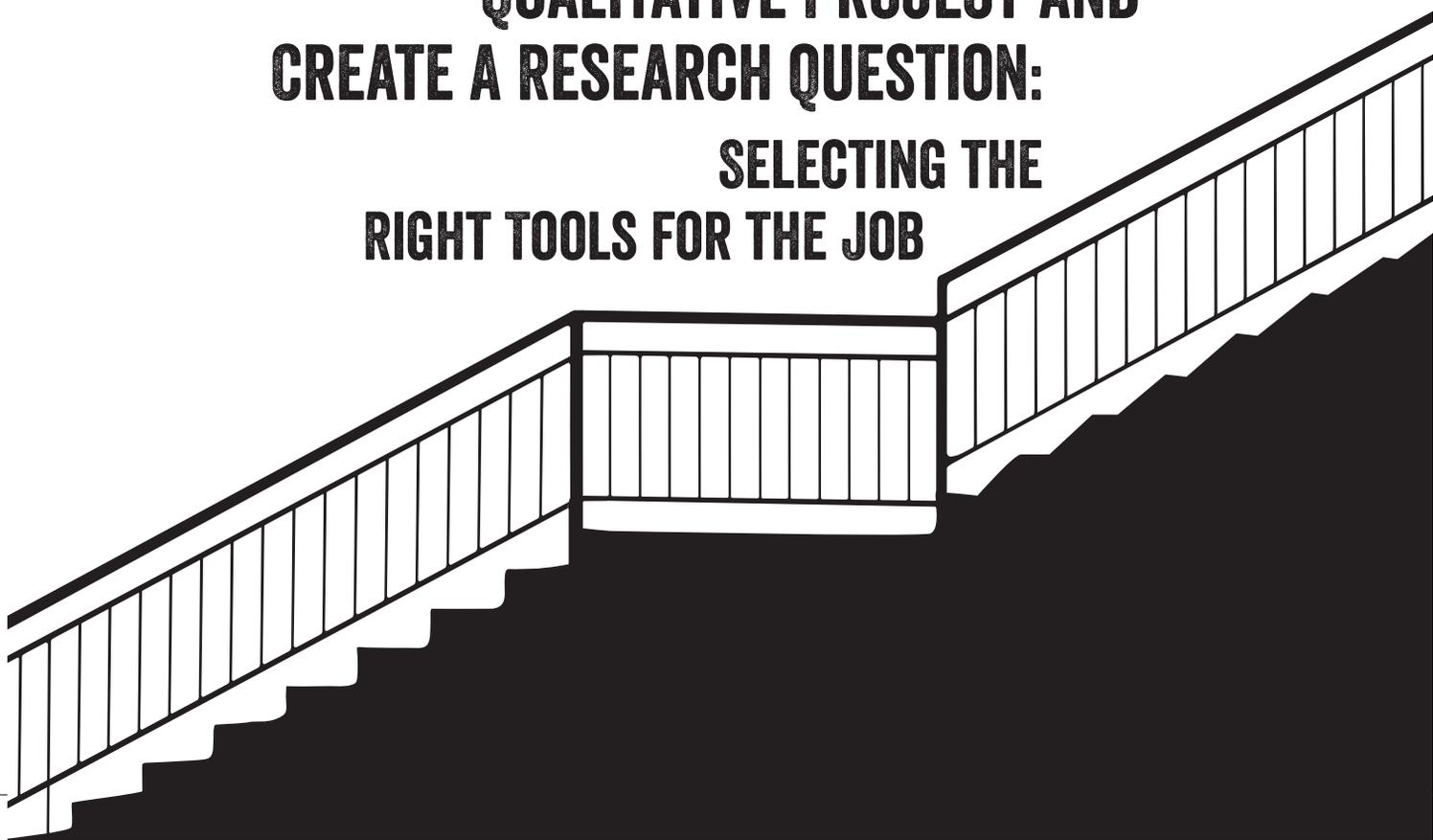


# 3

## HOW TO DESIGN A QUALITATIVE PROJECT AND CREATE A RESEARCH QUESTION: SELECTING THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB



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## Learning objectives

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By the end of this chapter you will have the tools to:

- Design a qualitative research project that spells out the goals of conducting research, articulates the functions of the research questions, and enumerates the methods that connect to your research objective
  - Connect your research questions to the structure of your project
  - Decide on a sampling strategy
  - Write a successful research proposal
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## Chapter summary

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A good research design is one in which all the components work harmoniously together. In contrast, a poor design can end in unfocused research and questionable findings. While it is necessary to plan ahead, qualitative research requires revisiting and modifying your design throughout the research process in response to new developments or problems that arise. We offer a step-by-step guide on how to design your project, but we want to emphasize that we are not offering a formula. You must design a project that takes into account the particularities of the research problem you will address.

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## INTRODUCTION

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. (Hurstun, 1942: 143)

Zora Neale Hurston's eloquent turn of phrase captures the heart of conducting qualitative research. While being a good researcher requires openness and curiosity, it also requires a thoughtful and precise plan. In this chapter, we give you a step-by-step guide to designing your study and writing your research proposal.

Once you have conceptualized and mapped out your topic, you are ready to design your research project. That said, we are aware that these two stages are often intermingled. A research design includes decisions about conceptualization, theoretical and methodological considerations, and finally identification of the contribution your research will make to the development of knowledge in a particular area (Cheek, 2008).

In this chapter, we will walk you through the important questions to ask yourself and steps you need to consider in designing your research project:

**Step 1.** 'What is the purpose of my project?' Here you need to develop your research question based on the work you've done conceptualizing the research problem.

**Step 2.** 'How do my research questions and methods connect?' Here you need to map out your methods and how they connect to your research question.

**Step 3.** ‘What is the nature of the data I will collect?’ Here you must identify your strategy to ensure the validity of the data collection plan.

**Step 4.** ‘How do I write a competitive and competent research proposal?’ We give you tips on how to write a competitive research proposal to fund your project.

**Step 5.** ‘How do I successfully collaborate with non-academic groups?’ Collaborations with community and other non-academic groups can offer many benefits and challenges. Here we outline some of the important considerations to avoid collaborations going wrong.

## STEP 1. ‘WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MY PROJECT?’ DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

If a writer asks no specific *question* worth asking, he can offer no specific *answer* worth supporting it. (Booth et al., 2008: 41)

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### Key takeaways

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- Pose only one or two master research questions.
  - Limit yourself to three or four sub-questions that are intimately tied to your master question(s).
  - Craft neutral questions that avoid imposing assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon under study.
  - Make an informed decision to use or not use language that invokes causation (see discussion below).
  - The questions should reflect your theoretical approach to qualitative research.
  - Your questions must be *researchable*.
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In this section we examine the formulation of research questions in qualitative research. We link these questions to several qualitative approaches. We then offer guidelines for evaluating the merits of your research question.

### Guidelines for crafting qualitative research questions

Instead of posing closed questions (e.g., Does X cause Y?), qualitative researchers *typically* develop questions that allow for more inductive intellectual inquiry (Creswell, 2003: 105; Maxwell, 2013). We say ‘typically’ because there are traditions that do examine a qualitative version of causation which we discuss below. This does not mean that ‘anything goes’; in fact the questions should align with the topic (obviously) and may also speak to a research problem that you may have already identified (perhaps less obviously).

We present four parameters for crafting qualitative research questions:

- a) Number of questions.
- b) Degree of openness and neutrality.

- c) Theoretical approach.
- d) Evaluating your research questions.

### Number of questions

#### *Required: One or two master questions*

The master question orients the project in a manner that is consistent with the project's methodological (qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods) and theoretical or paradigmatic approach. Like others (Creswall, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994), we recommend articulating only one or two 'master' questions to guide your inquiry. Unlike quantitative research, your master question(s) may evolve or change completely; however, these questions will guide your initial research design. The nature of your questions and the degree of flexibility will be determined in part by your theoretical approach discussed below.

#### *Optional: Up to three or four sub-questions per master question*

Though not required, each master question may be followed up with three or four sub-questions that are *intimately* tied to it and the subsequent data collection strategy. While master questions tend to be more open and broad, sub-questions are meant to flag specific dimensions of the master question. In short, sub-questions are not the place where you get to articulate every single question you ever had about the project. When developing sub-questions, you must continually integrate them: Do they meaningfully extend the original master question? Or do they potentially take the project into a different direction?

Others (e.g., Creswell, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994) allow for more sub-questions; however, we suggest no more than three or four to enhance the likelihood that the project stays focused and on-track, a task which in our experience is particularly challenging for novice researchers. Well-read and experienced researchers are positioned to add more sub-questions in line with more generous recommendations.

### Degree of openness and neutrality

Qualitative researchers usually have to strike a balance between crafting a research question that focuses the project on a specific phenomenon while at the same time allowing for more inductive inquiry. Openness often also relates to crafting 'neutral' questions, though there are exceptions to this position as we discuss below. For the purpose of qualitative research, neutrality has two dimensions: a) assumptions about the nature of phenomenon under study; and b) causation.

#### *Avoid building in assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon under study*

The first and most obvious point is to ensure that your question does not impose a particular set of assumptions on the topic you are interested in studying, including its *nature*

(e.g., good or evil), *conditions* (e.g., happy or sad) or its relative *quality* (e.g., better or worse). Equally important is to avoid language that implies direction (e.g., affect) or hierarchical ordering (e.g., more than).

Example 1: Assumptions about nature, condition or quality

Question: 'How do cohabiting couples cope with the stigma associated with living together?'

The question assumes that cohabiting couples:

- experience stigma;
- have or require coping strategies;
- experience stigma or have or require coping strategies that are unique to cohabiting couples.

A better question would still allow you to explore these possibilities (e.g., stigma), while still remaining open to a variety of experiences, meanings or outcomes for participants, such as 'How do couples conceptualize and experience cohabitation?'

Example 2: Assumptions about direction or hierarchical ordering

Question: Do cohabitating non-married couples face greater financial troubles than cohabitating married couples?

The question assumes:

- that non-married and married couples have financial troubles in the first place;
- that 'marriage status' defines the group (since you may find that other characteristics such as education or religion are more important to defining a group and how they relate to money).

While you may find some or all of it to be true *after* you collect your data, your question should not prematurely impose assumptions about the group or thing under study. In fact, qualitative researchers routinely use language that implies direction, hierarchical ordering and process causality at *later* stages of the data collection and analysis (e.g., statements about how a particular event mattered more than others or fundamentally shaped an outcome). However, we recommend that researchers should avoid building these assumptions into their research questions from the outset. A better question such as 'How do cohabiting and married couples understand their financial wellbeing?' would still allow you to explore whether cohabiting couples have more (or less) financial troubles than married couples; however, it would allow you to remain open to the possibility that both groups are more similar than you originally thought, that married couples may experience more financial troubles than non-married cohabiters, or that other characteristics (e.g., education) are more important to how couples organize their finances or perceive financial 'trouble'.

There are some exceptions to this rule, including when a statement is not merely an assumption, but backed by a substantial body of research. However, you still have to be careful about the historical, contextual, geographical or other nature of this research and

the very real danger of limiting your scope of inquiry. If researchers in the area of cohabitation had continued to rest on previous research, they might have failed to see *declining* stigma associated with cohabitation or that non-married *and* married cohabitating couples experience many of the same challenges.

