

Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process

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The reflective and interrogative processes required for developing effective qualitative research questions can give shape and direction to a study in ways that are often underestimated. Good research questions do not necessarily produce good research, but poorly conceived or constructed questions will likely create problems that affect all subsequent stages of a study. In qualitative studies, the ongoing process of questioning is an integral part of understanding the unfolding lives and perspectives of others. This article addresses both the development of initial research questions and how the processes of generating and refining questions are critical to the shaping of a qualitative study.

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Many qualitative researchers see a question as a beginning point for their research. Once a satisfactory question is in place, a study can begin. A research question does fulfill this function, but I propose here that much more is involved in creating and using research questions in qualitative studies. The reflective and interrogative processes required for developing research questions can give shape and direction to a study in ways that are often underestimated.

Good questions do not necessarily produce good research, but poorly conceived or constructed questions will likely create problems that affect all subsequent stages of a study. Ultimately, the quality of the initial questions impacts whether or not a study is approved by a dissertation committee, published, or funded. This article addresses both the development of initial research questions and how the processes of generating and refining questions are critical to the shaping all phases of a qualitative study the inquiry process.

The idea of qualitative inquiry as a reflective process underscores the strengths of a qualitative approach. At the heart of this approach are methods for representing what Geertz (1973, 10) called the ‘microscopic’ details of the social and cultural aspects of individuals’ lives. He described the central task of the ethnographer in his well-known discussion on the myriad interpretations of a human wink. He noted that it is not enough to describe a wink and label it as a behavior. Rather, ‘the thing to ask’ about human behaviors is ‘what their import is’ (Geertz 1973, 10). The researcher’s credibility rests, according to Geertz, on the specifics of a place and the people who inhabit that place at a given moment, an issue addressed by Maxwell (2005), Patton (2002), and others. Thus, the researcher’s worth is characterized by ‘the degree to which he is

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able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these?’ (Geertz 1973, 16). Qualitative inquiries involve asking the kinds of questions that focus on the why and how of human interactions.

Qualitative research questions, then, need to articulate what a researcher wants to know about the intentions and perspectives of those involved in social interactions. Strauss (1987/1990, 6) noted that the traditions from which qualitative inquiry sprang ‘placed social interaction and social processes at the center’ of this approach. He highlighted the purpose for qualitative inquiry (as developed by the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago) which ‘from its inception emphasized the necessity for grasping the actors’ viewpoints for understanding interaction, process, and social change’ (Strauss 1987/1990, 6). In qualitative studies, then, the ongoing process of questioning is an integral part of understanding the unfolding lives and perspectives of others. Creswell (2007, 43) noted that ‘Our questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem,’ a point also addressed by Charmaz (2006) as a central part of using grounded theory. However, changes in questions should also emerge from researchers’ capacities to examine their own roles and perspectives in the inquiry process, especially how they are positioned in relation to participants.

More recent qualitative inquiry has moved toward involving the researcher and participants in the process of inquiry (e.g., Flick 2006; Lassiter 2005; Maxwell 2005). Participants are sometimes invited to collaborate on the formulation of research questions, especially in participatory action research. Stringer (2007, 11) argued that ‘All stakeholders – those whose lives are affected by the problem under study – should be engaged in the processes of investigation.’ Given these developments in qualitative research, I focus on the development of questions as part of a larger *interactive* process wherein the primary premises of qualitative inquiry are more fully realized.

Good qualitative questions are usually developed or refined in all stages of a reflexive and interactive inquiry journey. Flick (2006, 105) noted that ‘reflecting on and reformulating the research questions are central points of reference for assessing the appropriateness of the decisions you take at several points.’ To extend the journey metaphor, it is helpful to think of research questions as navigational tools that can help a researcher map possible directions but also to inquire about the unexpected.

Below, I address ways of conceptualizing, developing, and writing research questions for a qualitative study. I realize that, within the scope of a single article, it is not possible to tackle all aspects of question development, but I felt it would be helpful, after working with doctoral students and reviewing journal articles, books, and conference proposals over the years to address this topic. I begin with the conceptualization of qualitative questions and how they evolve during different stages of a study. Then I describe some of the characteristics of good questions. I end with suggestions for writing effective questions and situating them in a paper or a dissertation.

The process of developing questions

Some qualitative researchers, especially those who write about grounded theory, recommend waiting until one is in the field and collecting data to fully develop research questions. In many situations, though, waiting is not an option. Charmaz

(2006, 154) pointed out the realities that confront many novice researchers: 'The emergent character of grounded theory may conflict with class report or dissertation requirements.' A qualitative study does not begin with a hypothesis or a presumed outcome as is the case in a quantitative study. However, as Richards (2005) noted, a qualitative study cannot begin without a plan. She argued that such an approach would be 'unacceptable for both ethical and practical reasons' (Richards 2005, 14). Because most researchers do need at least some initial questions for dissertations and funded project proposals, I address those who need to develop questions early on as part of designing a qualitative study. However, I want to emphasize that these initial questions are only a beginning point in the inquiry process. As Creswell (2007, 107) noted, qualitative questions are 'evolving.' First iterations of questions are tentative and exploratory but give researchers a tool for articulating the primary focus of the study.

