapter.



## The research question

Once you have identified your research topic you can begin to frame your research question. First, list all of the questions that you'd like answered yourself. The list may be very large or very small. It may have a number of inter-related questions or it may have a number of very different questions. In every case, the questions should be linked to the research approach you have decided to use. That means that the format and phrasing of the research question is related to the specific qualitative approach you intend to take. Qualitative research questions often begin with the words 'what' or 'how', and the question should inform your reader what the study will do. Different approaches to qualitative research also tend to lead to different types of questions. You may well already be familiar with some common approaches to qualitative research (for example, grounded theory, discourse analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis), and we will outline the basics of several of the most widely used approaches in Chapter 7. For now, however, it is simply worth highlighting that in order to ask a meaningful research question, you need to have an idea of the sort of assumptions you're making about your research, and the analytic approach you're adopting.

For example, phenomenological studies have questions seeking to explore meaning, to elicit the essence of experience. So, a researcher interested in the topic of sibling relationships might frame their research question as follows: 'What is the experience of sibling relationships?' In contrast, discourse analysis focuses on the ways in which language is used to construct 'reality'. A study on the same topic of sibling relationships might therefore ask the question: 'How are sibling relationships constructed in discourse?'

Similarly, since a key feature of an excellent project is coherence between your research question, method and analytic framework, your analytic approach will determine what kinds of methods are appropriate for you to use when collecting and analysing data. For example, the research question, 'How are sibling relationships constructed in discourse?', suggests that you will be using a version of discourse analysis. Which version you use will in turn determine the kinds of data you collect, such as 'naturally occurring' talk between siblings during meal times at home or 'researcher generated' talk from interviews you've conducted with siblings about their relationships.

Given the close relationship between the approach you are adopting and the question(s) you ask, you therefore need to take time to familiarise yourself with the sorts of approaches available to you before settling on a question. If you set your research question before you know which approach or method you're going to use, you may be storing up trouble for yourself further down the line!



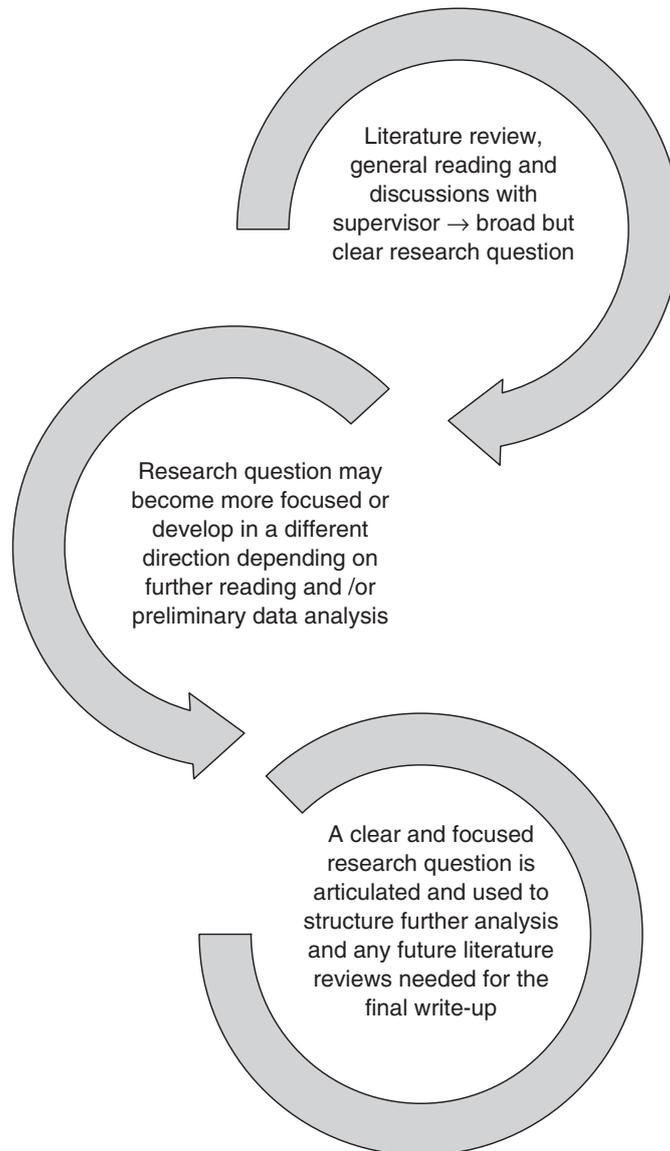
### Top tip: assumptions and research questions

Make sure that your research question is consistent with the approach you are adopting. It's easy to fall into the trap of deciding what question you want to investigate before you've properly considered how you are going to analyse your data and what assumptions you're going to make about your data.