Becker's (1953) study on marijuana smoking is a classic example. Rather than assuming that some people are predisposed to marijuana use based on some collection of established demographic or individual characteristics, Becker found that whether an individual uses marijuana or derives pleasure from it is largely a function of learning to smoke it in a manner that produces a pleasurable effect that is seen to be linked to the drug. In so doing, Becker was able to see that motivation and ability to get high on marijuana were acquired through a process of social interaction with other users.

### *Make an informed decision: 'Causation'*

Qualitative researchers vary on whether questions should invoke causation. Delving into the nuances of this debate is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, we present them as two options that serve different purposes and speak to different approaches to qualitative research. Option 1 comes from the school of thought that research questions and research more generally should avoid any notion of causation. Option 2 invokes a *qualitative* notion of 'causation' that differs greatly from traditional positivist definitions. This approach is captured by 'process' or 'realist' theories and approaches to qualitative research. We spend more time on this discussion as a way to introduce and inform our readers, especially given the dominance of Option 1 in the literature and the fact that many qualitative researchers invoke process or realist approaches without even realizing it, either from the outset or in their conclusions.

#### Option 1: Avoid language of causation

Creswell (2003: 107) and others advance the position that qualitative researchers should avoid using terms such as 'why', 'affect', 'determine' or 'relate' that imply causation. This option typically avoids direct reference to theory or the literature. In some cases it is about retooling your questions in a manner that still speaks to this topic and to a particular theoretical approach.

#### Example

Original question: What effect does divorce have on children?

Retooled question: How do children experience divorce?

#### Option 2: Process theory – build in (qualitative) notions of causation

'Causation' has been particularly controversial, and rejected based on the assumption that it violates most qualitative research paradigms. Yet, when qualitative researchers invoke the term 'cause' or 'causation' they are referring to a 'process' or 'realist', not a positivist, notion of causation. Process theory (also referred to as 'realist' and 'generative' theory) sees

the value in asking research questions that orient the project toward identifying the unique situations, historical events, sequences and even values, intentions and meaning-making that led to a particular outcome or condition (Maxwell, 2012: 656; see also the discussion of method of agreement and method of difference in Chapter 2). Process approaches to causation are grounded in thick description and an in-depth examination of meaning, contexts, and social, cultural and institutional mechanisms (Maxwell, 2012). The context shapes not only whether a particular causal process or mechanism matters or not (e.g., whether adding or subtracting a variable matters), but fundamentally shapes the nature of the process or mechanism itself (see also Anderson and Scott, 2012; Maxwell, 2004a).

Below we provide an example to further emphasize the difference between variant-theory and process-theory. While the variant-theory question focuses on measuring differences and explanatory variables between younger and older PhD graduates, the process-theory question seeks to understand the process by which a particular decision was made. The difference is subtle, but important. And like Option 1 above, we also suggest avoiding language such as ‘effect’, ‘affect’ or ‘relate’ at the outset since it implies a quantitative rather than a qualitative notion of causation.

#### Example

Variant-theory question: Do older PhD graduates select non-academic career options more so than younger PhD graduates, and if so, what explains this?

Process-theory question: How do PhD candidates make decisions about whether they enter non-academic or academic career paths? Do older and younger students differ in how they make decisions?

Process questions, as you can see from above, are commonly generated when we ask ‘what?’ and ‘how?’ types of questions in qualitative research. And our conclusions, in the spirit of qualitative (not positivistic) sense of the term causation often invoke a particular sequencing (or direction) or hierarchical ordering of events to explain how and even why something occurred according to how our participants come to understand, act and interact according to their definitions. This approach is very much in line with qualitative ontologies and epistemologies (Maxwell, 2012).

### Variance-theory versus process-theory

Researchers in this tradition make a clear distinction between variance-theory and process-theory. Variance-theory ‘deals with variables and the correlations among them found in experimental, survey or other quantitative research designs’ (Maxwell, 2004a: 4; see also Mohr, 1982). This is the traditional or positivistic understanding of examining correlation or causation, whether one (independent) variable makes a change in the other (dependent) variable. For qualitative researchers, this definition is rightly like fitting a square peg into a round hole (Maxwell, 2012).

In contrast, process-theory is something supporters such as Miles and Huberman (1994: 147) argue that qualitative methods are uniquely positioned to do; qualitative methods 'with its close-up look, can identify *mechanisms*, going beyond sheer associations. It is unrelentingly *local*, and deals well with the *complex* network of events and processes in a situation'. In other words, causal mechanism and a particular effect are not static, but rather highly context dependent. As illustrated by Anderson and Scott (2012: 679), rethinking causality as a process rather than as relationships between variables allows us to think about *indirect* causality:

For instance, we know that social class correlates highly with academic achievement. Academic achievement rises as family incomes rise (not necessarily the other way around). Does this mean that poverty 'causes' school failure for poor children? Most researchers would say no. However, although poverty does not directly cause low achievement, its effects do. In other words, there is often a series of chains of effects that result in low academic achievement (e.g., poor neighborhoods are saddled with toxic waste, causing more asthma among poor children, causing students to miss more days of school, causing lower achievement for poor children). Moreover, poor neighborhoods experience higher rates of violent crime, HIV infection and death, percentage of population incarcerated or with felony convictions preventing their ability to vote or secure reliable employment, and homelessness. Like a trail of breadcrumbs, a chain of causes and effects lead from low achievement back to poverty, and ultimately, to structural inequality.

The method of agreement and method of difference discussed in Chapter 2 is a clear example of process-theory. This approach is designed to identify the necessary or sufficient conditions that led to (or caused) a particular outcome (Mahoney, 2000). Similarly, as Mahoney (2000) points out, research like Skopol's relies on 'ordinal comparisons' - the process of ranking of conditions, things or categories based on their pervasiveness or presence. However, qualitative researchers develop 'propositions' rather than hypotheses. Propositions are provisional statements about the workings or connections that are developed *after* rather than before data collection and analysis is well under way (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 75).

### Theoretical approach: The nature of inquiry

Qualitative research ranges from approaches that examine the mechanisms that underlie a particular theory (see process-theory above) to those that avoid at least the appearance of anything beyond being 'theoretically sensitive'. The nature of your questions is related to the theoretical approach (see discussion below).

### Evaluating your questions: Knowing the good, the bad and the ugly

The connection between research question and philosophy is the match between what the researcher wants to understand and what exists and can be known. (Trede and Higgs, 2009: 17)

What constitutes a good question will be determined by one or more factors, including the project's purpose, your disciplinary aims and your theoretical approach. A normative

question such as whether it is good or bad to allow a terminally ill patient to end her life is perfectly reasonable within a discipline such as philosophy that ponders what is desirable or optimal. However, we expect social scientists, regardless of their theoretical approach, to ask ‘researchable’ questions that can be answered through the collection and analysis of one or more sources of empirical data. So rather than pondering whether euthanasia is good or bad, qualitative researchers might instead ask questions about why some groups support it in the first place. Good researchable research questions orient the project, inform appropriate data and methods, and provide the researcher with some parameters.

When determining whether a question is ‘researchable’, social scientists should ask themselves whether their proposed study is feasible, interesting and has the potential to make a contribution. Questions of worth address the fundamental contribution of the research study. Questions of quality or appropriateness on the other hand attack the merits of the research design, working definitions and data analysis. These questions are not only critical for determining the viability of any project, but versions of them are standard fare at most thesis proposals and thesis defences (Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1 Checklist for determining a researchable question**

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**Feasibility**

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- 1 Can I answer my question? Or are there aspects of my question that are virtually impossible to answer?
  - 2 What kind of data will I need to answer my question? Are there appropriate data available? And will I have access to those data?
  - 3 Do I have the resources (time and money) to gather the data I need in order to answer my research questions?
  - 4 Are my research questions or data required to answer my research questions ethical?
  - 5 Does my question make sense? Is my question too or complicated? Is my question based on an empirical, theoretical or policy problem?
- 

**Interest, contribution and potential criticisms**

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- 6 Will my research questions accommodate (possibly inconvenient) surprises?
  - 7 Will my research questions allow me to accommodate findings that challenge conventional wisdom?
  - 8 Has my question already been asked before, and if so what will I add to the literature?
  - 9 Do established people in the field think my research question is interesting?
  - 10 What are the potential criticisms or potential flaws with the kind of question I am considering asking (e.g., focusing too much on consumers and not enough on sellers)?
- 

***Feasibility: Questions 1-5***

The first five questions have to do with the basic feasibility of your study. These questions address whether the question has inherently unknowable qualities (e.g., whether dogs go to heaven), is limited by the knowledge that is currently available (e.g., whether condom use will decline once there is a cure for HIV), or by the kind of access to the population or

data that you need to answer your question. You must be realistic as to whether you have the money, time, skills or credentials to carry out your project to the end. A study on the Spanish Revolution that requires you to travel to Spain and dig through mountains of archival material makes little sense if you do not have the resources to spend an extended period of time living in Spain, nor the language proficiency to read and interpret documents in Spanish with a high degree of sophistication (for a discussion see Firebaugh, 2008).

Equally important for qualitative researchers is whether your population or organization of interest is willing to participate in your study. It makes no sense to build an entire project around a particular group if that group flat-out denies you access to its members or other materials that you need to answer your research question. A preliminary literature review and pilot project will go a long way in helping you determine whether the study is doable given the scope, access and resources required to execute the project (see Chapter 2). Some research has to be ruled out simply because it is unethical. A study that requires similar methods to Laud Humphrey's (1970) famous *Tearoom Trade* (e.g., participant observation of sex acts in public bathrooms) will be rejected on ethical grounds not only because of the potential harm to participants, but also to protect the researcher.

Finally, you need to consider whether your question makes sense. Is it too narrow or complicated? A narrow question that examines the perceptions of texting while dining out with friends may generate too few types of responses (e.g., rude, not rude or indifferent) to generate a meaningful analysis (Creswell, 2003: 105). Similarly, a complicated question suffers from the opposite problem, and muddies the project by confusing your audience (and often the researcher) about the central aims of the project. You also have to consider whether it generates a 'straw person', a logical fallacy based on the misreading, misinterpretation or generation of an empirical, theoretical or policy issue. In other words, is your question based on something that actually exists?

Here is an example of a research question sent by a student at the beginning stages of a research project. What he initially asked was: 'Is being physically active the only way to stay fit and does being unfit really constitute a learning deficiency?' The first part of the question implies that there is another way to be 'fit' other than through physical activity (unless of course he was referring to another kind of 'fit', such as being emotionally or cognitively fit, which he was not). The second part of the question implies that the literature and/or policies define being unfit as a learning deficiency, which it does not. This kind of question is un-researchable simply because the question formulation is so poor, both in terms of pitting two things that are essentially the same (being fit and physical fitness) and another thing that does not exist (defining poor physical fitness as a learning disability). After much discussion, we formulated the question he *really* intended to ask all along which was: 'Does poor physical fitness affect young children's learning?' Unlike the first question, this question has a clear focus and is researchable. And for his purposes (a second year research paper), the question oriented the paper toward a mountain of literature on the relationship between physical fitness and academic achievement.