Beginning the process

Researchers often begin thinking about a study long before they draft their first research questions. For Janesick (2000, 382), qualitative research begins with 'a question, or at least an intellectual curiosity if not a passion for a particular topic.' Certainly this statement will ring true for most researchers. I often find ideas for studies bubbling up as I read and teach and now keep an 'Idea File' on my computer. Most of the doctoral students I work with begin thinking about a study based on a deep interest in a topic they have already begun exploring.

Good questions can grow out of initial curiosity or ideas for a qualitative study, but at the early stages most questions are rough drafts. Janesick (2000, 382) suggests beginning with a self-question: 'What do I want to know in this study?' Even those using grounded theory have some broad questions after entering a potential research site. Charmaz (2006, 20) suggests that broad questions such as 'What's going on here?'; 'What are the basic social processes?'; and 'What are the basic social psychological processes?' can serve to help a researcher find some initial focus. Maxwell (2005, 65) called these early questions 'provisional,' but noted that even these early iterations are already determining decisions about theory and methods. These initial questions can be conceptualized as generative: they may invite a series of more specific questions that help to create the focus needed to move forward with data collection.

One of the problems that novice researchers may find challenging is framing a *qualitative* question that not only inquires about phenomena, understanding, or perceptions, but also signals the relevance of the study to a field or discipline. Flick (2006, 109) described qualitative research questions as those that are 'describing states and those describing processes.' However, most qualitative questions are also linked implicitly to a specific field of study. Patton (2002, 216) offered a typology of the kinds of disciplinary questions that often shape more specific questions in a discipline. For example, anthropologists may ask questions such as 'What is the nature of culture?' or 'What are the functions of culture?' Others have offered constructs for question types that help a researcher think about the kind of study they are doing and what purpose the researcher has. For example, Marshall and Rossman (2006) described questions that perform four different functions: exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, and emancipatory. I doubt that many researchers begin with these typologies in mind, but it is helpful perhaps to use these typologies to think about potential

directions that a study might take and about the relevance of a study to a particular discipline.

Most qualitative researchers need specific questions for a proposal. Creating one or two broad questions can be a fertile starting point for thinking through the specifics of what the study is about and what data will need to be collected. Maxwell (2005, 67) observed that ‘precisely framed research questions ... can point you to specific areas of theory that you can use as modules in developing an understanding of what’s going on, and suggest ways to do the study.’ For example, a researcher in the field of social welfare might want to know if child welfare workers suffer from secondary post-traumatic stress as a result of their work with neglected or abused children. An initial question might be simply framed: Do child welfare workers suffer from secondary post-traumatic stress? This broad question is already giving some focus to the study and is clearly relevant to the field of social welfare. However, the phrasing of this question is problematic as it could be answered with a yes or no and does not suggest a qualitative approach. Good qualitative questions should invite a process of exploration and discovery, as Creswell (2007) suggests. Initial provisional questions can become more focused; however, with a question like the one above, movement forward later in the inquiry process is constrained. Maxwell (2005, 67) also cautioned that starting with questions that are too focused can lead to ‘tunnel vision’ and can inhibit a researcher’s understanding and analysis. Creating discovery-oriented questions can help a researcher use the process of developing and refining questions as a basis for a more rigorous and reflexive inquiry.

With a qualitative study, a researcher is inquiring about such topics as how people are experiencing an event, a series of events, and/or a condition. The questions generally seek to uncover the perspectives of an individual, a group, or different groups. Most qualitative studies need to be focused on the particularities of the local and on the ‘thick description’ of human interactions in that context (Geertz 1973, 6). With those characteristics in mind, a question needs to move the researcher toward discovering what is happening in a *particular* situation with a *particular* person or group. A good example of this kind of question is one that Janesick (2000, 383) created as her overarching question for a study on deaf adults: ‘How do deaf adults manage to succeed academically and in the workplace given the stigma of deafness in our society?’ This question, as she noted, guided her methods and suggested a critical theoretical framework for her study – the cultural stigma of deafness in the USA. However, she also focuses on two specific contexts, academia and workplaces, in which this stigma affects human interactions.

Sometimes, it is necessary to bring others into the development of first iterations of questions. For a doctoral student, decisions about initial questions are often made with an advisor and/or a dissertation committee. For those engaging in evaluation studies, and also perhaps in ethnographic studies, it may be important to collaborate with a funding agency or with the group under study to see what questions they feel are important to answer. The direction and the scope of the questions may be critical to designing an effective study and to collecting data that the stakeholders find acceptable and meaningful.

