DESIGNING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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2 The "What" of the Study

BUILDING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

What is research? What is a research proposal? How do the two relate to each other? For the social scientist or researcher in applied fields, research is a process of trying to gain a better understanding of the complexities of human experience and, in some genres of research, to take action based on that understanding. Through systematic and sometimes collaborative strategies, the researcher gathers information about actions and interactions, reflects on their meaning, arrives at and evaluates conclusions, and eventually puts forward an interpretation, most frequently in written form. Quite unlike its pristine and logical presentation in journal articles—"the reconstructed logic of science" (Kaplan, 1964)—real research is often confusing, messy, intensely frustrating, and fundamentally nonlinear. In critiquing the way journal articles display research as a supremely sequential and objective endeavor, Bargar and Duncan (1982) describe how, "through such highly standardized reporting practices, scientists inadvertently hide from view the

real inner drama of their work, with its intuitive base, its halting time-line, and its extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives" (p. 2).

The researcher begins with interesting, curious, or anomalous phenomena that he observes, discovers, or stumbles across. Not unlike the detective work of Sherlock Holmes or the best traditions in investigative reporting, research seeks to explain, describe, or explore the phenomenon chosen for study. Emancipatory genres, such as those represented by some critical, feminist, or postmodern work, also make explicit their intent to act to change oppressive circumstances. The research proposal is *a plan for engaging in systematic inquiry* to bring about a better understanding of the phenomenon and, increasingly, to change problematic social circumstances. As discussed in Chapter 1, the finished proposal should demonstrate that (a) the research is worth doing, (b) the researcher is competent to conduct the study, and (c) the study is carefully planned and can be executed successfully.

A proposal for the conduct of any research represents *decisions* the researcher has made that a particular theoretical framework, design, and methodology will generate data appropriate for responding to the research questions. These decisions emerge through intuition, complex reasoning, and weighing a number of possible research questions, possible conceptual frameworks, and alternative designs and strategies for gathering data. Throughout, the researcher considers the should-do-ability, do-ability, and want-to-do-ability of the proposed project (discussed in Chapter 1). This is the complex, dialectic process of designing a qualitative study. This chapter demonstrates how, in qualitative design, you are deciding among possible research questions, frameworks, approaches, sites, and data collection methods. Building the research proposal demands that the researcher consider all elements of the proposal *at the same time.* But how to begin? This is often the most challenging aspect of developing a solid proposal.

Sections of the Proposal

Proposals for qualitative research vary in format but typically include the following three sections: (a) *the introduction,* which includes an overview of the proposal, a discussion of the topic or focus of the inquiry and the general research questions, the study's purpose and potential significance, and its limitations; (b) *a discussion of related literature,* which situates the study in the ongoing discourse about the topic and develops the specific intellectual

traditions to which the study links; and (c) *the research design and methods,* which details the overall design, the site or population of interest, the specific methods for gathering data, a preliminary discussion of strategies for analyzing the data, how the study's trustworthiness will be ensured, the personal biography of the researcher, and ethical and political issues that may arise in the conduct of the study. In all research, these sections are interrelated, each one building on the others. These sections are listed in Table 2.1. In qualitative inquiry, the proposal should reserve some flexibility in research questions and design because these are likely to change during the research process. The next section provides some strategies for building a clear conceptual framework while retaining the flexibility to allow the unanticipated to emerge.

Building the Conceptual Framework: Topic, Purpose, and Significance

The purposes of this section of the proposal are (a) to describe the substantive focus of the research—the topic—and its purpose; (b) to frame it in larger theoretical, policy, social, or practical domains and thereby develop its significance; (c) to pose initial research questions; (d) to forecast the literature to be discussed in the review of related literature; and (e) to discuss the limitations of the study. The proposal writer should organize the information so that a reader can clearly ascertain the essence of the research study. This section, along with the review of related literature, forms the conceptual framework of the study and tells the reader the study's substantive focus and purpose. The design section then describes how the study will be conducted and displays the writer's ability to conduct the study.