### *Interest, contribution and potential criticisms: Questions 6-10*

Four of the last five questions have to do with whether your research questions will help you advance a project that is interesting and that makes a contribution. In particular, unless your aim is to advance a very particular cause, social science research questions should be designed to accommodate unconventional findings. For qualitative researchers, the potential for surprises is often hardwired into their research questions to allow for inductive inquiry (see the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2014) website). ‘Surprises’ can come in many forms, including inconvenient, weaker or stronger findings than you would have otherwise expected (Firebaugh, 2008). You may also be hit with findings that assault your personal experiences, beliefs or morals.

Based on your own experience, for example, you may be convinced that contrary to popular belief, children of divorce do not fare worse than children who grow up in intact families (e.g., self-esteem, academic outcomes). You may also have the benefit of drawing on more recent quantitative research that seems to suggest that you are right. Yet, when you’re setting up your project, you have to be cognizant of framing your research questions in a manner that allows for a variety of outcomes, including the possibility that your assumptions are wrong or highly contextually dependent (e.g., material conditions in the home).

The last question has to do with considering how others will perceive your research questions. If you are asking a well-established question in the literature (e.g., What is the connection between academic achievement and social class?), you must articulate your research questions in a manner that demonstrates that you are making a meaningful extension to this question whether it be through novel data or data collection methods, examining a different dimension of the problem and so forth, since your research question will ultimately orient your entire project, including your research design. Answering this question is not so clear cut. When posing potential research questions to experts in your field you will undoubtedly receive a range of responses.

## **STEP 2. ‘HOW DO MY RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS CONNECT?’ METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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### Key takeaways

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- A coherent research design requires connecting research questions to methods, and ensuring that the different methods fit together.
  - Determining and justifying your sample depends on the objectives of your research and how they connect to existing theory. Sampling relies on a ‘purposeful’ design.
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Your research design needs to be clearly defined to articulate coherence between research questions and methods. It is important to be cognizant of the fact that the methods you use

to collect your data are not necessarily a 'logical deduction' from your research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Instead, think about how your methods will enable you to answer your research questions. You will need to decide what types of data you will gather, the structure of your research design, and the population(s) and/or texts your sample will include. We outline considerations for each of these decisions in this section.

## Types of data

In the following chapters, we give you detailed information about how to gather different types of qualitative data. Here we offer a brief overview of considerations you need to think about in connecting your research question(s) and design.

### In-depth interviews

Key to the commonly employed method of in-depth interviews is its focus on the individual. Research questions that seek to understand people's feelings and experiences, including perspectives on family, work and social life, are a good match for this method. In-depth interviews allow you to explore a wide range of activities, 'from illegal border crossing to becoming a paid assassin' (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 3). They are the only method for collecting data when you are seeking to understand the perspectives of individuals contextualized within their own history and/or experiences. In-depth interviews facilitate the comprehensive exploration of multifaceted issues, allowing you to connect these to personal circumstances (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This method frequently takes the form of semi-structured interviews: the researcher directs the content to be discussed while allowing participants to shift ideas in new but related directions. The goal is to identify themes and higher-order patterns – relationships among themes – and to explain and theorize them.

#### Example

Elliot Weininger and Annette Lareau (2014) conducted 87 in-depth interviews with parents of young children from a large Northeastern US city and its surrounding suburbs. Their research question asked about the decision-making processes of families from different backgrounds in choosing particular neighbourhoods in which to live. Interviews allowed Weininger and Lareau to uncover the importance of networks in this decision-making process.

### Focus groups

Focus group research has become more common as a social scientific methodology in recent decades. It involves a small group of people with common characteristics and/or experiences who participate in discussions about a topic, guided by a moderator. Group discussion relies profoundly on interactions and conversations between participants, distinguishing it from individual in-depth interviews that focus solely on individual meanings and perspectives. This method is especially useful in settings and situations where a 'one-shot collection' is

necessary, the research topic is culturally sensitive, or research participants come from marginalized backgrounds (Berg and Lune, 2012). Group discussion allows participants to refine their thoughts, and it provides data that is created through conversations with others (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Focus groups are especially suited to attitudinal research where the group can discuss or debate the nuances and differences of their perspectives, providing a forum where these differences can be explicitly addressed. This contextual backdrop facilitates reflection and allows participants to better articulate their reasoning and beliefs. Interactional group discussions can spur creative thinking, and facilitate the identification of solutions.

### Example

Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp (2003) set out to study how drag-queen performances in Key West, Florida, are political in their ability to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality. To answer this question, one important component was to understand how audience members, both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals, understood the drag-queen performances. They conducted 12 focus groups with 40 audience members who had attended the show. Half were women and half men, and 70% identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. These groups' discussions allowed them to assess how audience members viewed the performances as a challenge to conventional thinking.

### Field research

Field research, also referred to as ethnography and participant observation, is the methodology of choice for projects in which the research question focuses on processes, events and relationships. It requires immersion in and systematic observation of the social life of a group or culture for a prolonged period of time, and writing extensive notes based on these observations and experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Observation enables researchers to gain knowledge of perspectives, behaviours and cultural diversity, of meaning-making systems, and of the changes to social worlds and cultures over time. Collecting observational data can vary from a more open-ended approach that seeks to find patterns to a more closed tactic that seeks confirmation of patterns. Field research can be participatory, where the researcher becomes an accepted member of the community, or non-participatory, where the researcher remains an outsider who observes systematically without interacting with participants.

### Example

Melanie Heath (2012) conducted research on the social consequences of marriage promotion policies in the United States. The idea of promoting marriage as a solution to intergenerational poverty among poor, single mothers has been highly contested in the United States, but at the time of her research there had been no in-depth research on what was happening on the ground. Heath conducted extensive field research for 11 months to discover many unintended consequences, including the fact that the services were not targeting poor women, and, that when they did reach the target population, these efforts often had a negative impact.

## Unobtrusive methods

Unobtrusive methods allow you to answer research questions that address how societies log or record information concerning social behaviour. This method involves no direct contact with the study participants, and tends to be combined with other methods in social scientific research. Data can include print and non-print materials (Baker, 2008). Print materials comprise current and archival documents, such as historical pamphlets, diaries, letters, newspapers, government documents and census data, among others. Researchers might analyse photographs, paintings, graffiti and sheet music. Textbooks could be another data source. Non-print data includes various forms of technology-generated communications, such as tweets, chat rooms, listservs and blogs. Audiotapes, films, television and videos can also provide interesting data for understanding behaviour and social/cultural patterns. The lack of face-to-face contact that unobtrusive methods allow can provide more reliable information, especially when you are studying a sensitive topic.

### Example

Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt set out to study how social and cultural beliefs determine gender in various social spaces and to develop the idea of 'gender determination', using reactions to transgender rights legislation as a case study (2014: 38). To analyse these social behaviours, they determined that a content analysis of media articles would contribute to the literature by theorizing gender determination 'beyond face-to-face interactions through an analysis of policy and law debates and imagined interactions, situations that often display a call for explicit criteria for deciding who counts as a man or as a woman' (2014: 38).

## What is the structure of my research design?

Decisions about the research design flow from the research questions and help to determine the structure of the research project. In considering the structure of your project, you must decide on the role of case studies and of comparisons. You must also consider whether your study will be longitudinal and whether you will use a mixed methodology. We outline these four components below.

### Case study

A case study approaches one or a few instances of a phenomenon to study them in depth. While there is much disagreement about exactly what constitutes a case study, we offer the definition of Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis, who argue that the primary defining features are

multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context (or in a number of specific contexts if the study involves more than one case). Those multiple perspectives may come from multiple data collection methods, but they may also derive from multiple accounts - collected using a single method from people with different perspectives on what is being observed. (2003: 52)

Case studies are structured around context rather than individuals, as would be the focus of an in-depth interview project. You might design a case study based on a process (e.g., the phenomenon of cyberbullying, with the case involving perpetrators, victims and parents), or an organization/institutional context (e.g., the child sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church, with the case involving the Vatican (such as statements), bishops, priests and victims).

One of the main strengths of the case study approach is its ability to capture multiple perspectives and to build a more in-depth understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena. The definition of case study overlaps with ethnography, field research and participant observation. Karen O'Reilly (2008) argues that the key difference between is methodology: the defining feature of ethnography or field research is its incorporation of participant or non-participant observation (among other methods, such as in-depth interviews), whereas a case study can include a mixed-methods approach which involves quantitative and statistical elements (see below for our discussion of mixed methods).

In designing a case study project, the first important step is to determine the social context(s) of your research to help select your case or cases. Again, your research question(s) are key in guiding these decisions. There may be differences in the populations you will study in each case, and you will need to choose how consistent the selection of groups of people and/or organizations will be. Too many cases can lead to a very large sample size. You must ask yourself how feasible is a project with multiple cases or that includes multiple populations? Can you complete the project in a timely manner? Do you have the funding to be successful? What are the compromises you need to make in attaining breadth over depth to answer your research question and design a feasible research project? (See our discussion below on 'What will your sample consist of?')

### Example

Suzanne Staggenborg (2001) studied the relationship between culture and politics in the women's movement. Her research design offered a case study of feminist action in Bloomington, Indiana, from the 1960s to the 1990s. She outlined how her choice of site influenced her findings concerning the processes in which women's movements evolve and endure. In particular, the local movement in Bloomington encompassed a 'political field' (Ray, 1999), shaped by Indiana University, a university town of about 90,000 residents. Staggenborg noted that, while Indiana is a conservative state, the presence of the university in Bloomington provided a liberalizing effect on local movements. Thus, Bloomington as a case would shed light on the advantages and disadvantages for mobilizing that would affect the possible kinds of activism. She concluded, 'The site is a good place to examine the effects of culture-building on the larger women's movement' (2001: 511).

### Comparative research

Comparison is central to empirical social science and involves evaluating the associations and differences between phenomena. Most qualitative research incorporates some form of comparative research. For example, comparisons are often made in ethnographic studies of

core categories or themes. Comparative research is frequently built into the research design, such as case study comparisons, comparative political research, historical comparative research, and comparisons based on content and discourse analysis (unobtrusive measures). Comparisons may also emerge inductively between groups during the analytical process.

The fundamental goal of comparative research is to uncover correspondence and variance between the elements being compared. Qualitative approaches to comparative research focus on understanding similarity and difference, whereas quantitative methodical approaches place emphasis on measuring differences. The advantage of designing a comparative study is summed up by Melinda Mills: 'Comparisons not only uncover differences between social entities but also reveal unique aspects of a particular entity that would be virtually impossible to detect otherwise' (2008: 101).



### Quick tip: Considerations for designing comparative research (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003)

A comparative research design is the right match if your goal is to:

- Isolate the presence or absence of an entity among different cases.
- Identify whether and how phenomena vary between groups.
- Compare social processes across times and places.
- Explain how the presence or social consequences of an entity vary between groups.
- Compare the variations and interactions of phenomena in different social contexts.