Creating an overarching question to guide the inquiry process

Developing an overarching question, as Janesick (2000) did, has advantages for the researcher. A broadly framed question can serve as a basis for initial and emerging

sub-questions. A single overarching question allows a researcher to capture the basic goals of the study in one major question. A clearly stated overarching question can give direction for the study design and collection of data and offer potential for developing new, more specific questions during data collection and analysis.

Sometimes, these broader research questions are not stated as questions but rather as goals for the study. In a study of working class high school girls, Hartman (2006, 82) began her article with the following statement:

This ethnographic study focuses on a group of academically successful working class girls and their uses of literacy in high school English class. Specifically, I examined these girls' classroom literacy in the context of gender and class identities, looking at how their gendered and class identities influenced their uses of literacy and how these girls used texts from English class to construct their gender and class.

This statement identified her overarching focus of inquiry and could be converted to a question format, but for the article, stating her purpose for the inquiry works just as well.

Prindeville (2003) used a similar approach in her article on the role of race, ethnicity, and gender on women who are activists or political leaders. She began her paper with a statement that incorporates several elements that could be stated as questions, but with this opening paragraph, she was able to describe the focus and purpose of the study as well as her theoretical frames:

This article examines the role that race/ethnicity and gender play in the politics of 50 American Indian and Hispanic women public officials and grassroots activists in New Mexico. Incorporation of both formal/electoral and informal/grassroots leaders into one study provides valuable opportunities for comparison and contrast among women in politics working in a variety of circumstances toward the generally similar goals of empowering others to participate in public life and representing marginalized groups' interests. This study of Native women and Latinas in both governmental institutions and grassroots organizations focuses on the influence of race/ethnicity and gender identity on their political ideologies and motives for activism. (Prindeville 2003, 591)

Although this approach offers some of the same information as a series of questions might, some people prefer questions because they can offer more clearly defined goals for the study and better guide data collection. One potential problem with the statement above is that the second sentence offers the implicit idea that all women in politics are working 'toward the generally similar goals of empowering others to participate in public life and representing marginalized groups' interests' (Prindeville 2003, 591). If cast as a question, such a statement might more clearly be recognized interpreted as a 'leading' question, one where the author is presupposing a condition rather than being open to what she might discover in conducting interviews with her participants. In this instance, as is common in critical studies, the researcher is working from a set of assumptions that are linked to a critical theoretical position on gender and power. I will address these kinds of presuppositions later in the article when describing effective questions.

Developing sub-questions and new questions during a study

An initial generative question can set the stage for developing related sub-questions. Sub-questions can take many forms, depending on the focus of the overarching

question. Creswell (2007, 109–110), drawing on Stake (1995), described ‘issue’ and ‘procedural’ sub-questions, although some questions may cut across these categories. Both types of sub-questions emerge from an overarching question and ask about the specifics of a topic/issue or a phenomenon. Rubenstein-Avila (2007) used her initial question on a single case study of a young woman from the Dominican Republic who moved to the USA to set up two related sub-questions. Her first question – ‘What counts as literacy for a young Dominican immigrant woman as she makes the transition into high school in the USA?’ – led to two sub-questions: ‘In what ways do her emerging transnational experiences affect her expanding repertoire of literacy practices?’ and ‘What role does school play in the development of the literacy practices that count across institutions of higher education in an era of globalization?’ (Rubenstein-Avila 2007, 572). These sub-questions narrow the broader focus of the overarching question. While allowing for discovery, they also give direction to the particular kinds of data she would need to collect: data on this participant’s transnational experiences from her perspective and data on school policies that affect literacy practices in a global society.

The development of new questions, especially sub-questions, often occurs during the inquiry process, sometimes during data collection and analysis. A researcher may find that the initial focus of the research question is too limited to fully address the phenomenon under study. The addition of new questions is especially necessary in ethnographic studies or longitudinal studies where the research is evolving over months or even years. As I collected data in a three-year study of an African-American preservice teacher (Agee 2004, 749), I discovered that I needed to add questions.

As I observed Tina’s struggles, my research questions changed. Initially I was interested in preservice teachers’ perspectives on reading and teaching literature. However, as I continued to work with Tina during her first two years in the classroom, I focused on a second question: How is Tina, as an African American teacher who ended up teaching in a suburban school, able to develop her teaching identity in her first 2 years of teaching? Tina’s experiences also prompted larger questions: How do national and state policies that shape standards and assessments influence teacher identity formation, especially for teachers who want to use more diverse texts and approaches? Are teacher education programs unintentionally maintaining a White, Euro-American hegemony with discourse that makes teachers of color and their perspectives on curriculum invisible?

These subsequent questions ended up reshaping my data collection and my analyses.