Although separated into discrete sections through convention, the narrative of the first two sections—the introduction and the review of related literature—is derived from a thorough familiarity with literature on relevant theory, empirical studies, reviews of research, and informed essays by knowledgeable experts. A careful reading of related literature serves two purposes. First, it establishes evidence for the significance of the study for practice and policy and as a contribution to the ongoing discourse about the topic (often referred to as contributing to "knowledge"). Second, it identifies the important intellectual traditions that guide the study, thereby developing a conceptual framework and refining an important and viable research question.

Table 2.1 Sections of a Qualitative Research Proposal

Introduction
Overview
Topic and purpose
Potential significance
Framework and general research questions
Limitations
Review of Related Literature
Theoretical traditions
Essays by informed experts
Related research
Design and Methodology
Overall approach and rationale
Site or population selection
Data-gathering methods
Data analysis procedures
Trustworthiness
Personal biography
Ethical and political considerations
Appendixes

Because of the interrelatedness of the sections and because writing is a developmental, recursive task, the writer may find it necessary to rewrite the research questions or problem statement after reviewing the literature or to refocus the significance after the research design is developed. Bargar and Duncan's (1982) description of "extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives" (p. 2), quoted earlier, captures this dialectic process. Our advice is that the writer be sensitive to the need for change and flexibility and not rush to closure too soon. Sound ideas for research may come in a moment of inspiration, but the hard work comes next as the idea, the intellectual traditions that surround the idea, and the methods for exploring it are developed, refined, and polished.

Overview

The first section of the proposal provides an overview of the study for the reader. It introduces the topic or problem and purpose of the study, the general research questions, and design of the study. This section should be crisply

written, engage the reader's interest, and forecast the sections to follow. First, the topic or problem that the study will address is introduced, linking this to practice, policy, social issues, and/or theory, and forecasting the study's significance. Next, the broad areas of theory and related research to be discussed in the literature review are outlined. Then the design of the study is sketched in which the particular approach, major data collection techniques, and unique features of the design are noted. Finally, the introduction provides a transition to a more detailed discussion of the topic, the study's significance, and the research questions.

The Topic

In qualitative inquiry, initial curiosities for research often come from real-world observations, emerging from the interplay of the researcher's direct experience, tacit theories, political commitments, interests in practice, and growing scholarly interests. At other times, the topic of interest derives from theoretical traditions and their attendant empirical research. Beginning researchers should examine reviews of literature found in journals specifically committed to publishing extensive review articles (e.g., *Review of Educational Research*), peruse policy-oriented publications to learn about current or emerging issues in their fields, and talk with experts for their judgments about crucial issues. They might also reflect on the intersection of their personal, professional, and political interests to ascertain what particular topics or issues capture their imaginations.

Figure 2.1 provides a schematic description of the dialectic relationship between theory, practice, research questions, and personal experience. We call this the *cycle of inquiry*; the figure suggests that a research project may begin at any point in this complex process. For example, as a focus for the study emerges (the general topic), possible research questions, potential sites, and individuals or groups to invite to participate in the research may be considered. Imagining potential sites or groups of people to work with may, in turn, reshape the focus of the study. Thinking about sites or people for the study also encourages the researcher to think about her role in the setting and possible strategies for gathering data. Alternatively, the researcher may know of a site where intriguing issues of practice capture her imagination. Thinking about this site and the issues and people in it will foster analysis about what research questions are likely to be significant for practice. The research questions then shape decisions about gathering data. Developing the research

