

3

TOPIC, PURPOSE, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Just another day as an outsider looking at life from the inside.

—Venkatesh, 2008, xiv

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- select a site appropriate for addressing a research question of interest to you,
- write a purpose of the research statement related to a topic of interest to you,
- explain the role of research questions in the research process, and
- write a research question that corresponds with the purpose of your research.

One of frustrating sentences that students sometimes hear is, *Pick a topic and write about it.* In response did you think *There are a gazillion topics, but I cannot think of one?* Alternatively, your professor might have assigned the topic. Possibly you were given an essay exam in which your purpose was to justify your position, to summarize your reading, or to answer a question asked by your professor. When conducting field research, you will encounter these same issues—selecting a topic, determining your purpose, and deciding what your research question will be. However, a major difference in the planning stage is that field researchers have to choose the location

to go to get the information needed to complete their paper rather than using sources available at home. In this chapter, I make suggestions for how to go about selecting the topic of your research and location for your fieldwork, determining the specific purpose of your research, and creating research questions. The information in this chapter should be immediately applicable if you are in the early stages of planning your own field research.

RESEARCH TOPIC

An obvious and unavoidable part of designing research is to have a research topic. You will most likely conduct research consistent with a broad area of interest to you, such as criminology, aging, health care, political economy, education, decision making, social media, gender, public relations, tourism, purchasing practices, material culture, immigration, environment, social movements, and so on. However, the examples in this list are far too general for actually executing a particular research study. In fact, if you answer “criminology” when a faculty member asks for the topic of your proposed master’s thesis, the faculty member will conclude that you are miles away from having an idea to propose. Still, knowing what your general interests are gives you a starting point.

An early step in designing your research is to narrow the broad general area of interest to a specific topic, which will continually be refined as the research proceeds. Many iterations of the topic are usually needed, each time making the topic more specific, until the precise purpose of the research and the research question to be answered by the research are determined. You will eventually be in the position to collect data on a small facet of your topic by observing a group of people in a particular place. Table 3.1 is a brief illustration of these points.

You will want to consider many factors as you select a research topic. Smith (1984) suggests you ask questions such as these: *Can you sustain interest in your topic for as long as it takes you to complete it? Will you be able to complete your research in the time you can devote to it?* A project that has to be completed in a quarter or semester means your choices are highly restricted. *Is the project practically possible?* You might want to study the international trading of illegal weapons, but realistically, this is not something you could accomplish at this stage

TABLE 3.1 ■ From broad area of interest to fieldwork

Broad area	Drug addiction
Topic	Social support for people who interact regularly with others addicted to drugs
Purpose	To examine how groups provide support for family members who have children addicted to drugs
Research Question	How do members of a church-sponsored group for parents with teenagers addicted to painkillers provide emotional support to each other?
Fieldwork	One year of observations of and participation in the weekly meetings of the support group sponsored by the Pearisburg United Methodist church for parents who have teenagers addicted to pain killers

in your career. *Is there more than a fair chance that your professor will approve the topic? Is the topic one that could enhance your graduate school application or help you prepare for the ideal job? Do you have a theoretical interest that makes this topic suitable?*

Personal factors can be as important as academic factors. Bourgois (1995) explains some of the motivations for his research topic as follows:

When I first moved to East Harlem—“El Barrio”—as a newlywed in the spring of 1985, I was looking for an inexpensive New York City apartment from which I could write a book on the experience of poverty and ethnic segregation in the heart of one of the most expensive cities in the world. On the level of theory, I was interested in the political economy of inner-city street culture. From a personal, political perspective, I wanted to probe the Achilles heel of the richest industrialized nation in the world by documenting how it imposes racial segregation and economic marginalization on so many of its Latino/a and African-American citizens. (p. 1)

Thus far, I have suggested that you will start with broad concerns and arrive at a place to conduct the field research. In practice, sometimes the chicken comes first and sometimes the egg. A not uncommon experience is to start with a place where you want to conduct your research and then determine a purpose and research questions that will be suitable for engaging in fieldwork in that setting. I agree with Wolcott (2009):

Over time, that reputation for openness to inquiry, to set one’s problem in the course of coming to know a field site, has remained one of the unique characteristics of ethnography. It is still okay to make a decision on the basis of where one will study, rather than having to specify exactly what one intends to study. (p. 21)

Frankly, it doesn’t matter if the chicken or the egg comes first, as long as you eventually have both a chicken and an egg: a specific reason for conducting the research and a place to carry out your research or a group of interest to you. In Table 3.2, Powell explains how she ended up studying energy development in the Navajo Nation.