Sometimes researchers construct a series of questions that flow from one another, with the possibility that additional questions may be added as data is collected. In a study of the dialogic lives of actors from two countries, Linden and Cermak (2007) use this questioning technique to examine particular intersections of culture with the personal and professional lives of professional actors in the two countries. They begin with a series of related questions that reveal the complexities of these actors’ experiences in personal and professional contexts:

What does contextual knowledge of working life represent under conditions in which the social setting at the place of work is regarded as a subculture in which norms, traditions and rituals are created? What processes are involved in actors’ creating meanings that are important for their experiencing professional fulfillment and how is this related to their life experiences in general? (Linden and Cermak 2007, 48)

The focus of these questions helped the researchers develop a variety of protocols, from personal and group diaries to interviews, to collect the kinds of data that would reveal the actors' perspectives on their personal and professional lives. Their questions grew out of the hermeneutic framework that they used to highlight critical moments in the actors' lives. They offer the potential for exploration of a rich nexus of social and cultural issues that deeply affect these participants.

Theory and questions: a dialogic process

Theory is inextricably linked to research questions, whether the theory is shaping them initially or suggesting new questions as the study unfolds. An overarching question for many qualitative studies will point toward one or more of the theoretical constructs that frame the study. As Maxwell (2005, 68) explained, research questions need to account for one's 'tentative theories about ... phenomena.' Those tentative theories and the questions that result from them may very well change to accommodate data collection or preliminary findings. Often, when doctoral students write a proposal, they are drawn to grand theories as a beginning point. For example, a researcher may be drawn to social justice issues and therefore choose a critical theory framework, writ large, in the initial stages. As the design develops, the researcher may decide to focus on questions about a particular aspect of a social context, such as social interactions. At this point, the theory might be narrowed to discourse analysis, and research questions about discourse and the positioning of individuals in a discourse would follow.

Theoretical framing evolves and changes during most studies and may also inspire additional questions as a researcher collects data. Karpiak (2006, 86), for example, had begun her study of middle-aged social workers with three questions: 'What happens to these professionals in their work, their personal relationships, and their sense of self during the mid-life transition? How do they manage the changes and transitions during this period? Finally, for those for whom this period has ushered in major changes, what events triggered them?' After she was immersed in collecting her data, she found chaos theory revealed other dimensions of the participants' life changes that she had not originally considered: 'Through the lens of this theory, I could see the possibilities for human evolution that may follow from disorder, turbulence, chaos, and crisis' (Karpiak 2006, 105). Karpiak's turn to Chaos Theory helped generate new questions on how middle-aged people handle life situations beyond their control.

Some researchers, such as Yin (1994), propose that a theoretical framework should inform the research questions for case study research as the theory will help to define the selection and parameters of cases. As researchers design a study and protocols, theory often shapes the methods in explicit ways. For many researchers, selecting a theoretical framework not only shapes the questions but also connects the research to a particular field. In a reflective piece on some earlier research, Merriam (2006) explained how she and her colleagues used the transformation learning theory of Mezirow (1990) in developing a study of HIV-positive young adults. She described the role of theory in all aspects of the study: 'Our interest in the framework of transformational learning drove all aspects of our study from identifying the focus of our investigation, to sample selection, to interpretation of our data' (Merriam 2006, 26). The research question Merriam et al. developed emerged from theory and guided them to select a particular group of participants: 'Having selected a sample of HIV-positive

young adults, we wanted to explore how they made sense of this catastrophic news; that is, how does a young adult make meaning of this threat to his or her existence?' (Merriam 2006, 27). This question reflected Mezirow's ideas about a process of learning that leads, through a meaning-making process, to transformations in thought and action in the lives of individuals. Merriam et al. also pointed out the relevance of Mezirow's theory to the field of adult learning, so they were making connections between this study and this particular field.

Questions can point to theory explicitly or implicitly. For example, Patchen (2006) conducted an ethnographic study on Latina/Latino high school students' participation in classroom discussions. Her questions offer explicit links to several theories. She asked:

- (1) How do the ways in which adolescent Latinas/Latinos conceptualize classroom participation processes shape active oral participation?
- (2) How do girls and boys understand the relationship of gender to participation?
- (3) What, if any, are the mitigating factors influencing classroom participation? (Patchen 2006, 2054)

Her first and third questions point to discourse theory, and her second question more specifically to theories on the role of gender in discussions. Her questions also connected her theoretical frameworks to her methods and guided her analyses. Her explicit connections to these theoretical constructs helped focus her inquiry but at the same time anticipated discoveries about these students' conceptions.

In some cases, research questions offer more implicit links to theory. In a study on the online journaling of two adolescent girls, Guzzetti and Gamboa (2005, 169) used the following questions:

- (1) What is the new literacy practice of online journaling?
- (2) How do two focal students use online journaling to form and represent their identities?
- (3) For these two students, what are the engaging and appealing aspects of online journaling that might inform instructional practice in their language arts classrooms?

The first question seeks to define the phenomenon as a literacy practice and to establish a link with theories on writing. The second question points to identity theory as a framework for examining the appeal of online journaling. The third question seeks to identify what aspects of this literacy practice are engaging for these students and could lead to theories on motivation or engagement. However, the third question is problematic. It is presuming implications for the study – that journaling is engaging and that this practice has the potential to inform practice – and is out of place as a research question. The main point to remember is that qualitative questions should embrace theory, either explicitly or implicitly as a way of giving direction and framing particular ideas. Theory also serves as a conceptual tool that can move an inquiry forward toward deeper levels of understanding.