Deciding on the cases or sample is an important component of comparative research (Ebbinghaus, 2005). Generally speaking, the selection of cases should be theory driven (e.g., theorizing multiculturalism through a comparative study of policies in Canada, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom). Charles Ragin (2006) notes that many social scientists choose their populations for comparative research based on taken-for-granted categories. These 'given' populations, such as research comparing registered voters in New York and Los Angeles, are beneficial when conducting descriptive research, but he calls for giving greater attention to theoretically driven understandings of populations. Constructing understandings of populations can offer a more nuanced and innovative research design, such as comparative research on anti-colonial movements in the 20th century, which requires theoretical articulation to advance meaningful categories.

The comparative method can be an important tool that enables qualitative researchers to make causal inferences. Comparison can allow you to test the 'counterfactual' of what would have happened if the presence of the presumed cause were absent (Maxell, 2004b: 253). Causal relationships are also important in comparative historical research, a method that analyses historical events to build explanations beyond a particular time and place,

either through direct comparison to other historical/recent events or by building theory. This method focuses on historical sequences and their causes across a set of similar cases.

While comparative research offers many benefits to a research design, it also presents challenges. For example, deciding on the scale of your project presents a conundrum. Choosing a small sample size can, on the one hand, allow for descriptive depth, but, on the other, can mean too many comparative factors that get in the way of identifying competing causal models or explanations. A larger sample size (e.g., countries, cases) that only allows for more general comparative characteristics risks superficial findings (Mills, 2008). Again, designing your research is a continuous process that must be negotiated throughout the data collection and analysis phases. You must remain flexible to change your design if your sample proves to be too small or too large (see below for a detailed discussion of choosing your sample).

No matter what method or combination of methods you decide on for your project, you will want to consider carefully how comparative research might strengthen your research design. Comparison provides an entry point to numerous topics that allow you to incorporate multiple types of qualitative methods.

#### Example

Michèle Lamont (1992) set out to study how middle class men in France and the United States differentiate between people who they believe have greater or lesser worth. She employed the comparative method to uncover differences within the national samples on the basis of region (New York and Indianapolis in the United States, and Paris and Clermont-Ferrand in France), occupation (profit and public sectors) and mobility (first and third generation upper middle class). Her comparative model allowed her to illuminate national differences. It also provided evidence of similar patterns in the two countries based on the increasing importance of socioeconomic boundaries.

#### Single episode or longitudinal research?

Another factor to consider in designing your project is whether data will need to capture changes over time and/or a sequence of events. One solution for research that will be collected in a single episode is to rely on retrospective accounts. Retrospective interviews offer participants the opportunity to tell their stories about some event from beginning to end and can help identify processes and sequencing. You might consider using specifically designed calendars or diaries for participants to record their thoughts and reactions to a series of questions over time.

There are shortcomings, however, to this strategy. The quality of the data may be compromised by ‘problems with recall, distortion and post-event rationalisation’ (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 53). If the evolution of events or the processes being recorded are a central component of your research, and the data represents complex sequencing or long time-spans, a single episode of data collection may not be sufficient.

Longitudinal studies can be an answer to this problem by including more than one episode of data collection. Longitudinal designs are prevalent in quantitative research, but

are becoming more common among qualitative research as investigators acknowledge the importance of understanding changes in people's lives. There are two general forms of longitudinal research. First, panel studies are built on the idea of interviewing the same participants more than once. Second, repeat cross-sectional studies interview successive samples of new respondents (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Qualitative panel studies shed light on micro-level variation among individuals (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). For example, they can investigate individual biographies over time, such as orientations and action strategies of participants. The fundamental idea is to capture participants' reactions and thoughts as they arise after a period of reflection. Mostly, panel studies seek to capture change over a long timespan to illuminate particular outcomes and social consequences that are difficult to uncover in a single episode of interviews or focus groups. The goal is not to measure change, which is the objective of panel studies in survey research. A qualitative panel design allows you 'to describe the different types of changes that take place or the different outcomes that result, to account for them by showing how they arise, and to explain how and why there are differences between sample members' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 54).

Cross-sectional studies focus on macro-level change and the broader social context in which these evolutions take place (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). You might use a cross-sectional design to study what shapes attitudes about immigration, for example. A longitudinal panel study would allow you to specify changing attitudes, how they have developed, and what the social consequences are.

Qualitative longitudinal research has many benefits, including creating a more nuanced understanding of change and greater narrative depth over time. There are also challenges. It is difficult to anticipate the obstacles to conducting second or more interventions when qualitative research tends to demand more time and commitment on the part of participants than survey research. Multiple interventions may also be more difficult to fund. Still, the potential of this method to obtain rich, dynamic and contextualized accounts of people's experiences over time cannot be discounted.

### Example

Virginia Morrow and Gina Crivello (2015) worked with a team of researchers who gathered data on 'Young Lives', a longitudinal study investigating childhood poverty in Ethiopia, Peru, India and Vietnam over 15 years. The goal was to uncover the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and the role of policies in improving children's life chances. Data were gathered quantitatively and qualitatively from two cohorts of children in each country. The qualitative component has to date four waves and involves 200 children, their caregivers and other key figures. These researchers consider factors influencing households moving into and out of poverty, and the consequences for children. Data collected allowed the researchers to map out aspects of children's lives in ways not possible in cross-sectional research, including how the dynamics of poverty influence children's lives over time.



### Quick tip: Considerations for longitudinal research (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003)

A good longitudinal design will include consideration of the following:

- **Number of interventions and timing.**
  - These are guided by your research questions and objective.
- **Initial sample size.**
  - For panel studies, you will need to address the possibility of attrition.
- **The right methods for a longitudinal design.**
  - In-depth interviews with their individual focus are better suited to panel studies.
  - Focus groups are better attuned to gathering contextual and group information.
- **Selecting the follow-up sample.**
  - Whether to include the entire first-stage sample in subsequent interventions.
  - Whether to use a purposive sample (see the section below on sampling) to study particular issues or groups of people.
- **Analysis of all stages of data collection.**
  - Planning ahead how you will integrate later stages of data to facilitate comparisons and analyse evolutions.

### Using multiple methods

Qualitative researchers frequently collect data using multiple methods. The term ‘mixed methods’ can refer to the incorporation of qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study, but the term can also be applied to mixing different qualitative methods to carry out an investigation that draws on the strengths of each. We highlight three purposes for mixing methods and discuss the challenges that a mixed-method research design presents.

First, *triangulation* – the incorporation of multi-methods to reduce deficiencies of a one-method approach – can be a strategy to strengthen your research design. This approach also allows for a deeper understanding of the issues you are studying. You might combine different sources of data (e.g., official documents, interview data, field notes), and different methods of collecting data (e.g., formal and informal interviews, participant observation, anonymous questionnaires). You can also triangulate data collection by gathering accounts from different participants in a prearranged setting, from different phases of activities in a singular setting, and from different sites of the setting. In this sense, triangulation involves cross checking the consistency of data across settings, participants and at different times. We discuss in depth the importance of triangulation as a way to ensure validity below in ‘Step 3. “What is the nature of the data I will collect?”’.

Second, you might choose to incorporate multiple methods to broaden the range of data you collect rather than as just a way to strengthen your conclusions. For example, observation is often combined with interviews to shine light on how events or behaviours naturally occur and how they are constructed through individual understandings of behaviour. Thus, while interviewing provides an efficient way to learn about people's perspectives, conducting observation can allow you to draw inferences on these perspectives that would not be possible if you were to rely solely on interview data (Maxwell, 2013). Employing a mixed-methods approach can help uncover tacit meanings and elicit data that respondents might be reluctant to divulge in a more structured interview setting.

Finally, combining qualitative and quantitative methods (a specific kind of triangulation) builds on the strengths of both approaches to address specific research problems. Employing quantitative and qualitative research can bridge the macro–micro gulf. Quantitative research addresses the structural features of social life and can illuminate what happens 'if' X occurs. Qualitative research is more adept at uncovering processes and answering the question of 'how' or 'why' X occurred. There are numerous reasons to consider employing quantitative/qualitative mixed methods, including the incorporation of quantitative evidence to help generalizability. Quantitative research can also fill gaps in a qualitative study to include more structural elements. Many research questions require measurement of some kind, *as well as* better understanding of the nature or origins of an issue, and each approach offers a distinctive kind of evidence.

John Creswell (2013: 15) presents three primary models for designing a mixed-methods project. First is the 'convergent parallel mixed methods' model, which merges qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive explanation of a phenomenon. This design generally means collecting the two forms of data simultaneously and integrating it into the interpretation of the results, facilitating a deeper discussion of contradictions or incongruent findings. The second model is 'explanatory sequential mixed methods'. Beginning with quantitative research on a topic, analysing it, and using it to enhance your qualitative research represents a sequential approach that strengthens the quantitative findings. This approach presents a challenge of favouring a quantitative design, making it difficult to deal with the very different sample sizes of the two methods and what this means for finding conclusions. Finally, 'exploratory sequential mixed methods' begins with the qualitative and uses these data to construct the quantitative component. The qualitative data may help you to build an instrument to better test a hypothesis using quantitative methods. Or you may be able to identify important variables to include in survey research by analysing the in-depth qualitative data. The challenge in this method is determining which aspects of the qualitative data to analyse that can contribute to a quantitative project.

### Example

Simon Roberts et al. (2004) conducted research to understand how employers and service providers responded to provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act in the United Kingdom. They used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods model, first conducting

2,000 telephone survey interviews, and using these to perform case studies with 38 employers and service providers. They noted that the quantitative component led them to focus qualitative interviews on the workplace rather than the overall organization, allowing them to talk to line managers who could share with them actual practices beyond scripted responses of top management.

Table 3.2 provides examples of different options for connecting your research objectives to the structure of your data collection and methods.

**Table 3.2** Connecting research to structure

Research question	Some design options	Example
What is happening? How and why does it happen?	Case Study: An in-depth examination of a wider phenomenon	Shifman and Katz (2005) provide a case study of humour created in the course of immigrant assimilation (the wider phenomenon), regarding jokes ( $n = 150$ ) told by Eastern European old-timers at the expense of well-bred German Jews who migrated to Palestine/Israel beginning in the mid-1930s
What is the process? Has there been a change? What are the long-term consequences?	Longitudinal Qualitative Research: The goal is to investigate and interpret change over time, exploring the processes involved while taking account of the social context	Thomson et al. (2012) employ a longitudinal study of new mothering, using observational data to explore interactions between researcher, mother and child relating to food
How are A and B different and similar? What explains similarities and differences? What are some possible consequences?	Comparative Research: This method emphasizes the holistic nature of cases, the interaction of attributes, and multiple paths to an outcome	Cress and Snow (2000) use qualitative comparative analysis to chart the different pathways to various outcomes for homeless social movement organizations
How are A and B different and similar over time? What are the consequences? How 'X' influences A (or A and B similarly/differently)	Multi-Method Longitudinal Comparison: This approach allows for sophisticated 'macro-qualitative' comparative research designs, emphasizing the relationships among methods	Bagnall et al. (2013) conducted a 12-month longitudinal-matched comparison study incorporating three sets of data: psychometric scores and other data from structured questionnaires; routinely collected data on use of healthcare services; and self-care beliefs and behaviour from qualitative interviews

### What will your sample consist of?

Sample selection is an essential feature of your research design, whether your research is qualitative, quantitative or a mix of the two. Research involving small populations or single case studies must attend to who will be studied and in what settings, in a similar

manner to large projects that encompass extensive ethnographic data sets or comparative designs (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Deciding on a sample includes two related elements for both qualitative and quantitative research: First, you need to define the full data set or what is generally called the population. Second, you need to select a subgroup from that population.