Examples of projects undertaken by field researchers are shown in Table 3.3. Some of these refer to settings (biosphere), people (wives of athletes), activities (piercing), rituals (consuming the dead), cultures (college bound), organizations (orchestra), processes (becoming a glass blower), and artifacts (medium to create avatars). In this book, I often use the terms *topics*, *settings*, *group*, or *phenomena* as a simple way to represent the larger list of possibilities that include rituals, activities, artifacts, cultures, and so on.

Some of the examples are far-reaching in scope, even international in focus, and are suitable for some Ph.D. candidates or more advanced scholars. If you are assigned an undergraduate research project in a college course in the United States, you are not going to be expected to study a symphony orchestra in Japan or consuming-the-dead rituals in Asante, Ghana. As an undergraduate student, you will be pleased to know that your local community can offer rich resources for a field research project. In my undergraduate courses, students have examined employment at a sewage treatment facility, selecting a pet at an animal shelter, and gendered interactions among members of the university sky divers club. Prior

TABLE 3.2 ■ From activism to a research topic

Powell (2010, pp. 12–13) shares four “arrival stories” about her early interactions with “the Navajo.” Then she describes how she came about to do anthropological research on energy development in the Navajo Nation.

It should now be clear from these arrival stories that I did not come to “the Navajo” by way of anthropology; rather, I came to anthropology by way of my activism with Native communities. This is an important distinction for at least two reasons: first, given the fraught history of anthropology in Native America, opting to work on/with a Native Nation carries a politics of knowledge production and difference that shapes what is possible (knowable and actionable) in many encounters. Second, I formulated my sense of the problem of energy development in the Navaho Nation by way of a collective through my engagement in a diverse, national environmental/social justice movement. That is, I did not formulate the problem from an ethnological or area studies interest or even in ethnography, as a practice. Starting with the problem of energy development on the Navajo Nation rather than “the Navajo” as a population of inquiry, kept my compass set on the shared matter of concern amidst the shifting sands of collaborative engagements.

to committing yourself to conducting research on a specific topic in a particular setting or with a social group, you should consider ethical issues related to your choice.

Ethical issues

One goal of your selection process is to focus on research that is ethically well grounded. Although you cannot predict all of the ethical issues that could possibly arise from your choice of a field research project, you can minimize such problems by asking yourself a series of questions before finalizing where you will conduct your research.

First, can the research you are considering be completed without deception? Deception is tempting if you believe that participants in the setting will change their behavior enough to make the research meaningless. If you think this will be the case, you should select another project in order to avoid slipping into deceptive practices, unless you have been granted a rare exception.

Second, how difficult will it be to keep promises of confidentiality? As discussed earlier, confidentiality issues are complex and particularly problematic for research on illegal, immoral, or unethical behaviors. Virtual field research has more issues related to confidentiality than might be readily apparent.

Third, what are your chances of getting **dirty hands** during your fieldwork by participating in illegal behavior or behavior that is against your own moral standards? You need to be particularly careful about illegal behaviors because engaging in research cannot be used as a legal defense for breaking the law.