Ideally, the inquiry process should not only include possibilities for discoveries that may lead to new theory and questions, as was the case for Merriam et al., and for developing new theories and questions that may emerge from analyses of data but also possibilities for ongoing reflexivity about one's own theories or world view. Creswell

(2007, 42) noted that a qualitative study begins with ‘the broad assumptions central to qualitative inquiry, a worldview consistent with it, and in many cases, a theoretical lens that shapes the study.’ One’s worldview often determines an initial choice of theory. As Flick (2006, 106) observed, research questions usually originate with ‘the researchers’ personal biographies and their social contexts.’ I find many students are in love with a particular theory even before shaping their questions, and it is likely that their own life experiences have played a role in their choice. However, the process of qualitative inquiry should invite the possibility for questioning personal theories and for expanding or modifying the original conceptual framework and research questions.

Reflexivity and ethical considerations in developing questions

Part of the process of developing questions in qualitative research is being reflective about how the questions will affect participants’ lives and how the questions will position the researcher in relation to participants. This ethical aspect of question development is often ignored, but is a central issue when a researcher proposes to study the lives of others, especially marginalized populations. As Flick (2006) noted, qualitative studies can reveal how people experience and think about events and social relations, so a qualitative question needs to be developed to take advantage of the unique capabilities of qualitative research. At the same time, because the researcher is representing the lives of individuals, the kinds of questions a researcher is asking become paramount when considering the short- and long-term effects on others.

Ethnographers have, for the last three decades, called for more attention to issues in representing the lives of others (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rosaldo 1989). This concern with the representation of others by recent scholars in ethnography grew out of works such as Said’s (1979) landmark book *Orientalism*. Said examined the conceptions and power structures informing stereotypes of other cultures included in the term ‘Oriental.’ In his conclusions, he offered these thoughts on representation:

Modern thought and experience have taught us to be sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying the Other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas, in the socio-political role of intellectuals, in the great value of a skeptical critical consciousness. Perhaps if we remember that the study of human experience usually has an ethical, to say nothing of a political, consequence in either the best or the worst sense, we will not be indifferent to what we do as scholars. (Said 1979, 327)

In earlier debates on representation by ethnographers (see Roth et al. 1989), researchers took on the problem of representation as an ethical issue. More recently, ethnographers have moved toward studies that are reciprocal (Lawless 2000) or collaborative (Lassiter 2005) where a researcher works with participants as co-researchers to co-create representations. Such collaborative efforts often change the nature of research questions. Lassiter, for example, following the advice of Spradley and McCurdy (1972), turned to those he was interested in working with in his research – the Kiowa tribe – to discover what was important in their lives from their perspectives.

Concern with ethics has been central in narrative and life history studies. In a review of scholarship on narrative ethics, Adams (2008, 179) found that ‘working with ethics involves realizing that we do not know how others will respond to and/or

interpret our work.' Importantly, he also asked, 'What questions can we use to probe authors and stories to uncover their 'ethical dimensions'?' Taken to an extreme, Adams (2008, 184) admitted that concerns about ethics can paralyze a researcher: 'Will I silence myself worrying about harming *them*?' He concluded, 'We can never definitively know how others interpret our work nor can we ever definitively know who we harm and help with our life stories.' Consideration of ethical issues begins in the process of reflection and is carried forward into formulating questions, designing a study, and writing it up for publication. The best practice is to engage in 'meaningful conversations about life writing' (Adams 2008, 188). These conversations should certainly begin during the formulation of research questions, but they can continue to take place during and after the completion of the inquiry process.

It is important to remember developing good research questions requires understanding that inquiries into other people's lives are *always* an exercise in ethics. Institutional review boards at universities routinely ask researchers who are proposing a study to state the level of risk to the participants. Assessing risk when formulating questions is often particularly difficult for new researchers. A former doctoral student who was chairing her department in a high school wanted to study how well the teachers in her department were implementing a new initiative she had developed. Not only did her committee not approve the study but the institutional review board also denied the student approval on the grounds that the proposed study could jeopardize these teachers' jobs and professional lives due to issues of authority and coercion.

In another instance, one doctoral student wanted to study her colleagues to see how they felt about implementing new teaching strategies that her school was implementing. In my discussion with this student, it was clear that she had not thought about the possible consequences to her colleagues and how her future professional relationship with them might be damaged by asking this question. She decided to change the focus of her study.

Well-crafted qualitative research questions *can* address sensitive topics and pursue issues that are of importance to a field of study. Wood (2006) described the ethical challenges she faced in conducting field research in El Salvador during the civil war. She was examining the perspectives of Salvadorans from a range of socioeconomic situations on the conflict. She made the point that in such sensitive and dangerous contexts, where people's lives may be threatened by participation in a study, that the context should determine the research and 'some settings where research cannot be ethically conducted and should not be attempted or should be curtailed' (Wood 2006, 374). Wood also practiced the kind of interactive, reflective thinking that goes into developing and carrying out a qualitative study.