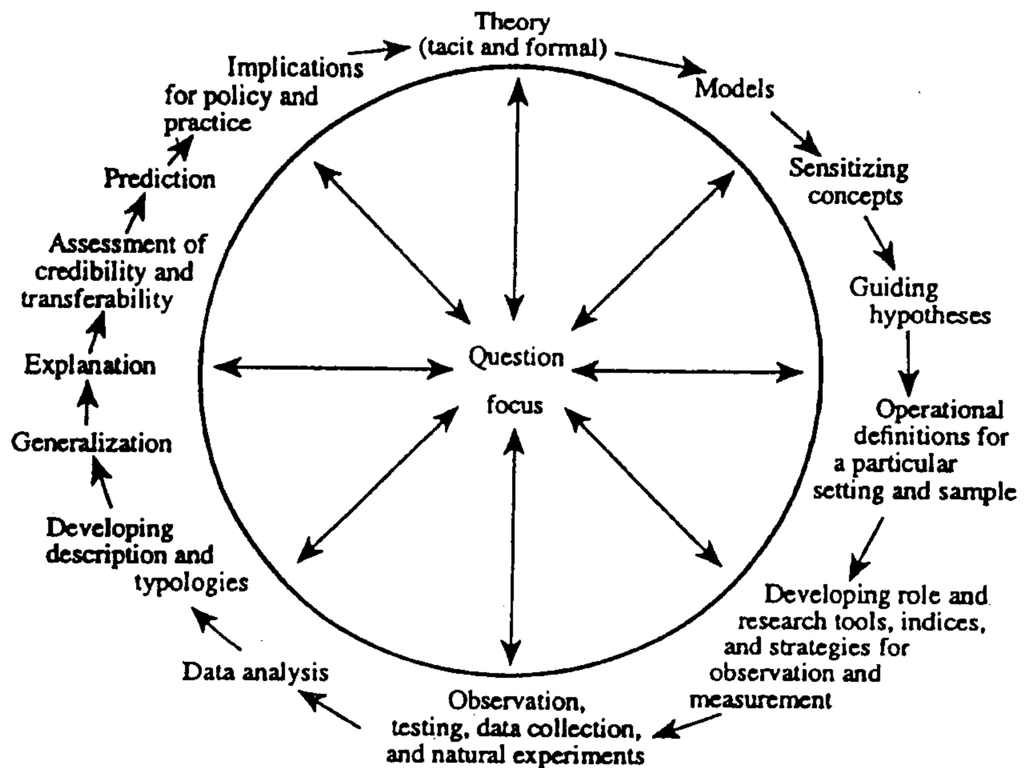


Figure 2.1. The Cycle of Inquiry

project proceeds dialectically as possible research focuses, questions, sites, and strategies for gathering data are considered.

Crabtree and Miller (1992) offer refinements of this generic cycle of inquiry. They argue that the process of much qualitative research can be captured by "Shiva's circle of constructivist inquiry" (p. 10)—Shiva is the Hindu god of dance and death (see Figure 2.2). The researcher enters this cycle of interpretation with exquisite sensitivity to context, seeking no ultimate truths. She must be faithful to the dance, but she also stands apart from it, discovering and interpreting the "symbolic communication and meaning . . . that helps us maintain cultural life" (p. 10). A more radical inquiry process is captured in Figure 2.3, which expresses critical, feminist, and some postmodern perspectives. These two models depict the researcher looking critically at experience and the larger social forces that shape it. She searches for expressions of domination, oppression, and power in daily life. Her goal is to unmask this "false consciousness" and create "a more empowered and emancipated consciousness by reducing the illusions" of experience (pp. 10-11). Figures 2.2 and 2.3 provide alternative conceptualizations of the cycle of inquiry; note, however, that each entails question posing, design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