In most cases, qualitative research relies on nonprobability sampling techniques for selecting a study population. This means purposely selecting a population to reflect particular features of a group(s), event(s) or activity(ies). Unlike quantitative methods, sampling in qualitative research does not seek statistical representativeness, referring to samples where the chances of selection for each element are unknown. Qualitative researchers link their research question(s) to the characteristics of a population in determining selection of the sample. This purposeful strategy is important to small-scale, in-depth studies. Thus, a good sample will be one that attends to homogeneity along some dimensions and heterogeneity along others in a study population. The more common types of nonprobability sampling techniques are convenience sampling, which has no rationale except availability, and purposive sampling, which includes multiple options. Below, we summarize these approaches.

### Convenience sampling

A convenience sample selects research participants based on their ease of availability, and lacks any clear sampling strategy. The selection process relies on including those who are the most eager and able to participate in the study. A small convenience sample may be useful to test the appropriateness of a research design or interview questions before delving into a more intensive and larger project. However, due to concerns about the validity of the data and their interpretation given the lack of sampling strategy, we do not recommend this type of sample except for very preliminary research. Patton (2015) makes a distinction between convenience and opportunistic sampling, the latter focusing on the need for a researcher to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities as they arise during the course of fieldwork. This kind of flexible approach can be very important in fieldwork where unexpected events are likely to unfold.

### Purposive sampling

Some characterize purposive sampling as more or less synonymous with qualitative research. From this perspective, purposive sampling, which requires a number of strategic choices about where, how and with whom you will conduct your research, is the backbone of a qualitative research design. Sampling is fundamentally tied to a project's objectives and research questions, signifying some form of purpose. The diversity of objectives and research questions entails multiple possibilities for purposive sampling. Michael Patton (2015: 266–72), for example, provides an overview of 40 purposive sampling options to aid in the selection of information rich cases. We review here the approaches we believe to be the most salient in qualitative research design.

### *Snowball sample*

Snowball sampling, also referred to as referral chains, is a common strategy for obtaining a sample in qualitative methods. It relies on asking people who you have already interviewed to name others who fit the selection criteria. This strategy can be helpful when your research involves populations that are dispersed or hard to reach. This is particularly true for populations that have been historically marginalized, such as lesbians and gay men of colour. It can also be a useful strategy when you are studying populations that practise some kind of deviant or illegal activity. Another strength of this sampling technique is its ability to build a sample of ‘natural interactional units’ of people who relate to one another on a regular basis (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

Snowball samples also have limitations. For example, it can be challenging to find the right respondent(s) to create referral chains of participants who complement your research objective. You might also compromise the heterogeneity of the sample if all new participants are generated through existing ones, resulting in a sample that is too homogeneous. This can be mitigated to a certain extent by identifying characteristics that will ensure diversity and asking respondents to suggest other participants based on these characteristics. You will also want to avoid automatically including family members or close friends in your sample. Another possibility might be to refrain from interviewing the new contacts identified by your existing sample, and instead ask these individuals to identify others who meet your criteria. This has the advantage of creating some distance between sample members, but can be cumbersome as a method. As a rule of thumb, we recommend that you only interview two to three people from any one chain/source, and, rather than relying solely on snowballing, use it to supplement other methods of generating a sample frame.

### *Maximum variation and homogeneous sampling*

Maximum variation sampling seeks to locate cases or individuals in order to include a wide spectrum of attitudes and perspectives on a phenomenon. When dealing with small sample sizes, too much heterogeneity can present problems when individual cases differ substantially from each other. Sampling based on maximum variation transforms this perceived limitation into a strength by identifying core experiences and central patterns in heterogeneous populations or phenomena. A statewide initiative, for example, may have programmes aimed at several different populations. Your sampling strategy might seek to include at least one programme from each population to provide variation among the programmes studied.

In contrast, homogeneous samples are sometimes deliberately chosen to give a detailed account of a particular phenomenon. A homogeneous sample might limit its breadth to a subculture or a group that presents many of the same characteristics. The advantage of this approach is to facilitate in-depth investigation of social processes in a specific social context. Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street* (1999) offers an ethnographic account of street violence in a disadvantaged African American community of Philadelphia. He conducted fieldwork on this population to uncover the emergence of a subculture regulated by

‘the code of the street’, that combines elements of respect, loyalty and honour to regulate social interactions in the impoverished neighbourhood where his project was conducted.

### *Typical case, disconfirming and extreme sampling*

Another strategy for sampling is to select a case or cases that you identify as ‘normal’ or ‘average’ to study mainstream aspects of society. In other words, cases might be of interest simply because they are ordinary. Howard Becker (1970) wanted to understand how medical students were socialized into their profession. He conducted his research at the University of Kansas Medical School because the school was seen as typical of the medical school experience (Palys, 2008). This strategy demands some prior knowledge of the population or phenomenon to identify it as ‘typical.’ You might gain this knowledge through your literature review or by conducting an exploratory study.

Another strategy for sampling is to seek cases that might disconfirm a theory or a finding that you have identified through exploratory research or in your literature review. Seeking to disconfirm a theory may be a way to strengthen your argument to support a competing theory. Ted Palys (2008: 698) sums up this general principle as, ‘If you think your results are not generalizable or the existence of a particular kind of case will undermine all that you “know” to be true about a phenomenon, then look for that kind of case’.

Finally, in contrast to the typical case sampling strategy that seeks the ordinary, extreme sampling searches cases because they are extraordinary or special in some way that can shed light on a topic. Studying extremes or exceptions can illuminate a topic by uncovering the importance of outliers in creating what is considered normal. Ethnomethodologists, for example, often choose deviant sampling to expose implicit assumptions and norms (Palys, 2008).

### *Purposeful random sampling*

While nonprobability sampling assumes a non-random sample, a purposeful random sample can be a strategy to increase the credibility of your methods. Patton (2015) describes his collaborative research with a programme that conducts in-depth interviews on the ‘war stories’ about their clients’ successes and struggles. These researchers decided to enhance the credibility of these narratives by systematically determining what would be included in the case histories, and then setting up a procedure to randomly select clients. These stories, though not generalizable, were randomly selected before knowing the outcomes of who experienced success or failure in the programme, adding credibility to their findings. It is thus important to keep in mind that a purposeful random sample is not representative. Rather, its purpose is to reduce suspicion about why certain cases were selected for study.

### *Stratified purposeful sampling*

A stratified purposeful sampling strategy incorporates a hybrid tactic to bridge homo- and heterogeneity (i.e., maximum variation and homogeneous sampling strategies). The objective is to select groups that offer variety in regard to a particular phenomenon, but each of which is fairly homogeneous, allowing the comparison of subgroups. Another strategy is

to combine a typical case sample with others, stratifying the cases around an average. The purpose is to clarify variation ‘rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis’ (Patton, 2015: 305). Thus, the strata would offer a predominantly uniform sample, while differences would exist between the strata. For example, you might use this sampling strategy to study different models of implementing online learning in lower and higher socioeconomic classrooms.

### *Criterion sampling*

This sampling strategy seeks to incorporate cases or individuals who meet a predetermined criterion of importance, such as a shared characteristic or experience. In general, employing this technique requires carefully designating inclusion/exclusion criteria. For example, married men who have been clients of sex workers might be the criterion from which you build your sample. Implicit to this sampling strategy is the idea that the criterion is contrasted to cases that are external to it. Thus, unmarried men who have been clients of sex workers would be a good comparison case.

### *Theory-guided (emergent) sampling*

A more deductive or theory-testing approach to research design would seek to include individuals or cases specifically on the basis of their potential contribution to theory. This approach is mainly associated with grounded theory – a systematic method of conducting inductive qualitative inquiry aimed toward theory construction. A theoretical sample moves between sample selection, fieldwork and analysis: a preliminary sample is selected, fieldwork carried out and data analysed; this process is repeated to refine emergent categories or theories until no new insights are generated.

### *Sample size*

Determining the size of your sample relates to a number of factors that link to your research objectives, questions and sampling strategy. If you are conducting comparative or longitudinal research, your sample size is likely to be larger than if your research is a case study. On the one hand, a sample that is too large can lead to a point of diminishing returns where very little new evidence is obtained (in fieldwork, this is called the point of saturation; see Chapter 6). Since a qualitative project does not involve the need to measure, or establish incidence/prevalence in the ways that statistical inference requires, you will want your sample to be small enough to yield rich information. On the other hand, if your sample is too small, it may fail to include key players or lack diversity to study variation and the influence of different factors on the population/topic you are studying. Thus, a good purposive sampling strategy is key to ensuring that your sample will be rich in terms of constituencies and variability (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The sample size for a project that relies on in-depth interviews will likely include no more than 50 participants, but again, you will need to consider the kinds of comparisons your project will make (how many sub-populations are included in the sample) and how you will combine different methods (in-depth interviews and fieldwork) to ensure you can answer your research questions.



### Quick tip: Considerations for determining your sample size (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003)

- **The heterogeneity of the population:** A diverse population will likely increase the required sample size, whereas a more homogeneous population will allow a smaller sample.
- **The number of selection criteria:** The criteria you identify in designing the sample will influence its size. The more you identify, the larger the sample.
- **Groups of special interest that require intensive study:** If your project includes groups that require intensive study, you will need to include them with sufficient representation and diversity, requiring a larger overall sample.
- **Multiple samples within one study:** If your research design includes more than one sample for reasons of comparison or control, your sample size will increase based on the number of cases that need to be included for each sample population.
- **Type of data collection methods:** The sample size will increase depending on your methods of data collection, whether single interviews, paired interviews, small or average size group discussions, or multiple methods.
- **The budget and resources available:** The more complex your research design and sampling method, the more intensive resources are necessary for data collection and analysis.

## Ethical considerations

Ethics in qualitative research speak to the relationship between researchers and those they study. They are a central aspect of research design and all decision-making processes throughout the project. Research designs are expected to be ethical, meaning that researchers must treat the participants in their research with humane consideration, and the presentation of results must observe the principled conventions. One central concern of research ethics is the integrity of the research activity, where honest revelation of a study's strengths and limitations mark its integrity. Some social scientists consider any type of covert research, for whatever purposes, to lack integrity because it can mislead the people being studied and does not facilitate the process of peer review. Such has been the critique of Laud Humphrey's (1970) participant observation of sex acts in public bathrooms. Ethical issues have particular importance in qualitative research due to the fact that the methods involve in-depth study and anticipated events.

Generally, issues arise because qualitative researchers work with participants face-to-face, over long periods of time, and possibly in intimate circumstances. There can be a fine line between building relationships that are caring and not exploiting participants. Reporting the findings also presents ethical challenges, as most participants have access to what is published or presented about them. Ethics in this case has to do with the effects that research reports will have on participants.

### *Informed consent*

Researchers must obtain informed consent from participants, providing them with information about the study's purpose, funding, the research team, how data will be used, and what

will be required of them. Informed consent also means specifying that participation is voluntary, and how participants will be identified in reports from the study. Providing too much information in the recruitment stage may deter participation or ultimately alter participants' responses. On the other hand, not providing enough information can lead to problems later on when the participant is surprised by questions being asked or by other aspects of the study.