Fourth, what are the chances that your research will harm someone in the setting? Even if you maintain confidentiality, can your presence in the setting be distressing to group members? For instance, if you decide to study mothers receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families, would your research interest in them make these mothers feel somehow

TABLE 3.3 ■ Examples of research topics

- the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala (Sundberg, 2004)
- the wives of professional athletes (Ortiz, 2004)
- genital piercing, branding, burning, and cutting (Myers, 1994)
- public school garden space (Sulsberger, 2014)
- online electronic medium to create avatars for virtual worlds (Taylor, 1999)
- two Native American social movement organizations challenging educational practices (Gongaware, 2003)
- pregnant women's under-utilization of clinic-based prenatal services in Mozambique (Chapman, 2003)
- a food bank that distributes food to the needy in southern Canada (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003)
- mechanics of the participatory approach and claims of empowerment within the experience of a non-governmental organization based in Chiapas, Mexico (Mason, 2016)
- online discussions among pedophiles (Durkin, 1996)
- improving teaching practices through action research (Brown, 2002)
- process of becoming a glassblower (O'Connor, 2009)
- consuming-the-dead rituals in Asante, Ghana (Bonsu & DeBerry-Spence, 2008)
- women farmers in central Pennsylvania (Trauger, 2004)
- a symphony orchestra in Soka Gakkai, Japan (McLaughlin, 2003)
- long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail (Siudzinski, 2007)
- perinatal loss support group (Drake, 2010)
- online support groups for people with eating disorders (Walstrom, 2000)
- terrorism trial in the United States (Hess, 2014)
- communication and Pentecostal worship (Coats, 2009)
- college-going culture in an urban high school (Govan, 2011)
- high school wrestlers (Snyder, 2012)
- intercultural wedding message boards (Nelson & Otnes, 2005)
- hip hop artists and the Internet (Przybylski, 2015)
- a bondage/discipline/sadomasochism community (Holt, 2015)
- Venice Beach boardwalk artists (Deener, 2009)
- farmer seed exchange practices (Aistara, 2011)
- character creation in video games for the *Elder Scrolls* series (King, 2014)
- interaction ritual theory and Pittsburgh Steeler fans (Cottingham, 2012)

unfit or different despite your reassurances to the contrary? Might your final paper bring unintended, negative consequences to group members?

Finally, could the project be harmful to your personal safety? Do the responses of others to your race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexuality put you at risk? Simply being an outsider can increase your risk in some situations. For example, Macabuac (2005) elected to conduct her dissertation research in the Philippines. She had already written her proposal and received approval from her committee, but just as she was about to undertake the fieldwork portion of her research, violence in the area she wanted to study increased considerably. Although she is from the Philippines, Macabuac's ethnic status made it unsafe for her to be in the region where she planned to collect her data. With her committee in total agreement, she selected another site, a decision that required modification of her research questions and a delay in her data collection. She made the correct choice. As is often the case when field researchers have to deviate from their original design, the adjustments Macabuac made in her project resulted in an excellent dissertation.

These questions cover just a few of the ethical issues you should ponder as you begin the process of selecting a topic. As with most aspects of field research, there is no complete list of ethical issues to consider—nor is there a rulebook on how to resolve ethical dilemmas in project selection.

At this point in your determination of a research topic, you can now turn your attention to practical issues.

Practicality

There are numerous practical issues to consider in selecting the setting or group appropriate for a research topic. One important issue is time. Field research requires long-term engagement with those being studied. Do you have enough time to commit to a project that interests you? Do you have the flexibility to make observations during different times of day and night? How long fieldwork takes varies greatly from project to project, but be warned that however long you think your particular project will take is probably an underestimation. Keep in mind that even fairly narrowly defined research topics undertaken by seasoned field researchers can take years to complete. Graduate students often need to consider whether their research can be completed before their funding runs out. Undergraduate researchers have less flexible time limits.

Think about your level of commitment to your topic. Are you excited enough about it that you will be willing to play the video game hour after hour for your research when you are no good at it and find it tedious? Are you sufficiently committed to your proposed research that you will visit your site as often as you should, even if you have a long drive with horrible traffic? It is difficult to maintain motivation for research you are excited about and much harder when you feel so-so about it at the beginning.