Although most researchers pursue less challenging studies, ethical issues can arise when researchers presume they are asking innocuous questions and subsequently develop protocols (to obtain data to answer the question) that participants find offensive or uncomfortable. In other instances, a researcher realizes that the initial questions are complicated by his/her own positioning in relation to participants. Positioning can be especially complicated when researchers are working with special populations such as children. Huber and Clandenin (2002), in a study of a diverse classroom of elementary school children and their experiences in school, encountered unanticipated issues about their positions as researchers when a new student, Melissa, entered the classroom. Melissa questioned the presence of the researchers, these other adults, and how they were positioned in relation to her and to the other adults in her

classroom. After their encounter with Melissa, Huber and Clandenin (2002, 787) found themselves asking new questions:

Our reflections on Melissa's statement awakened us to deeper thinking about how we storied the children as well as how the children storied us. How were we imagining the children's positioning in this inquiry? How were they positioning us? How might Melissa's story of children as teachers be lived out in a relational narrative inquiry? How did we imagine children were to be co-researchers in a relational narrative inquiry?

Developing qualitative research questions should include careful thought about how the direction of the inquiry will position the researcher in relation to participants and what the implications are for the participants' lives.

When working with vulnerable or with marginalized populations, the effects of research questions need to be assessed throughout the study. Subedi (2007) described the problems he encountered when setting out to study Asian-American teachers. His study questions focused on 'how the teachers articulated their linguistic identities as non-native speakers of English in schools' and 'the challenges the teachers faced in negotiating their religious identities (Muslim and Hindu) since Christianity was often normalized as the un/spoken official religion in the schools' (Subedi 2007, 53). As an Asian-American himself, Subedi wrongly assumed when creating his research questions that he would not have to be concerned about his positionality or about parity in the research-participant relationship. Subedi (2007, 65) concluded:

When researchers disregard how ethnic participants are reshaping research design, they fail to see the agency exerted by the Other. And such non-recognitions simply reduce participants to data sources and to objects that are ready to be sorted out and written up through the researchers' ethnographic imaginations.

In asking his research questions and designing his interview protocols, Subedi did not anticipate the level of discomfort his participants would feel when participating in taped interviews. He advised other researchers who are researching 'marginalized people ... to fully engage with cultural differences and be explicit about how the learning encounters have redrawn the maps of research methodologies' (Subedi 2007, 65). This process begins with the research questions and thinking through the ethical implications of asking particular questions.

Adams (2008) concluded that engaging in conversations about and reflecting on potential ethical issues is the best approach. Although there are no assurances that the researcher will not encounter other ethical issues along the way in a study, the goal is to develop reflexive and dialogical tools through thoughtful development of research questions.

Writing good qualitative questions

So, what is required in actually *writing* research questions for a qualitative study? Qualitative questions usually inform the direction of the study in both theoretical and methodological terms. One important characteristic in writing initial questions is *focus*. A question can be thought of as a tool that is much like a steady-cam lens used to document an event or a journey. In the initial stages of study design, the researcher uses the steady-cam to frame an ever-changing broad landscape and then narrows the

focus to frame and follow a specific set of events or actions in the broader terrain. However, that terrain is not just any place; it is a specific place with a dense, rich history. Geertz (1973, 22) emphasized this point in the work of ethnography: ‘Anthropologists don’t study villages ...; they study in villages.’ Questions have to reflect this particularity. A qualitative researcher is not asking about any context but rather asking about ‘the delicacy of its distinctions’ (Geertz 1973, 25). However, new researchers often have difficulty conceptualizing their first questions in these terms.

Many first attempts at question development generate questions that are overly broad and that lack reference to a specific context. A doctoral student who was planning to conduct a pilot study – a single case study of a veteran high school teacher – drafted a first question that asked: ‘How do teachers perceive professional development on strategies for helping at-risk students?’ Using the metaphor of a steady-cam, it was clear that one problem with the first-draft question was that the context for this question was not in focus. Who were these teachers? How did their perceptions reflect the context of their school and their school district? The researcher had a particular context in mind, but did not clarify this context in the question. Moreover, she was going to study one teacher in a particular school. Her question also did not describe the duration of professional development. Was it taking place in one day or over a longer period of time? Her revision added some important context and allowed her to focus her question: ‘How does a high school English teacher perceive a one-week professional development workshop that focused on instructional strategies for at-risk students?’

After talking with this student, I asked *why* she was interested in a teacher’s perceptions on professional development. In our subsequent discussions, she realized she was really interested in the factors that shaped their perceptions and influenced their propensity for adopting some of the strategies they had learned about. Her question then became ‘What factors influence high school English teachers’ perceptions of a one-week professional development workshop on instructional strategies for at-risk students?’ A second question asked, ‘How did these factors influence the degree to which they used these strategies in their work with at-risk students?’ Although she continued to refine her questions, this dialogic and iterative process helped her to begin designing a pilot study that would involve two interviews with the teacher, one during the professional development workshop and a second after the workshop, and observations in her classroom after the workshop.