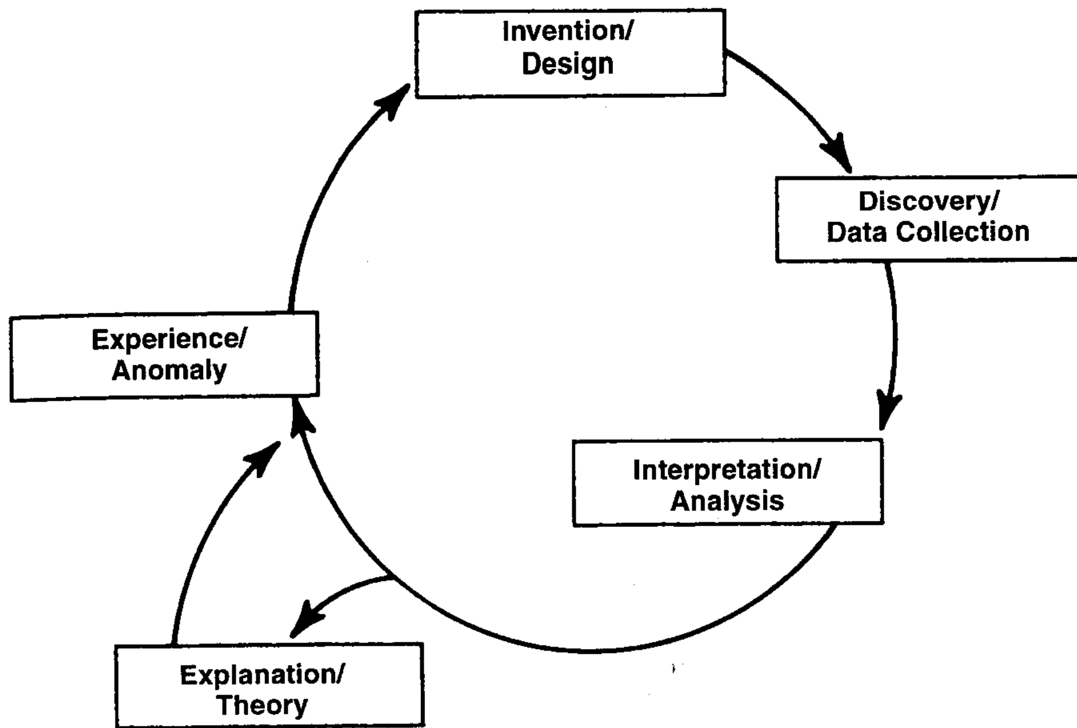


Figure 2.2. Shiva's Circle of Constructivist Inquiry

SOURCE: Crabtree and Miller (1992, p. 10). Reprinted by permission.
NOTE: Hx = hypotheses.

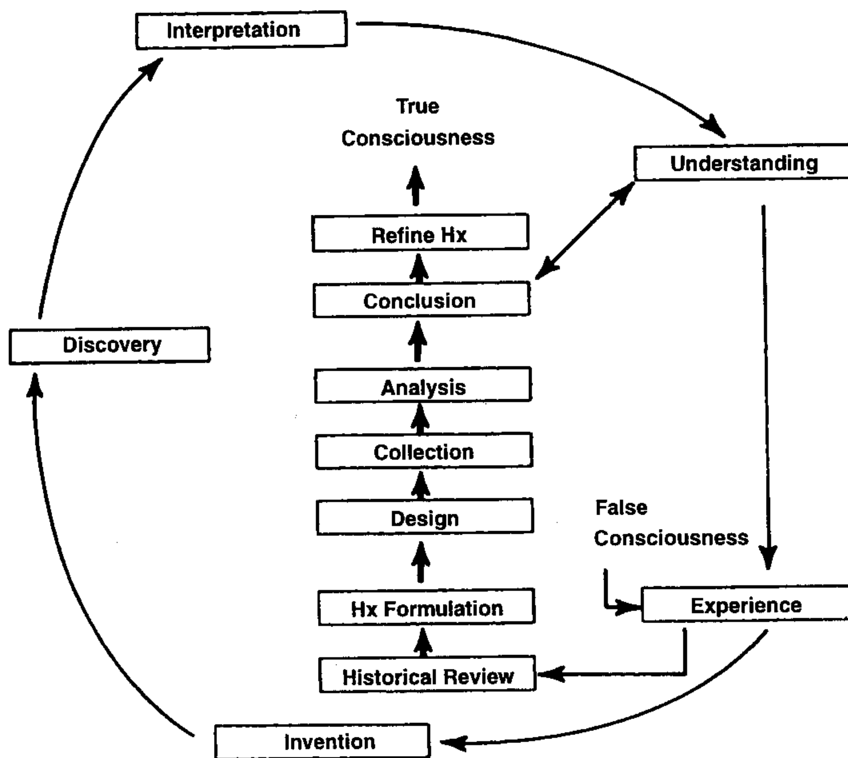


Figure 2.3. Global Eye of Critical/Ecological Inquiry

SOURCE: Crabtree and Miller (1992, p. 11). Reprinted by permission.

Especially in applied fields, such as management, nursing, community development, education, and clinical psychology, a strong autobiographical element often drives the research interest. For example, a doctoral student in family counseling psychology studied bereaved mothers because of her own experience with the loss of a teenaged son (Oliver, 1990). A student in social psychology, deeply committed to the protection of the environment, studied environmental attitudes from an adult development theoretical perspective (Greenwald, 1992). A student in organizational development investigated male and female physicians' espoused moral principles of care and justice in compensation issues, as a way of exploring Gilligan's (1982b) theory, because of her deep commitment to ethical practice (Cormier, 1993). A student in international development education studied Indonesian farmers' views on land use because of her political commitment to indigenous peoples (Campbell-Nelson, 1997).