So, having listed all possible research questions, now revise them so that they reflect the most appropriate approach and method that would be used to address them. Now, consider them carefully so that you can choose the best one. Initially a qualitative research question can be broad, rather than narrowly focused. You can then work to refine and focus it. That is because qualitative research is usually cyclical rather than linear (Reason and Rowan 1981).

To say that qualitative research is cyclical means that it aims to address research questions through a gradual immersion into the topic. The idea is that your ideas about what to focus on develop as you come to know more and more about your topic, either through reading, thinking about what you've read, or early stages of data analysis. So, for qualitative researchers writing a research question is an iterative activity, as there may be various points in the research project in which the researcher re-evaluates their question, considering ways in which it may be more focused or even re-focused. Note, though, when it comes to writing up, the usual format is to write the report focusing on the final research question and not any early or interim questions. Figure 2.1 below illustrates how your research question might develop during the project.

For further information on the changing nature of qualitative research questions, and some examples, see Chapters 3 and 4. Although your research question at the beginning of a project can be broad, it still needs to have some focus. Your research question should not be so broad that it fails to give any direction or guidance to the researcher. So, for example, 'Why do people self-harm?' is relatively broad, and for most research projects this is the kind of question that is likely to be a general aim (that is, the study might aim to make some contribution to answering this kind of question, rather than to answer it in full). The kinds of questions that are posed as research questions need to be much more focused and narrow. For example, something like 'What are the reasons for self-harming behaviour given by adolescents?' is more focused, is easier to research and can be addressed more fully and in more depth by a particular research project. What is also important about this example, though, is that it is not so narrowly focused that it is uni-directional and leading. Some flexibility in your question, but without completely lacking focus, is important for an excellent qualitative study. This flexibility also allows for your research question to develop as your study unfolds. For example, in the early stages of analysis you may notice things that you hadn't previously thought about, and these may lead to new questions arising.



**Figure 2.1** Developing and re-developing the research question

### **Activity 3: broad or narrow?**

Consider the following questions. Are they too broad, too narrow, or about right?

- 1 How far do male nurses embody the male hegemonic identity?
- 2 What is the experience of living with diabetes?
- 3 Do children sent to day-care have problems?
- 4 How do football fans using online message boards account for their team's poor performance?

Answers are at the end of the chapter.

Make sure your research topic covers exactly what you want to research – no more and no less – and your research question asks exactly what you want to investigate – no more and no less. ‘Eating disorders’ is too large a topic if you want to discuss anorexia alone. ‘Is anorexia represented as a female adolescent concern in teen magazines in the UK?’ is too small a research question if you also want to discuss bulimia, or anorexia in males, or anorexia in middle age. Bite off as much as you can chew thoroughly and then chew it! And of course, if you are in doubt about the chewability of your research question, ask your supervisor.

Finally a strong research question should pass the ‘so what?’ test. That is, what is the potential benefit of answering the research question? Does it matter? Will it actually say anything? If you cannot make a definitive statement about the purpose of your research, it is unlikely to become an excellent qualitative project. Remember that you are the person who will have to present a clear and strong rationale for why you asked that question and why you tried to answer it in the ways that you did – so if you’re not sure that you will be able to answer the ‘so what?’ question, you need to do some work here before moving on.

### In a nutshell: make your research question excellent

- Take time to decide upon your research area.
- Consider your research topic carefully.
- Make sure the topic can be researched qualitatively.
- Ask yourself whether the question is suited to the approach you are taking.
- Check that the question is grounded in relevant research.
- Make sure that your research question is focused.
- Ask yourself whether the research question asks precisely what you want to ask.
- Check that your question passes the ‘so what?’ test.

### Summary

Figure 2.2 summarises the process of developing your research question. Choosing a research question can be a very challenging exercise. However, it is vital that you take time to do it thoroughly. The ultimate success of your project depends upon asking an appropriate and clear question. The question must be suitable for qualitative research, and for the specific approach you are using. It must be grounded in research. It must also be articulate and clear and ask precisely what you want to find out. Knowing this will help you plan your project, the topic of the next chapter.