Consider your interpersonal skills. If you are extremely shy, you might want to avoid settings where interacting with strangers would be a frequent requirement. Field research is not for the fainthearted. Even a place where you have been numerous times can feel alien when you are there to conduct field research. In speaking of her experiences with women sales agents at a car dealership, Lawson (2000) noted that "I felt, much as other

field workers before me, unfamiliar with the social world under investigation and a resulting sense of edginess, uncertainty, discomfort, and anxiety” (p. 135).

Still, you need not always avoid settings in which you might feel ill at ease. Researchers who are not only uncomfortable but also downright miserable in a setting have done wonderful research. Miller (1986), for instance, wrote that overcoming her fear was part of her motivation to continue her research on women involved in crime. However, your ultimate goal is to complete the research, and you simply won't be able to finish it if you end up in a setting that requires more investment in resources than you are willing or able to give.

Insider/Outsider

Whether to undertake research in a familiar place is a common question students ask when they are considering conducting field research. Some researchers are more than just familiar with a setting; they are active members of the group they are studying. These individuals are considered **insiders**, versus **outsiders** who have little or no previous connections to the setting or participants. The distinction between insider and outsider status is somewhat false. For example, someone who started the research as an outsider may become so integrated into the setting that they take on the role of insider, and the insider always has some outsider status by virtue of the dual role as a researcher.

The debate on the relative costs and benefits of insider/outsider status is longstanding. One position is that research in unfamiliar settings might be more fruitful than research conducted in familiar ones because cultural and social events in unfamiliar settings are easier to see (Neuman, 1991, p. 344). Researchers with outsider status might be less biased by their own view and less likely to ignore the perspectives of others if they do not have a history with the group under study.

Another perspective is that being an insider provides a firm foundation on which to build. Those who are familiar with a setting may already have rapport with participants, understand the nuances of language and behavioral expectations, and possess analytic insights into the working of the setting. This was the case with Desmond (2006) who worked as a member of the Elk River Wildland Firefighting crew for 3 years prior to conducting his research. He felt that he had insights that he would not have had otherwise if he have not offered up his “mind and body, day and night, to practices, rituals, and thoughts of the crew” (p. 392).

In some instances, the only person who has a chance of being allowed to conduct research is someone who is already known to the group. This was the case for Hopper and Moore (1994), who studied women in outlaw motorcycle gangs. Prior to their work, women's involvement in motorcycle gangs was virtually ignored. Hopper and Moore's research provided details about the place of women in biker culture, the rituals in which they engage, their role as moneymakers, and their motivations and backgrounds. They were able to conduct this study only because this was a familiar setting. They write,

The main reason we were able to make contacts with bikers was the background of Johnny Moore, who was once a biker himself. During the 1960s, “Big John”



Prior to and during my research about people who lived full time in their RVs and no longer had another home, I spent several months each year traveling in an RV with my husband and our dog Noell. Was I an insider or outsider?

Source: Photograph © William Snizek.

An important contribution to our understanding of women's participation in motorcycle gangs would have been lost had Hopper and Moore followed the advice not to study familiar settings.

Another side in the debate is that treating insider/outsider status as a binary oversimplifies the complexity of the issue. Is it even possible to be exclusively one or the other? Insider/outsider status might be better conceptualized as a continuum—maybe even something multidimensional without the researcher being fixed in any one location. Things become even more complex when you consider whether “sameness” on race, gender, social class, education, sexualities, age, and so on affect your position as an insider or outsider.

I like how Obasi (2014) reflected on this debate during her pilot study for her dissertation about deaf experiences even though she could hear. She writes,

This article draws on the experiences of a black female hearing researcher conducting a PhD pilot study. It reports reflexively on epistemological dilemmas and challenges in conducting the research from both “insider” and “outsider” and “minority” and “majority” positions simultaneously. It demonstrates the ways in which the reflections on these dilemmas and challenges were used to come to the decision to redesign parts of the research in the main study. In so doing, it raises a number of questions that are relevant to current debates on insider/outsider positioning. To what extent and in what ways can hearing researchers contribute to understandings of culturally Deaf experiences? In what ways can “sameness” across “race” and “gender” have an impact on researcher/researched relationships? Can insider experiences in one “othered” group contribute to the understanding of another group from the outside? (pp. 61–62)