### *Anonymity and confidentiality*

How you will deal with anonymity and confidentiality needs to be carefully planned and communicated to participants. Anonymity refers to the protection of identity for those taking part in the study. Some participants may want to be identified, while others will want to remain anonymous, and you can give them a choice, such as selecting their own pseudonym if they desire. When participation is arranged by or through a third party – such as an employer – anonymity may be compromised. In this case, you will need to inform participants that you cannot absolutely guarantee anonymity. Confidentiality refers to ensuring that the attribution of comments in your reports or presentations does not identify participants.

### *Protecting participants from harm*

You will need to consider if taking part in the research project will have any harmful effects for members, and, if so, take curative action. Research that deals with sensitive topics is likely to uncover painful experiences, perhaps which have not been previously shared. You will need to give participants enough information so that they have a clear understanding of what will be required of them before taking part in the study.

### *Protecting researchers from harm*

Conducting fieldwork can also place you at risk, and arrangements should be made at the beginning of the study to minimize these. You should consider the kinds of risks that may arise in public places, such as arrangements for getting to your research site, and in private, such as conducting interviews in participants' homes.

## **STEP 3. 'WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE DATA I WILL COLLECT?' VALIDITY CONCERNS**

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### **Key takeaways**

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- Ensuring the validity of your findings is a key component of a good research design.
  - Validity threats in qualitative research include researcher bias and reactivity.
  - There are a number of ways to test the credibility of your conclusions: length of time conducting research, the richness of your data, obtaining feedback from participants, triangulation, among others.
  - While differing radically from quantitative methods, it is possible to generalize qualitative findings.
-

Validity in qualitative research broadly refers to whether a study is ‘well grounded’ (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 270). It is a key component of your research design and your research proposal (see the next section on how to write your research proposal), but it is a difficult component to account for. There is no easy guarantee that your study will be valid, or that the results will reflect reality. Moreover, no method can absolutely confirm that you have captured the actual phenomena that you claim to describe. Maxwell (2013) points to the fact that validity is relative, meaning that it must be evaluated according to the context and objectives of the project. One’s evidence, and not simply the chosen methods, establishes the validity of the research.

Accounting for validity involves the ability to test claims against the real world as a check to prove that your account is not wrong. A key concept in conceptualizing validity is *validity threat*, or the ways that you might be wrong. These threats include alternative explanations or other ways of understanding your data not accounted for – ‘for example, that the people you interviewed are not presenting their actual views, or that you have ignored the data that don’t fit your interpretation, or that there is a different theoretical way of making sense of your data’ (Maxwell, 2013: 123). Your research design needs to conceptualize these threats and how you will deal with them. In this section, we outline specific ways to understand validity threats and steps to deal with them. We conclude with a discussion of generalizability and an example of a conceptual map to articulate the interactions of the research design.

## Validity threats

Strategies to deal with validity threats differ markedly between quantitative and qualitative methods. For quantitative or experimental designs, controls are generally built into the design to deal with expected and unexpected threats to validity. Qualitative researchers, in contrast, do not have statistical means to ‘control for’ probable threats, and these threats are often dealt with once data collection has begun. This means considering factors that might present as threats before beginning the research process and attending to their evolution or to new threats. There are two broad types of threats to validity that you confront: research bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013).

### Research bias

Research bias refers to the tendency that researchers have to collect, interpret or present data that support their own prejudgments, theories or goals. This concept has to do with the subjectivity of the researcher, a term that is often favoured over the term bias within qualitative research. The need to deal with issues of subjective bias can arise from multiple sources and at numerous stages within the research process, including during research design, sample selection, data collection, analysis or writing. Rather than seeking to eliminate bias – it is not possible to jettison your own perspectives, experiences or beliefs – dealing with research bias means understanding how your viewpoints can influence conducting qualitative research. Identifying possible impacts of your predispositions on your research project will allow you to retain the

positive effects and avoid the negative ones. For example, you might be inclined to devise methodological strategies that could favour particular findings. In this case, it is important to think about alternative strategies and the consequences of these for your research design.

### Reactivity

Reactivity, or observer effect, occurs when the process of conducting research alters the behaviour of the participants, challenging the validity of the data. There are several types of reactivity. One is the Hawthorne effect, which links changes in behaviour to study participation. Experiments conducted by Elton Mayo at a plant in Hawthorne, Illinois, during the 1920s and 1930s found that, when changes in working conditions were introduced, such as better lighting, productivity increased. Mayo hypothesized that workers were actually responding to the attention they were receiving as research participants rather than to better working conditions. Another type of reactivity is the novelty effect, which occurs when individuals modify their behaviour after the introduction of something new, such as the presence of the researcher. This effect is usually short-lived. Reactivity may also result when participants act in a certain way to please the researcher. Characteristics of the observer, such as race, gender or age, can result in reactivity, especially when there are substantial differences between the investigator and the participant(s) (McKechnie, 2008).

In qualitative research, reactivity can apply to both the researcher and participants. The goal is not to remove the influence of the researcher on the research process (again, an impossible objective), but to ensure that reactivity is identified and channelled in a positive way. When conducting research with participants, it is important to keep reflexive notes to document how your own behaviour and understandings may affect the research process. Next, we present a series of validity tests proposed by Joseph Maxwell (2013) to increase the credibility of your conclusions.

### Validity tests

Methodological approaches cannot guarantee valid findings, but a good research design can help bolster the credibility of your conclusions. Maxwell (2013: 125) argues that it is important to 'test' the validity of your conclusions rather than to verify them. Testing involves searching for evidence that calls into question your findings. We provide a number of strategies below for testing the validity of your findings, but keep in mind that not all strategies work for all studies. Your research objectives and questions can guide you in deciding which threats are important to address, and how to test for validity.

#### Intensive, long-term involvement

Long-term participant observation can be a good method to test the validity of your findings. It allows you to gather a diversity of data, and you have the time to check and confirm your observations and understandings. Conducting interviews and observations in tandem

over time can help to ‘rule out spurious associations and premature theories’ (Maxwell, 2013: 126). You can also test alternative theories or postulates. Howard Becker (1970) conducted long-term participant observation of medical students, allowing him to dig deeper under the cynical surface that the students maintained to uncover the idealism with which they approached their profession.

### Rich data

Long-term observations and intensive interviewing produce rich data that can aid in testing the validity of your conclusions. Verbatim transcripts of interviews and detailed field notes can give you a broad picture of the circumstances and contradictions that take place in social life. According to Howard Becker, rich data can

counter the twin dangers of respondent duplicity and observer bias by making it difficult for respondents to produce data that uniformly support a mistaken conclusion, just as they make it difficult for the observer to restrict his observations so that he sees only what supports his prejudices and expectations. (1970: 53)

### Respondent validation

Obtaining feedback from respondents on your conclusions can be an important strategy to test your interpretations against those of your respondents. You might solicit this feedback throughout the research process or wait until you have written up your results. Judith Stacey (1990), for example, elicited feedback from the two key informants of the two families she studied at the end of her research. She included these responses in an appendix to reflect on differences between her views and those of her respondents. In the end, this information offered *evidence* of the validity of her conclusions (i.e., the responses were not more inherently valid than the interviews and fieldwork she conducted).

### Intervention

Qualitative researchers unavoidably intervene in the social world they study. This fact can create challenges to ensuring valid conclusions but can also represent an opportunity to test the validity of your findings, using intervention as a way to test your interpretations. Maxwell (2013) gives the example of Goldenberg (1992) who studied the effects of a teacher's expectations and behaviour on students' reading progress. Goldenberg shared with the teacher his theory about why a student was unable to meet the teacher's expectations, which resulted in a change in the teacher's behaviour towards the student and improved the student's reading abilities. Thus, Goldenberg was able to successfully test his claim that the teacher's behaviour toward the student rather than her expectations was the primary cause of the student's lack of progress.

### Searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases

If you find evidence that cannot be accounted for in your interpretations or explanations of a phenomenon, this is a good sign that you need to rethink the validity of your conclusions.

If you find yourself in this situation, you will need to decide whether the discrepancy is based on just one aspect of the evidence you have gathered and can be ignored, or whether you need to revisit your conclusions to ensure that this piece of evidence disconfirms them. You might ask others to consider your evidence and the discrepant evidence to ensure that you are not relying too much on your own perspectives in making conclusions. You might also decide to report the discrepant evidence in your write-up and allow your audience to draw their own conclusions.

### Triangulation

Triangulation, as discussed above in our section on mixed methods, decreases the chance of systematic bias due to relying only on one specific method. Norman Denzin (1989b) theorized four basic types of triangulation that can strengthen the validity of your findings. The first is *triangulation of methods of data collection*, which means combining methods such as interviewing, surveys and observation across various times and places to offer multiple perspectives. For example, focus groups might be conducted initially as a way to explore themes that will then be addressed through in-depth interviews. The second is *investigator triangulation*, which can strengthen the trustworthiness of findings by including more than one investigator in the collection and analysis of data. Multiple investigators can offer insights and can shed light on assumptions that may be missed if there were only one person collecting and analysing data. A third possibility is *triangulating data sources*. Drawing on evidence from a variety of data sources can also increase the credibility of research findings. Evidence gathered from interviews, participant observation, archival and historical documents, and public records will yield different kinds of evidence and elucidate different understandings of the phenomena under study. Finally, *theory triangulation* approaches research findings from different theoretical lenses to guard against wearing ideological blinders that favour only one theoretical approach. This kind of triangulation does not permit integration of results (making it less useful for confirming validity of findings), but it can be helpful in explaining dissonant data or negative cases and in yielding new insights into aspects of the research problem.

### Numbers

Maxwell notes that many of the conclusions that result from qualitative research have ‘an implicit quantitative component’ (2013: 128). Claims concerning prevalence or typicality of a phenomenon, or how common a theme or behaviour is, require some quantitative support. Incorporating an appropriate use of numbers to assess the amount of evidence you have is a good way to increase the credibility of your conclusions. Maxwell (2010) offers a comprehensive assessment of the importance of numbers in qualitative research.

### Comparison

We have discussed the importance of comparison in linking your methodology to your research questions. Comparisons are also an important way to address validity threats. Comparative research can address an important weakness in qualitative research – its ‘inability

to explicitly address the “counterfactual” of what would have happened *without* the presence of the presumed cause’ (Maxwell, 2013: 129). Comparisons help to draw out regularities and specify the underlying social mechanisms and processes that generate these regularities, thereby strengthening the validity of your conclusions.

## Generalizing from qualitative research

Generalization refers to extending findings from a study based on a sample of particular individuals, settings, times or institutions as relevant beyond that sample. In both quantitative and qualitative research, researchers propose two main types of generalization: *empirical* and *theoretical* (Hammersley, 2008; other terms have also been employed to capture the broader idea of two types of generalization, see Maxwell, 2013). Empirical generalization concerns applying findings from qualitative research to populations or settings beyond the particular sample of the study. Some argue that a better term to capture this idea is ‘transferability’, involving a transfer of knowledge from a study to a new situation (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The second context of generalization is theory building, which refers to the formation of theoretical concepts able to offer a wider, more general, application. Conclusions from a case study or other types of qualitative methods are used in developing wider theory.