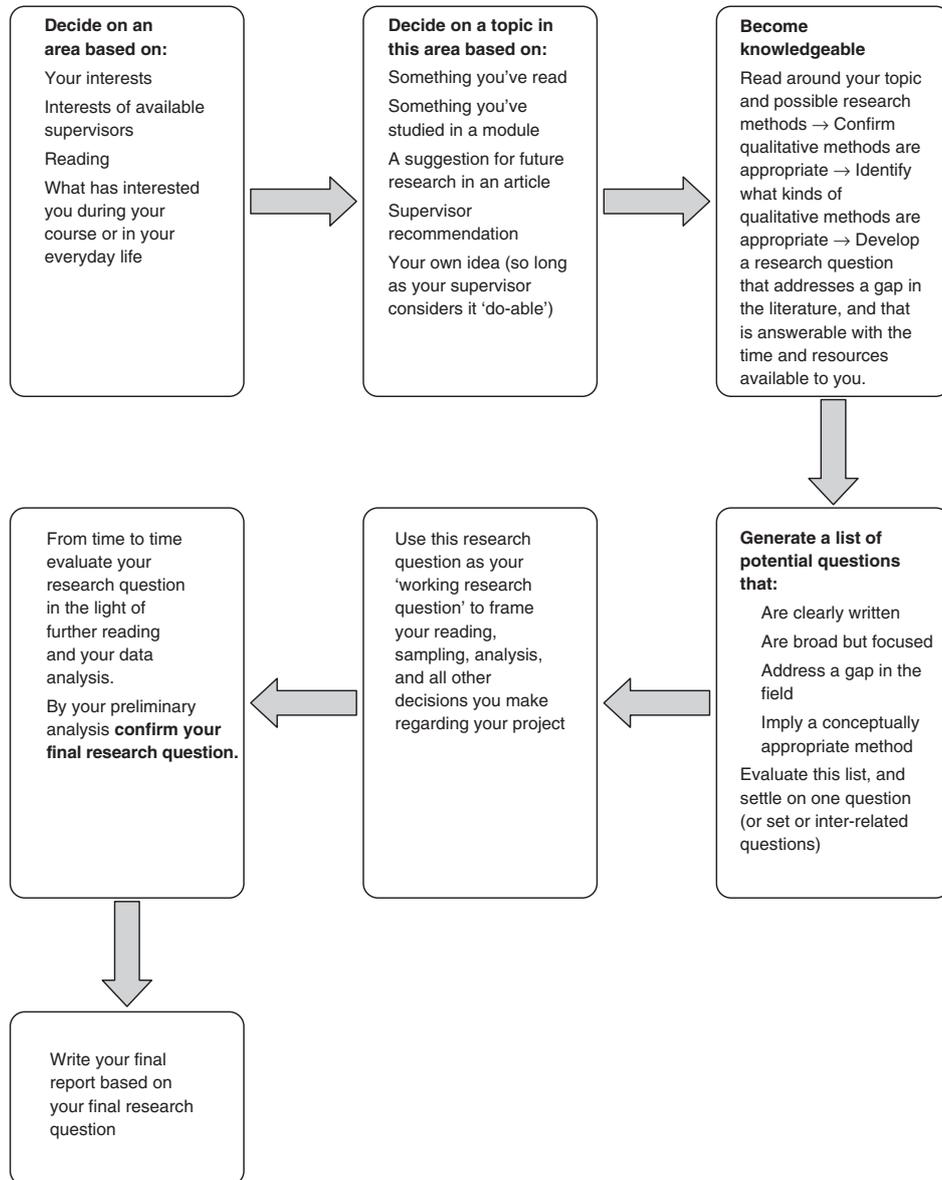


Figure 2.2 Research questions flow-chart

### Answers to Activity 2

- 1 As currently phrased, this would be more suitable to a quantitative project measuring the correlation between hours of playing violent games and subsequent violent behaviour. A qualitative project might explore the experience of playing violent computer games, or the way in which the link between violent computer games and violent behaviour is socially constructed by the media.

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- 2 As with question 1, this could be suitable for either a qualitative or quantitative investigation. The notion of a 'link' between two phenomena implies that one is looking at relationships, which may lend itself more easily to a quantitative study. However, a qualitative project asking questions about the quality of relationships occurring between people living in close proximity to each other would be interesting.
- 3 This would make for a potentially interesting study using a phenomenological approach (see Chapter 7).
- 4 This topic would probably be well-suited to a quantitative study which could aim to measure success. However, a qualitative project might explore what healthy eating means to children (which might yield important findings about reasons for – and barriers to – the success of the programme), or how healthy eating programmes perpetuate discourses of expertise and control.

### Answers to Activity 3

- 1 This question offers some room for development. Definition of terms will give it appropriate focus.
- 2 This question is very broad. It is unclear whether the study will look at people with insulin dependent diabetes or non-insulin dependent diabetes and what exactly it is aiming to investigate. The question needs focus.
- 3 The question does not make clear what type of 'day-care' is assumed or what 'problems' includes. This question needs focus.
- 4 This question is specific enough to make for a manageable project. The focus on 'accounts' points to the appropriateness of a qualitative (most likely a discourse analytic) approach.

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