The qualitative researcher's challenge is to demonstrate that this personal interest will not bias the study. A sensitive awareness of the methodological literature about *the self* in conducting inquiry, interpreting data, and constructing the final narrative helps, as does knowledge of the epistemological debate about what constitutes knowledge and knowledge claims, especially the critique of power and dominance in traditional research (see the discussion in Chapter 1 about critical ethnography, feminist research, action research, and postmodern perspectives). If direct experience stimulates the initial curiosity, moreover, the researcher needs to link that curiosity to general research questions. The large end of the conceptual funnel, if you will, contains the general, or "grand tour," questions that the study will explore; the small end depicts the specific focus for the proposed study.

Figure 2.4 illustrates this funnel metaphor, drawing from the study by Benbow (1994) about the development of commitment to social action. The large end of the funnel represents the general conceptual focus—the issue of social activism and its role in ameliorating oppressive circumstances. Midway down the funnel, the focus narrows to a concern with individuals who have demonstrated and lived an intense commitment to social causes. An alternative choice at this point would have been to focus on social movements as group phenomena rather than on individuals whose lived experiences embody social consciousness. The small end of the conceptual funnel focuses even more closely on a research question (or set of questions) about how life experiences helped shape and develop a lifelong, intensive commitment to social activism.

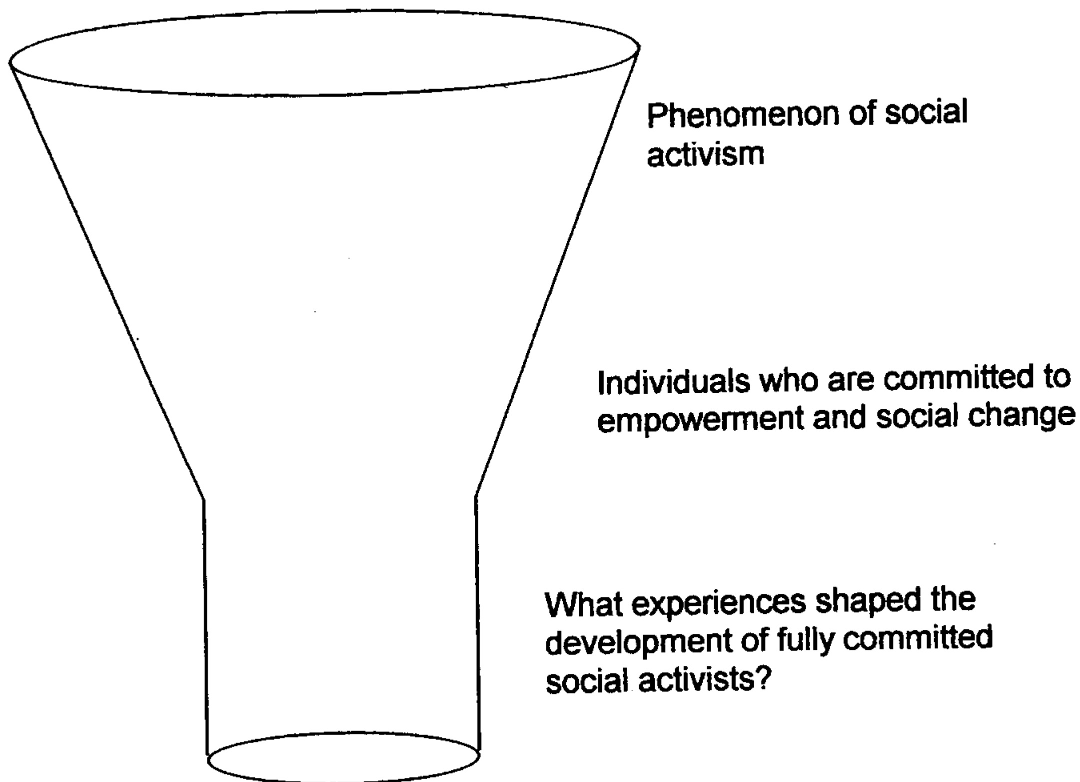


Figure 2.4. The Conceptual Funnel

People develop personal theories (theories-in-use or tacit theories; Argyris & Schön, 1974) about events as ways of reducing ambiguity and explaining paradox. When they decide to conduct inquiry, however, they should be guided by systematic considerations, such as existing theory and empirical research. Tacit theory (one's personal understanding) and formal theory (from a literature review) help to bring the question, the curious phenomenon, or the problematic issue into focus and raise it to a more general level. The potential research moves from a troubling or intriguing real-world observation (e.g., these kids won't volunteer in class no matter how much it's rewarded!), to personal theory (these kids care more about what other kids think than they do about grades), to formal theory, concepts, and models from literature (students' behavior is a function of the formal classroom expectations as mediated by the informal expectations of the student subculture). These coalesce to frame a focus for the study in the form of a research question: What are the expectations of the student subculture vis-à-vis class participation?

This complex process of conceptualizing, framing, and focusing a study is depicted in Figure 2.5. It shows the interplay of personal observation with a