My view is that field research can be more exciting if you engage in research in an unfamiliar setting. In fact, I encourage undergraduate students to push themselves to do research in places that are foreign to them. In contrast, I advise graduate students to conduct research in places where questions that are both of theoretical interest to them and substantively important can be answered. Then, throughout the research process, they should reflect on the possible implications of their insider/outsider positioning.

was president of Satan's Dead, an outlaw club on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. He participated in the rituals we describe, and his own experience and observations provided the details of initiation ceremonies that we related. As a former club president, Moore was able to get permission for us to visit biker clubhouses, a rare privilege for outsiders. (p. 391)

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this section is to introduce you to the importance of having a clear statement of the purpose for your research. As I did in this paragraph, consider writing, “The purpose of my research is to _____” as the first sentence of a proposal that you submit to get approval to conduct your research. The purpose statement might not actually be the first sentence; your professor will provide guidance as to where the purpose statement appears in your proposal. However, even if it is not the first sentence, thinking about it this way is a useful exercise. What matters is that you have a purpose for your research and having a purpose statement or something equivalent explicitly stated allows anyone reading your paper to know right away what you plan to do. If you cannot write the sentence, you may not be sure why you are conducting the research, which is not a good thing.

Table 3.4 contains general purposes fairly common among field researchers.

General statements such as these are modified to fit a variety of specific research situations. Table 3.5 provides examples of what purpose statements look like when applied to a particular topic. I selected these examples of purpose statements, primarily from undergraduate papers, master’s theses, and dissertations, to draw your attention to four things: (1) the present infinitive “to” followed in most cases by a verb; (2) page numbers showing that most were from the abstracts or first page, indicating their importance; (3) sentences written in such a way that the researcher takes ownership of the research: “my paper,” and “I”; and (4) the personal impetus for the research. These latter two are not consistent with the style often used in quantitative research but are appropriate for qualitative research and even encouraged.

After the purpose is decided, the more specific and extremely important research questions are derived from and closely linked to the purpose.

TABLE 3.4 ■ General purpose statements

In the first chapter of their book, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) state several general purposes for conducting field research:

- to “document and interpret their distinctive way of life, and the beliefs and values integral to it” (p. 1);
- to understand the “meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts” (p. 3);
- to “investigate some aspect of the lives of the people who are being studied, and this includes finding out how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves” (p. 3); and
- to “describe what happens, how the people involved see and talk about their own actions and those of others, the contexts in which the action takes place, and what follows from it” (p. 7).

TABLE 3.5 ■ Examples of specific purpose of research statements

- “The purpose of this critical ethnography is to explore the support experiences of mothers who participate in the Mommies with Hope support group, a biblically-based perinatal loss support group” (Drake, 2010, p. vi).
- “The purpose of this interpretive ethnography was to understand the experience of pregnant women viewing childbirth preparation videos in childbirth preparation classes” (Gibeau, 2008, p. viii).
- “The purpose of this study is to examine an urban, public high school’s culture in the southeast region of the United States with a high population of African Americans and students living in poverty” (Govan, 2011, p. xi).
- “The purpose of this dissertation study is to: 1) identify how and why FIU civically engages Cuban-American and non-Hispanic Whites at FIU . . .” (González, 2005, p. 1).
- Because of the love for my rescue cat Bruno, I investigated why the animal shelter was so mismanaged, in the hopes that the results might be useful for improving conditions at the shelter (Jung, 2013, p. 1).
- “My primary purpose in conducting this research was to document the factors that led to the university’s restructuring and some of the consequences of this particular action” (Kirk, 2004, p. 2).
- “In particular, this study examines the complexity of care delivery on inpatient care units that have implemented the latest research recommendations regarding safe patient handling” (de Ruiter, 2008, p. iv).
- “In this article, we report on a study that seeks to explore how the contested chronic condition myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), one of the current medical diagnoses for medically unexplained long-term exhaustion, is negotiated within the context of Norwegian internet sites” (Lian & Nettleton, 2015, p. 1383).
- “Drawing on the rich traditions of the sociology of deviance and symbolic interactionism, the specific aims of the inquiry are to . . . explicate how individuals create and maintain boundaries in order to engage in safe play” (Holt, 2015, p. 1).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Some forms of stress relevant to graduate students’ experiences are recognized as such—taking preliminary or comprehensive exams. However, the large amount of anxiety associated with writing research questions is rarely discussed, as if it were some dirty secret. The experience of writing research questions for undergraduates might be even worse because of the lack of in-depth background in a topic area.