We embrace the view that the findings of qualitative research can be generalized, albeit in a manner that differs substantially from how generalizability occurs in quantitative research. Again, we offer the distinction made by Maxwell (2013) as a particularly useful one for thinking about how to generalize your findings: *internal generalizability* and *external generalizability*. Internal generalizability allows you to generalize within the organization, setting or case, to other settings, people, etc., that were not directly observed or interviewed in the data collected. External generalizability moves beyond the case or cases specifically studied to other institutions, people or settings.

### Internal generalization

Internal generalizability predominantly concerns the representativeness of the data and conclusions for the phenomena or people you are studying. This means that it relies primarily on empirical rather than theoretical generalization. In particular, this form of generalization is important to the validity of your results. It involves sufficiently representing the variation in the setting or group of people you are studying. Being able to generalize internally is intimately tied to your sampling strategy. If you are conducting participant observation, you cannot observe all the factors of the setting, and it is thus important to account for the kinds of diversity that can exist in a particular location or social context. What have you missed, and how does this affect your overall findings? In analysing your data, you should pay attention to data that do not fit prior expectations, and make sure to retain the important differences you have built into your design. For example, are you imposing an artificial coherence on the data?

### External generalization

External generalizability in qualitative research concerns theoretical generalization or the transferability of particular results to other cases. It attends more to a logic of replication than to a sampling logic, which is the focus of quantitative generalization: it seeks to make theoretical extensions and not provide statistical representativeness (Maxwell, 2013). In fact, external generalizability in qualitative research often depends more on its lack of statistical generalizability, in that it seeks to illuminate an ideal type or an extreme case. Judith Stacey (1990), for example, studied two ‘unrepresentative’ families made up of devout Christians who mix feminism and fundamentalism to understand changes that are occurring in family life. Thus, generalizing in qualitative research is based on the development of a theory about the processes being studied that might operate in other cases but that may also end in different outcomes in different circumstances (Maxwell, 2013). The analysis strategies relating to internal generalization are also relevant for external generalization, in this case through theory development. For example, you may need to test a theory to search for discrepant data. It may also be important to develop alternative theories and search for evidence to indicate which theory(ies) best explain your data.

### Modelling your research design

A good research design is able to identify the key components of the project in a concise and clear manner. Maxwell (2013) suggests creating an interactive model to help you think about the ways that your research components connect. In Figure 3.1, we offer an example of a conceptual map from the dissertation research of Jessica Braimoh based on these principles. For her PhD dissertation, Jessica Braimoh (2015) was interested in examining how geography shapes the organization of social services for marginalized youth. She conducted a case study of a single youth organization that works across rural and urban settings. The diagram that Braimoh created puts the research questions at the centre. She has one central question: ‘What is the relationship between geography and the standardized provision of social services to marginalized youth?’, and three sub-questions. She uses arrows to show that these questions are the ‘hub’ that connects all the other components in the design. The upper part of the diagram concerns the conceptual components. Her research questions are clearly and directly connected to her research problem (how does geography affect a ‘one-stop shop’ model of social services), conceptual model (neighbourhood effects, social capital, etc.), and her analytical framework (comparative). The lower portions are the operational half of the design, specifying how she will collect data and ensure the validity of her results. The broken lines represent the fact that the research design will need to evolve over time. The research questions will remain the hub, and as these are modified, so too will the other components.

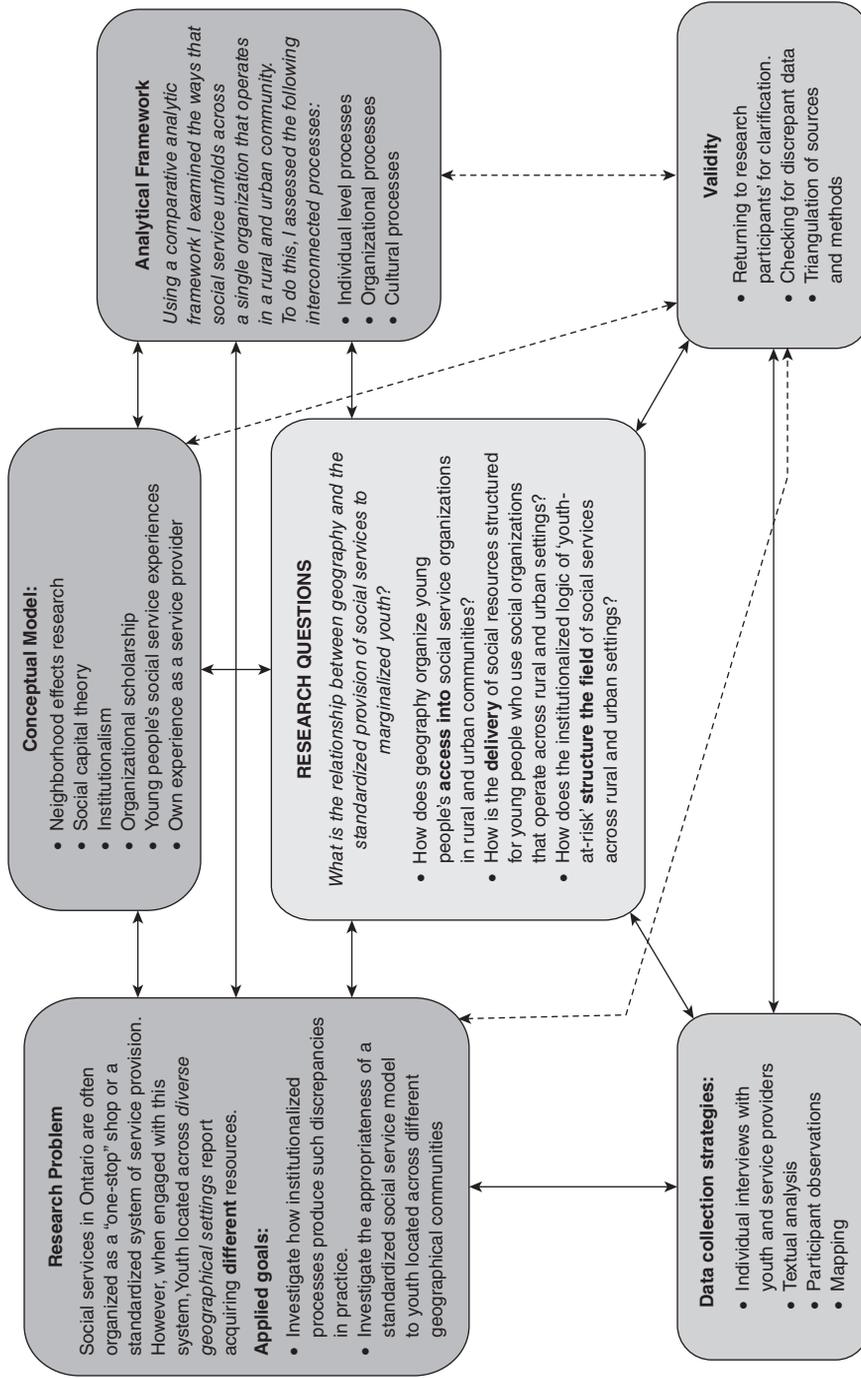


Figure 3.1 A design map of Jessica Braimoh's dissertation research

## STEP 4. 'HOW DO I WRITE A COMPETITIVE AND COMPETENT RESEARCH PROPOSAL?'

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### Key takeaways

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- Research proposals articulate a research plan and convince others of the soundness of that plan.
  - A research proposal is fundamentally about making a good argument to explain and justify the reasons to conduct the research you are planning.
- 

Research proposals serve two primary purposes: 1) they serve as a document in which to articulate a research plan; and 2) they seek to convince others (an audience of experts and non-experts) of the soundness of your plan. Thus, the goal is to communicate and justify the need to study an identified research problem and to articulate the steps in which the research will be conducted. Research proposals offer an extensive literature review that sets up the research problem and provides evidence for the need to conduct the proposed study. In addition to providing a rationale, a proposal describes the methodology in detail and a statement on anticipated outcomes and/or benefits derived from the study's completion.

You should write your proposal for a non-expert audience. An interdisciplinary panel is often assigned to review competitive grant proposals, and successful proposals are the ones that can communicate and justify the research plan to a non-specialist audience. For dissertation proposals, faculty members may have more or less specific knowledge about your area of interest, so the same rule-of-thumb applies about writing for a non-specialist audience.



### Quick tip: Your research proposal must address the following questions

- What will your research accomplish? Explain in clear terms the research problem and what you are proposing.
- What is the reason for conducting this research? This is where you justify what you plan to do. Specifically, your proposal needs to answer the 'So what?' question.
- How are you going to do it? Provide a convincing argument that what you propose is doable.

### Making a good argument

A research proposal is fundamentally about making a good argument to explain and justify the reasons to conduct the research you are planning. Rather than a summary or pure description, a proposal provides the logic behind a research plan. Each part of the proposal

should link to the overall argument. Joseph Maxwell (2013) points out that a good argument is a coherent one. He names two types of coherence that are essential. 1) The proposal itself has to cohere – each point must flow from one to the other and make sense as a whole. To make a convincing argument, you need to understand what you will do and why, demonstrating the connections between different components of your research design. 2) The argument itself has to be coherent, that is it needs to make sense to a general audience. The writing should be clear and precise, and it should avoid unnecessary verbiage and jargon.

## Parts of a research proposal

There are typically several standard parts of a research proposal. One key component is justifying the research, which addresses its purpose and answers the ‘So what?’ question. This is where you make the case as convincingly as possible for your research plan, explaining both short- and long-term interest and value. Here, we build on Joseph Maxwell’s (2013) structural model for writing your proposal (see his Chapter 7 on research proposals for useful outlines and examples).

### Abstract

The abstract offers a roadmap of the study and the arguments you will make in your proposal. The abstract is a good place to begin and end. Your first draft can begin to articulate the arguments that will follow in the proposal. Once you have filled in all the elements of the proposal, you can return to the abstract to revise it into a concise and abbreviated summary of the research plan.

### Introduction

The introduction sets the stage for the research in one to three paragraphs that succinctly answer the following four questions: 1) What is the central research problem? 2) What is the topic of study related to that problem? 3) What methods should be used to analyse this problem? 4) Why is this research important, and why should someone reading the proposal care about the outcomes from the study? Your research questions can be presented in full after you have articulated the conceptual framework. The end of the introduction should also provide an overview of the structure of the rest of the proposal.

### Conceptual framework

This section of your proposal is often called the literature review. Reviewing the literature and existing theory offers an overview of what research has already been done on your topic to date and how your research will contribute to the overall state of knowledge in this area. It provides a justification for the need to conduct further research; that is, for the particular piece of research being proposed. This section also introduces the theoretical framework that informs your study.

The keyword for writing a good literature review is *relevance* (Maxwell, 2013). Each piece of literature or theoretical approach should be relevant to your proposed research. Your proposal should explain how the literature and theories you are using are relevant. How do they inform your research plan and what are the implications for your study? Thus, you will want to incorporate only research and literature that specifically relates to your topic and builds a coherent argument concerning the ‘why’ of the research. If you have conducted a pilot study, this is the place to describe it and explain its implications for your research.