The process of focusing questions is an iterative, reflective process that leads, not just to data, but to specific data that can add knowledge to a larger field of study. Flick (2006, 106) summed this up quite well: ‘The result of formulating questions is it helps you to circumscribe a specific area of a more or less complex field which you regard as essential.’ When beginning to write questions, a researcher might use the old, but useful question, ‘So what?’ What difference will this inquiry make in the field of study in which a researcher is working? The importance of the questions to the field should help to shape the writing of research questions.

In sum, qualitative questions should reflect the particularities of one’s study. Maxwell (2005, 67) phrased it bluntly: ‘The function of your research questions is to explain specifically what your study is about.’ If a researcher is going to study a group of students in an urban high school in the mid-west, the question should specify the participants as situated in the rich contexts in which they are living their lives.

Making questions work for the researcher

As noted above, theory is an important aspect of qualitative research questions. When writing questions, it is important to frame the words so that the phrasing implicitly or explicitly makes a link with the theory, as described above. Maxwell (2005, 67) described research questions as guides that can help ‘point you toward specific areas of theory’ and that may be helpful in designing the study. For example, if a researcher is interested in urban middle school students and their perceptions on experiences that lead them to dropping out of school, questions might be phrased to take into account some aspect of critical theory. The researcher might also be interested in the ways that discourses in the school and community contribute to these students’ at-risk status, so the researcher might word the question so that it would point specifically to critical discourse theory.

Another important issue when writing questions is to be sure that they are *answerable*. Can they be answered by any kind of study? A former student, with a background in library science, was doing a small study for a class project and came up with an initial question that asked: ‘How do college students feel about their campus library?’ Of course, he had no intention of interviewing all college students in the world. In our conversation about his proposal, he said he was especially interested in undergraduate students’ views on specific services provided by the library. He was able to narrow his question to ask about undergraduates on one campus and to focus his questions so that he addressed some of the specific services offered by the library. His rewriting provided the limitations necessary for designing and carrying out a small study in a semester.

There are many practical considerations to think about when writing questions. Some questions are simply not answerable given the researcher’s time frame and resources. When writing questions, a novice researcher may not take into account the costs of travel, copying, transcription, and all the time and materials required. Richards (2005, 15) lists three questions to ask in developing research questions: ‘What are you asking? How are you asking it? What data will you need to provide a good answer?’ Her third question is particularly important. If a question is focused and clearly establishes what data is needed to answer the question, the research process will likely be smooth and achievable within a reasonable time frame.

As noted above, when writing a qualitative research question, it is usually important not to phrase it so that it ‘leads’ or contains a presupposition about participants or events. In qualitative research, in particular, the researcher is trying to discover meaning throughout the inquiry process. However, there are theoretical positions as well as qualitative approaches that work from a set of assumptions or a worldview such that research questions contain those implicit or explicit views. Critical theorists often begin by assuming unequal power relationships exist, and those assumptions may shape questions. In participatory action research, initial questions may also seem to lead as they tend to focus on a local set of circumstances. Yet these kinds of research can also work toward a process that opens an inquiry rather than closing it prematurely. If a researcher takes seriously the idea that questions are evolving and provide tools for opening dialogue, as suggested by Van Manen (1990), early assumptions may be questioned as the research evolves. Stringer (2007, 11) argued that with participatory action research, the stakeholders have continuing opportunities to question what they know and assume: ‘As they rigorously explore and reflect on their situation together, they can repudiate social myths,

misconceptions, and misrepresentations and formulate more constructive analyses of their situation.’

In many cases, though, leading questions emerge when new researchers have not thought through their study design and how the wording of questions might lead to unintended problems. For example, one of my doctoral students posed the following question: ‘What events and interactions are occurring in middle school social studies classrooms that show self-regulated learning?’ Besides being overly broad and providing little context, the question presupposes the occurrence of self-regulated learning in middle school classrooms. After the student revised the question and added some context, she came up with the following version: ‘What kinds of learning strategies are evident in three urban middle school classrooms after the teachers engaged in professional development on self-regulated learning?’ The revised question brings the focus to learning strategies without presupposing an outcome for professional development.

It can be difficult to avoid leading questions based on assumptions or a particular world view. Often researchers come to a study expecting to see certain events occur and may write questions around those expectations. Often such questions tend to assign attributes to a situation or a group of people in advance and thereby violate the essence of qualitative inquiry in ways that may not be desirable. For example, questions that assume that all social workers suffer from secondary post-traumatic stress or that all urban school children have low levels of literacy are based on faulty premises. Writing leading questions that arrive at certain conclusions before collecting data can bias a study in a way that damages its credibility.