Writing research questions is not easy, and having to respond to the question, *What are your research questions?* is nerve-racking if you don’t have them polished—and this might not be the case until you are in the middle of your fieldwork. The major purposes of this section include reducing your stress and helping you develop and clarify your own research questions. Further, it should reassure you that you are not alone; creating research questions is one of the most difficult parts of conducting research (Wolcott, 2008). Still, no need to worry. If everyone else can write them, you can too.

Research is done to answer questions, whether it is one suitable for quantitative research—*What percentage of people in the United States live below the poverty line?*—or one appropriate for qualitative research—*How do definitions of masculinity affect friendships among men?* (Gill, 2008). The research question is the *specific* question that the research is intended to answer. To help you figure out your research question, ask yourself, *What is one specific thing I want to know about my topic?* Complete the following sentence: *I want to know how/what/why _____.* Then rewrite this as a question: *My research question is as follows. How/what/why _____?*

You may want to know everything, but the research question should focus on a fairly small part of what you would like to learn. My experience is that the first, and often the second, third, and fourth, draft of a research question is usually too broad, and my advice is to narrow, narrow, narrow, narrow it so it asks something extremely specific. What seems like too narrow a research question to you at the start is soon to be found more difficult to answer than anticipated.

Another important consideration when deciding on your research questions is whether answering the question is reasonably possible. A general research question such as *In what ways does global capitalism cause poverty?* is not likely to be answered in a semester—or 7 years. In contrast, this question probably is, *How does the closing of a coal mine by Massey Energy Company affect the food bank in the small town of Melville, WV?* The belief that the best dissertation is a done dissertation can help you persevere, but it will take you much longer to get to the done dissertation stage with an unanswerable research question. The same applies to you undergraduate researchers who have more restrictions on the time allowed to complete your research.

A research question prior to starting the research is not a required component of field research, although fairly standard. One of the benefits of field research is that not every aspect of it has to be rigidly planned with no deviations from it. As noted elsewhere, the research questions can be developed while in the field and even changed during the course of the research. Field research allows for flexibility in its execution. In fact, some ethnographers try to avoid having formal, narrowly focused, research questions. Experienced researchers might conduct their fieldwork armed with their expertise in their discipline but not with a research question. However, in some cases, as a student, your chances of getting your research approved by your instructor or your committee, finishing in a timely fashion, and conducting valid research are enhanced when it is guided by a research question from the very beginning.

I personally view research questions so important to the research process that I would feel like I was abdicating my professional responsibility if I did not stress them. For me, research questions are the anchors of the research process, to which all parts are attached. Every aspect of the research should be tightly linked so that one can easily follow the chain that connects the first page of the final document to the last. The research question is the strongest link in the chain and handles most of the load.

Possibly a better way to conceive of the role of the research question is to think of it as the hub of a bicycle wheel to which all the spokes are connected. The spokes are connected to the rim and the rim to the tire. You can ride with a spoke or two missing or even a flat tire for awhile, but without the hub, nothing moves. The research question plays a similar central role.

In my experience, students benefit by seeing models, so I provide a generous serving in Table 3.6 of research questions asked by field researchers.

In this section, I answer some of the frequently asked questions about research questions.