### Research questions

Statement of your research questions is central to the proposal (just as it acts as the hub in a map of the research design, see Figure 3.1). While the research problem is presented in the introduction, the research questions might be better articulated at the end of the conceptual framework work or in a separate section that follows. This is due to the fact that the justification for your research questions may not be clear until after you have mapped out the gaps in the literature and theoretical approach to your research problem. In stating your research questions, you should make sure to articulate how they relate to prior research and theory and to the goals of the research. You should also make clear how these questions relate as a whole. Are there one or two central questions? How do the sub-questions relate to the major ones?

### Research methods

Your methods section should not seek to justify the use of qualitative research methods in general. Rather than going into lengthy discussions about debates over conducting qualitative research, you should focus on and justify the methodological decisions you have made. Here, you explain specific data collection strategies, including addressing the questions of what, where, when, how and about whom data will be collected. Describing the setting or social context is a good strategy to justify your choice of research questions and methods. If you are writing a grant proposal, you will also need to explain what funding you have already received.

Important elements to discuss in your methods sections are as follows. 1) What kind of study is this? Are you conducting a qualitative interview study, a case study, a comparative study? 2) How will you establish your research relationships? This is particularly important to articulate if your research encompasses ethical or methodological challenges. 3) What is the setting? Will people be involved as research participants? If so, how will principles of ethical research conduct with people be upheld? 4) How will you collect the data you need to answer your research questions? Here, you should describe specifically the kinds of observations, interviews or focus groups you will conduct and provide justifications for their use. Maxwell (2013) points out that there are always practical reasons for choosing certain methods, and that you should be candid about this in your methods section. 5) How will you analyse the data you collect? Make sure to articulate in this section how data analysis will help you to answer your research questions. Finally, you should discuss formal ethics approval, and when and how it will be obtained.

## Validity

A section specifically dealing with validity can signal that you are taking this issue seriously. Here, you outline the known limitations and parameters of the study. You should also address how you will ensure trustworthiness (e.g., triangulation of methods, member checking). How will you deal with competing explanations and discrepant data?

## Preliminary results

If you have already started collecting data, you can discuss in a separate section some of your preliminary results. This can be a useful way to justify the feasibility of the research and to clarify your methods.

## Conclusion

Here is the place to summarize the objectives of the research and pull together the main arguments concerning all of the elements you address in the proposal. Summarize the research goals, the contribution, and the study's relevance to broader fields. The conclusion is also a good place to rearticulate the answer to the 'So what?' question.

## References

This section should only give references that were actually cited in the proposal (unless otherwise instructed).

## Appendices

The appendices may include: a timetable for the research; ethics forms and letters of introduction; interview guides or other instruments; a schedule of observations; a description of analysis techniques and software.



### Quick tip: Anticipating and overcoming criticisms

Be ready to answer general questions about **worth**:

- Why is A worth studying?
- How does your question, data or method improve our understanding of A?
- Others have been studying A for many years in X country. How does replicating this study in Y country add to the literature?

Be ready to answer general questions about **appropriateness**:

- Others have used Y method or data for studying A. Why did you select X method or data?
- Others have used Y theory to study A. Why did you select X theory to examine A?
- Researchers define X differently.
- There are other factors that contribute to X.
- Why didn't you consider A or B?

## STEP 5. 'HOW DO I SUCCESSFULLY COLLABORATE WITH NON-ACADEMIC GROUPS?'

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### Key takeaways

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- Partnerships come in all shapes and sizes, ranging from a small community group to multiple groups and institutions.
  - The objectives of this arrangement include practical, contractual, responsive and paradigmatic partnerships.
  - Potential challenges, including difficult gatekeepers, knowledge asymmetry and intellectual property issues, can be mitigated through careful planning, negotiation and formal agreements.
- 

Qualitative research is often portrayed (and experienced) as a 'lone wolf' activity. However, research collaborations are not only available to qualitative researchers but are sometimes strongly advocated by funding agencies and research communities. There are now separate funding envelopes, prizes, awards and international conferences that are dedicated toward three varieties of research partnerships. The first includes collaborating with academics from other departments, countries and different disciplines. Interdisciplinary research is a term frequently used to describe this type of partnership. The second includes Industry and University Research Partnerships (or IURPs), including those with pharmaceutical or high-tech firms. The third, which we concentrate on in this section, is work conducted with non-academics, including community groups (e.g., parent groups), institutions (e.g., schools) and complex organizations (e.g., school boards). Partnerships with non-academic groups come in a variety of forms that vary in their complexity and intentions. Partnerships also span from the partner group providing some 'input' all the way to their full and active involvement throughout the research process (e.g., Participatory Action Research or PAR). In this section, we outline how partnerships with non-academics can be organized and how researchers can anticipate and minimize potential sources of conflict.

### Why partner? Key objectives

Partnerships come in all shapes and sizes. A research partnership may consist of one researcher and a small community group, or a dynamic cast of characters, including researchers from several universities, a variety of government agencies (e.g., state education department, child welfare, police), dozens of partner organizations (e.g., school boards) and thousands of potential participants (e.g., students). The range of potential partners available to researchers is equally broad. Partnerships can include highly complex

institutions such as government agencies, hospitals and corporations all the way to a local community or advocacy group. Groups and organizations may hail from the state, for-profit or non-profit and philanthropic sectors and vary in size, target audience, complexity and mission.

### Practical partnerships

In some cases formal partnerships are necessary to make contact with a group or organization. Partnerships may be required to gain access to documents, records or key informants. They may also generate mutual benefits – you benefit in the form of data for your project or thesis, and they benefit from the generation of usable information or a pre-agreed-upon report.

### Contractual partnerships

A research contract may be initiated from outside academe. A group or organization may contact a researcher and contract him to conduct a particular project (e.g., evaluate a programme).

### Responsive partnerships

The development of a partnership may be in response to a particular group or organizational need. The partnership may be sought out by the group or organization, initiated by an outside party, or known to the researcher. Partnerships may be seen as the optimal method for addressing social, economic, practical or other problems.

### Paradigmatic partnership

Partnerships may be built on a desire to help facilitate social change or provide participants with a stake or voice in the process. Terms to describe this approach include Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR), and Action-oriented Research. All share the belief that partnerships generate research that is more responsive to the issues faced by the group of interest (Small and Uttal, 2005). These approaches subscribe to the belief that ideally the research topic comes from the community or group and is based on the community or group's understandings of what the problem or issue is. These approaches subscribe to a strong social justice ethic aimed at changing or improving a particular condition with rather than for the group of interest.

### Anticipating challenges

There are several considerations that should be anticipated and negotiated before and during the research process. Most of these considerations are generic to research collaborations while others tend to be more endemic to projects that include partnerships with larger organizations and community groups (see Table 3.3 for a summary of the challenges).

**Table 3.3** Key challenges and questions

Gatekeepers	What is the role, positive or negative, of gatekeepers?
Knowledge asymmetry	How do you balance what constitutes 'good' research with the knowledge and methods preferred by the group or community?
Time asymmetry	How does time affect the participation of potential research collaborators?
Decision-making, roles and responsibilities	What is the process of decision-making? Who has right to the intellectual property generated by the research collaboration? How and by whom is the research disseminated?
Professional and cultural norms	What role do professional and cultural norms play?
Intellectual property	Who has rights to the intellectual property or by-products generated by the research project? How will the intellectual property be used?

### Gatekeepers

We will discuss the importance of gatekeepers – key people and informants – in Chapter 6. They can provide access as well as much needed legitimacy with other group members. They may also potentially block access or contain the research process. You may also find yourself with a gatekeeper who offers access, but does so minimally. The gatekeeper may not share your enthusiasm or sense of urgency and may find ways to circumvent your access to information, events or people.

### Knowledge and time asymmetry

The fundamental goal of research partnerships of any sort is to bring together a diversity of perspectives, knowledge and skill-sets. Knowledge asymmetry, however, can generate tensions between researchers and the group. Researchers and non-academics each bring with them a different skill-set. Researchers bring with them knowledge of the literature and a methodological toolkit that is informed by their discipline's standard of 'best practices' or 'good science'. Non-academic members bring with them knowledge of the group's condition that is grounded in their intimate contact with the people and issue at hand. These two skill-sets – one grounded in formal or academic knowledge and the other in local knowledge – are not always aligned.

Time asymmetry may also be an issue. Qualitative projects tend to be very labour intensive. Research partnerships magnify this challenge since it often requires the non-academics involved in the research project to devote some if not all of their time. A project may also require a substantial commitment to participating in training or information sessions in addition to participating in some or all of the research protocol.

### Decision-making, roles and responsibilities

Outlining the authority or decision-making structure of the partnership, the roles each of the partners will play and the type of responsibilities that are tied to each role are

critically important. You cannot assume by virtue of the structure of the partnership (e.g., full partnership) that roles and responsibilities will be obvious to everyone involved, including you. Who designs the project, and what does that role look like? Who handles the ‘dog work’ associated, such as bookkeeping or scheduling, handling the project’s finances and getting supplies? Who is assigned blame if something goes wrong? These are important questions to address before entering a partnership.

### Intellectual property

We often think of intellectual property in the context of high-tech, medical or other hard science disciplines. Yet survey data, field notes, interview transcripts and information generated through consultation with or by group members are also a form of tangible ‘goods’. A key ingredient of a successful partnership will also include determining access to and uses of the intellectual property generated in the context of the research project.

### Professional and cultural norms

Once you are ‘in’, you will start to learn about the professional and cultural norms of the group. As scholars who study organizational behaviour know well, all organizations tend to have a ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ structure. You will likely learn about the formal structure before you enter the group or organization; it includes all the codified systems, policies and rules. However, all groups or organizations have an ‘informal’ structure which includes the norms, behavioural patterns and politics of the group; it includes the unspoken rules about who has status and power in the group, how communication actually works, and notions about how things should get done. These rules may be based on emotions, attitudes, professional socialization and even the history of the organization.

All potential challenges, including difficult gatekeepers, knowledge asymmetry and intellectual property issues, can be mitigated through careful planning, negotiation and formal agreements. It is important to enter partnerships with your eyes open, and to seek open communications and agreements to ensure that problems do not arise that could cause significant delays or difficulties in completing your project.

## CONCLUSION

To design a qualitative study, you cannot simply apply a set of rules or a logical structure and implement them faithfully. Throughout the research process, you will need to design and redesign your strategies for your qualitative project. You must continually move between the different components of the design to assess their interactions and implications. You must continually consider how your design influences and is influenced by the social context in which you are conducting your research. Remaining flexible to change is key to designing a good qualitative project.

**KEY TERMS**

Case Study	Homogenous Sample	Reactivity
Comparative Research	Informed Consent	Research Question
Convenience Sample	Longitudinal Research	Researcher Bias
Criterion Sample	Maximum Variation Sample	Snowball Sample
Degree of Openness	Multiple Methods	Stratified Purposeful Sample
Disconfirming Sample	Negative Cases	Theory-Guided Sample
Discrepant Evidence	Purposeful Random Sample	Triangulation
Extreme Sample	Purposive Sample	Typical Case Sample
		Validity
		Validity Threats