Finally, wording matters in writing questions. Substituting one word for another or adding one word can clarify or obscure the meaning of a question. In writing a question for a class project, one student asked: ‘How does the act of participating in an online class affect self-concept when the learner is new to online learning?’ In his revision, he added one word and deleted three to come up with the following question: ‘How does participating in an online college class affect self-concept when the learner is new to online learning?’ Adding ‘college’ focused the question on a particular age group. Deleting ‘the act of’ focused the question on examining a range of interactions that informed the learner’s self-concept.

Finally, it is important not to ‘pack’ questions with multiple sub-questions. A former doctoral student started with the following research question for his qualitative study on administrators of wellness clinics: ‘How do wellness clinic administrators in a large urban clinic describe their professional collaborations with other clinic administrators and staff members, their roles as collaborators, and their collaborative partners?’ This question needs to be unpacked. There are several questions embedded in this one question that merit separate questions. This student wanted to examine parity in these different collaborative interactions. So, his revised questions asked, ‘How do wellness clinic administrators in a large urban clinic perceive their collaborations with other administrators?’ and ‘How do wellness clinic administrators perceive their collaborations with staff members?’ He also wanted to understand how the administrators perceived their roles in each of these collaborative contexts and if those differed. So, he rewrote the question, ‘Do these administrators’ perceived roles in collaborations with other administrators and with staff members differ, and if so how?’ After thinking through what he wanted to know in each situation, he was able to unpack his initial question and parse its multiple aims in order to create a clearer set of research questions.

Situating questions in a paper or dissertation

After deciding on initial questions for a proposal or a paper, it is helpful to think about where the questions will be placed in the manuscript and what will precede them. In a well-written qualitative paper, the research questions need to be stated *early* in the paper, but they also need to have enough prefatory material so that a reader can see how the questions are growing out of interests of the researcher, theoretical premises, and significant issues in the discipline. Thoughtful placement of the questions will show a reader how the questions are linked to the larger study.

Coiro and Dobler (2007, 221) in a study of sixth-graders' online literacies, placed their research questions after the review of literature. Their preface for the questions summed up what they had reviewed and pointed toward the methods they would use to collect data:

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to explore the reading comprehension strategies of skilled sixth-grade readers prompted by Internet search engines and informational websites, and further, to begin to describe how readers employed these strategies in each context. The tasks we designed focused on three aspects of comprehension deemed important from a new literacies perspective (e.g., locating, evaluating, and synthesizing) (Leu et al. 2004) in two online reading contexts commonly used for Internet research tasks in school classrooms (Lenhart, Simon, et al. 2001). To explore these issues, we conducted a qualitative study of reading strategies used across these contexts guided by two related questions:

- (1) What characterizes the reading process as skilled readers search for and locate information on the internet?
- (2) What informs the choices that skilled readers make while reading for information on the Internet?

In these questions, I might have requested the addition of 'sixth-grade' before 'skilled readers.' However, the authors had stated their goals for the study earlier, and they had clearly established the context and the grade and skill level of the participants, so the reader could use the questions as a guide through the rest of the study. The preface above set up the questions, identified a theoretical framework (New Literacy theory), described the context, and described the general approach used for the study.

Because qualitative papers tend to be lengthy, the writer may want to place the research questions in both the introductory material and in the methods section. This placement is especially helpful in a dissertation. For a dissertation study in this instance, it is sometimes useful to restate the questions yet again in the concluding chapter to show how the analysis and conclusions have addressed the questions.

Summary

Conceptualizing, developing, writing, and re-writing research questions are all part of a dynamic, reflective qualitative inquiry process. Using qualitative research questions reflexively can help researchers to clarify purpose, make connections with a field of study, and reflect on and interrogate the impact of the research trajectory on participants.

A large part of constructing clear research questions is writing drafts of them over and over and sharing them with others. In his well-known book *Writing to learn*, Zinsner (1989, 49) described writing as a tool for thinking and learning:

Writing is a tool that enables people in every discipline to wrestle with facts and ideas It compels us by the repeated effort of language to go after those thoughts and to organize them and present them clearly. It forces us to keep asking, 'Am I saying what I want to say?' Very often, the answer is 'No.'

Zinsser's point works well with the idea that writing and re-writing research questions encourages researchers to ask important questions about purpose and clarity and to learn from this process. Wrestling with our questions, through reflecting and writing, ultimately helps us to become better researchers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, good qualitative questions can be significant tools that shape a study design and analysis. Although initial questions often emerge from a researcher's passions and interests in particular topics, ultimately, the goal is to refine and possibly expand the inquiry through reflexive, iterative, and dialogic processes that are central to the theoretical and ethical positions taken up by the researcher. During the inquiry process, a researcher needs to see questions as tools for discovery as well as tools for clarity and focus. In the end, good qualitative questions are dynamic and multi-directional, drawing the reader into the research with a focus on a topic of significance and at the same time functioning as lenses that are directed outward by the researcher to capture the nuances of the lives, experiences, and perspectives of others.

Notes on contributor

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