TABLE 3.6 ■ Examples of research questions

- “What is the experience of living with an autistic child, and what does that experience mean?” (Glass, 2001, p. 12)
- “How is practical knowledge in glassblowing achieved?” (O’Connor, 2009, p. 12)
- “How do tourism development, urbanization, and national parks affect Bedouin access to resources on the Gulf of Aqaba?” (Ali, 1998, p. 34)
- “Does the culture at the police academy support the COPS [community-oriented policing] orientation?” (Chappell, 2005, p. 62)
- “How do the students participate in and talk about the garden in their school and home lives?” (Sulsberger, 2014, p. 113)
- “How do definitions of masculinity relate to these friendships and to the men’s everyday lives?” (Gill, 2008, p. 15).
- “How do elders experience their daily life within the physical and social environment of two different types of [adult day services] centers in Taiwan?” (Liou, 2011, p. 8)
- “How do preservice elementary teachers characterize relationships between teacher education program components and how do those characterizations vary or change?” (Spielman, 2006, p. 9)
- “How is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) manifested in the pedagogical perspectives and practices of five African American women educators during their 1st year of teaching?” (Dunbar, 2009, p. 11)

What Are Research Questions?

To answer the question *What is a research question?*, I repeat some of what is said above. Of all the possible questions that could be asked about a particular topic, the research question is the specific question that the researcher wants answered. In effect, in selecting the research question, the researcher is saying, *This is the most important thing I want to know by the completion of my research.* The research is then designed to get an answer to a related question. Therefore, all parts of the research have to be connected to the question—the topic, purpose, ethical stance, theory, literature review, data collection, analysis, results, and final document. Repeatedly check to be sure that is the case.

What Is the Structure of a Research Question?

Research questions often start with “how” or “what.” They are rarely stated in a way that could be answered “yes” or “no” or by anything other than a narrative.

What accounts for _____?

What are the mechanisms that _____?

How are _____?

In what ways do _____?

Why are _____?

What Level of Abstraction Should Research Questions Be?

The level of abstraction for research questions varies. Sometimes research questions include theoretical concepts; other times, they are more concrete.

1. What are the performative elements and nondiscursive practices that men use to express hegemonic masculinity in light of gender inequalities in the labor force?
2. How do men reaffirm their masculinity when working in a female-dominated occupation? (LoMascolo, 2008).

Either of these is fine in the right circumstances. However, an easily understood question is preferred to one that is opaque, regardless of the level of abstraction.

How Many Research Questions Should I Have?

For an undergraduate paper, one or two research questions is probably sufficient. For a thesis or a dissertation, two to four is not atypical, but one is still okay. Although sub-research questions can be created, do not use these as a way to sneak in four or five more research questions.

If you find yourself writing research question after research question, you may have drifted into interview questions. Research questions are not the same as interview questions—although there should be a close correspondence between the two sets of questions. Interview questions are what you are going to ask study participants so that you can answer your research questions. Interview questions are typically even more narrowly focused than research questions.

Where Do Research Questions Belong in My Final Paper?

In proposals, I like to see research questions introduced early in the document—a somewhat arbitrary number is within the first two pages for undergraduates and not much further for graduate students. Where they are introduced in the final document is more variable—in the first chapter or possibly not until the methods section. Your instructor will indicate their preferences for both the proposal and final paper. Regardless of where you first state them, you will repeat them many times throughout the final document.

May I Change My Research Questions?

Researchers sometimes change their research questions as their studies progress. Bourgois (1995) found the focus of his research in East Harlem (“El Barrio”) changing from the entire underground economy in the area to a focus on crack, a drug that he did not know about before 1985, when he began his 5-year study (p. 1). He did not abandon his interest in the underground economy, but rather modified his questions by considerably narrowing their focus.

Keep in touch with your professor and possibly the Institutional Review Board (IRB), if you decide to change your research questions. Given the centrality of research questions, changing them is nontrivial. However, being able to revise your purpose, research questions, data collection strategy, and so on as you proceed is an advantage of field research over many other research designs. Making a research question narrower as you proceed can be a good strategy; not having one at all is not.

When in the Process Do I Write the Research Question?

The earlier you have a research question, the easier it is to design and execute your research in a way that all parts are linked. You are more likely to collect useful data right away than if you are not sure what your focus should be. However, as long as you eventually have one, when you developed it might not affect the quality of your research, but may well make completing your research considerably more difficult. Not having one at the onset of your research is high risk because getting approval for conducting the research will be harder to get without at least one research question being proposed.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The following example should further your understanding of how research can move from a broad topic to narrower research questions. This example is derived from Venkatesh's (2008) research that focused on the underground economy of the urban poor.

Step 1: State the broad area of interest.

I had a burgeoning interest in young people, especially those at the margin.

Step 2: Pick a topic with a narrower focus than the broad area of interest.

I was particularly curious about the economic activities of the local gangs.

Step 3: State the purpose of the research.

I hope to understand why young people choose this risky path.

Step 4: Write research questions that are even more specific than the purpose but are closely linked.

I was interested in one small part of this history—namely,

- *how the organization came to develop and manage its lucrative drug-trafficking enterprise;*
- *how they invested, saved, and spent the money they earned;*
- *how a gang dealt with all the conflicts and problems that arise while running a business that was entirely illegal.*

CONCLUSIONS

“Broad to narrow” is one of the key phrases to remember as you start your research. You begin with a broad interest in some topic, then decide upon a more limited purpose, and finally arrive at a narrow, specific research question. I cannot overstate the importance of having good research questions because all parts of your research need to be linked to questions that your research is designed to answer. When faced with a decision about how to proceed, asking yourself, *How does this relate to my research question?* will help guide you to the next step.

You might be thinking that you are now ready to go forth and collect data. Alas, considerably more work, as explained in the next two chapters, has to be done before the fieldwork portion of the research begins.

Chapter Highlights

- Planning research often begins with a general topic of interest, and then the purpose of the research that frames the research is determined.
- Myriad ethical and practical issues should be factored into the decision-making process about what to study.
- Researchers can be insiders who are familiar with the research setting and group or outsiders who are unfamiliar.
- Research questions are the specific questions that the researcher wants answered by the completion of the research.
- All the parts of the research process, from the purpose of the research to the final document, have to be closely related.

Exercises

1. Imagine that you have been asked by your instructor to make a one-page, double-spaced handout about creating and using research questions. It should primarily be a bulleted list, although you might need to add some elaboration. The handout should be designed for someone who is about to conduct research but knows almost nothing about research questions. You can use some information from this book, but you will need three other sources. You can easily find lots of useful guidance for writing research questions through an online search. Remember to cite all your sources; you can have multiple sources for the same point. Only include information that pertains to field research or qualitative research more generally. Use quotes sparingly. Depending

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upon the information you are finding, you might want to organize your handout into sections. Be creative.

2. List two general areas of interest to you and two narrower topics related to each. Write a purpose statement for each topic and two research questions related to each purpose that could be answered by conducting field research.
3. Give two examples of research you could do as an insider. Explain what you see as the pros and cons of insider research for each.
4. Start planning your research by selecting a topic and writing a purpose and a research question. This should be for research that you might want to actually conduct. Explain why you are interested in this topic and question.

Online and Recommended Reading

Online at study.sagepub.com/Bailey3e

Labaree, R. (2002). The risk of 'going observationalist': Negotiating the hidden dilemmas of being an insider participant observer. *Qualitative Research*, 2, 97–122.

Sandberg, J., & Alvesson, M. (2011). Ways of constructing research questions: Gap-spotting or problematization? *Organization*, 18, 23–44.

Stamler, L. (2002). Developing and refining the research question: Step 1 in the research process. *The Diabetes Educator*, 28, 958–962.

Recommended Additional Reading

Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2013). *Constructing research questions: Doing interesting research*. London, England: Sage Publications Ltd.

Dwyer, S., & Buckle, J. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8, 54–63.

Koro-Ljungberg, M., & Hayes, S. (2010). Proposing an argument for research questions that could create permeable boundaries within qualitative research. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 4, 114–124.

Mantzoukas, S. (2008). Facilitating research students in formulating qualitative research questions. *Nurse Education Today*, 28, 371–377.