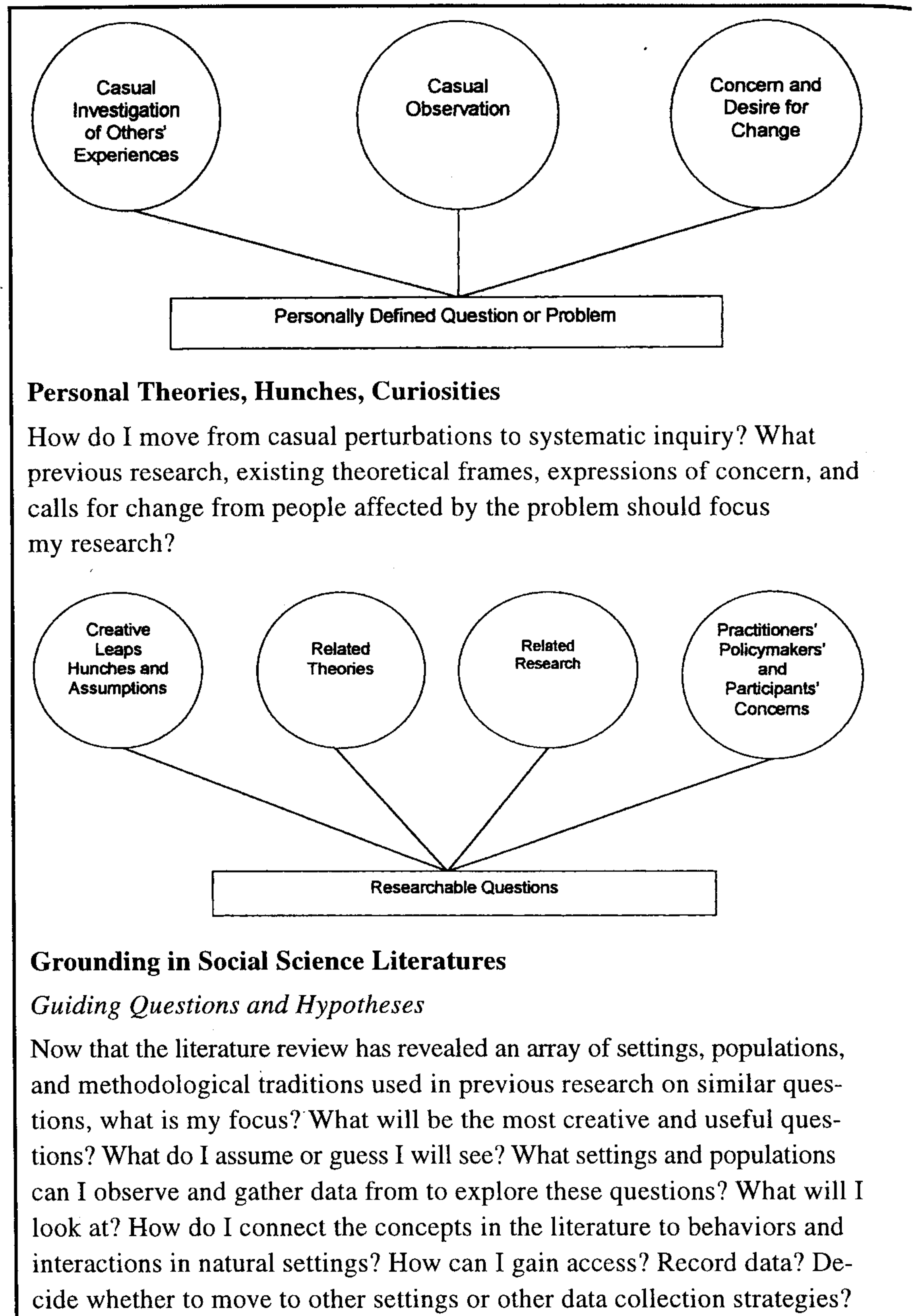
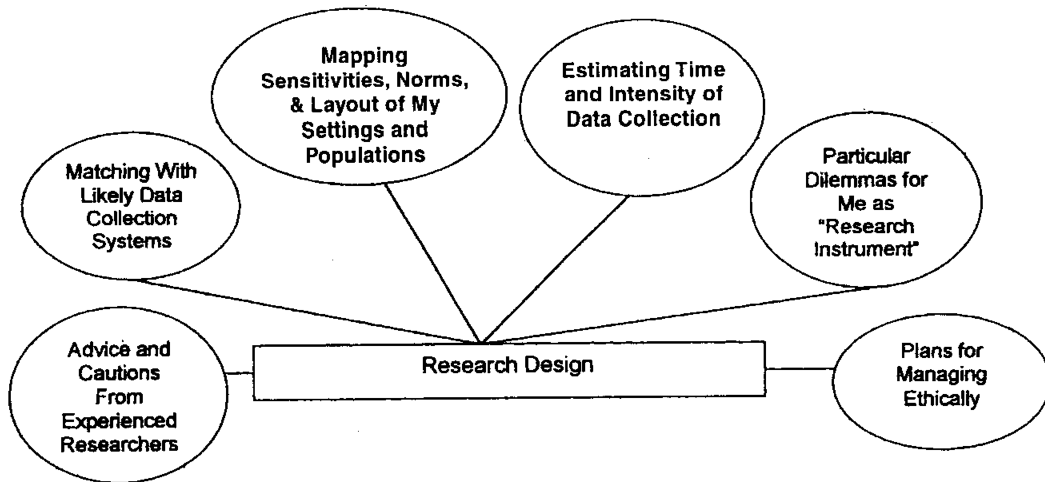
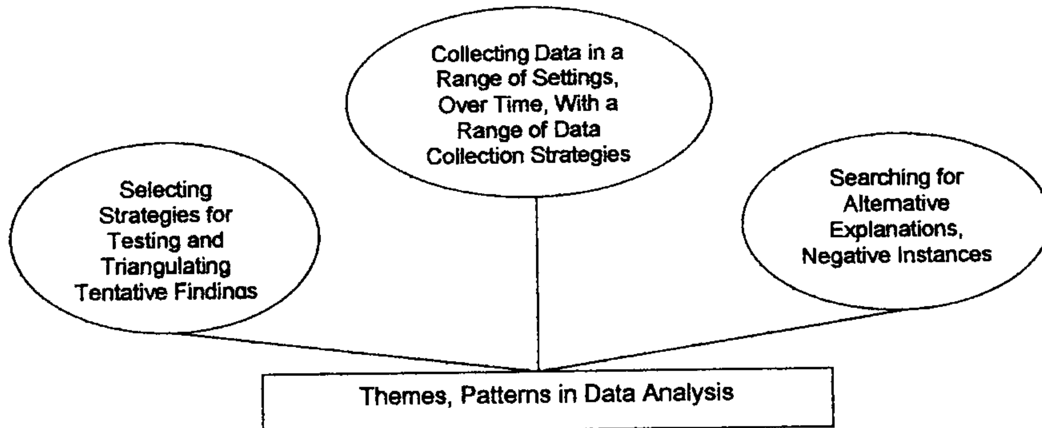


Figure 2.5. Framing the Research Process



Data Collection Management and Analysis

As I move into the actual research, what strategies will I use to store my data, move toward identifying patterns, and work systematically to ensure that I am working toward identifying useful and significant "truths."



Reporting Findings, Conclusions

What modes of reporting are ethical, useful for my career, useful for helping people? How inventive should I be? What traditions in qualitative reporting make the most sense for my purposes? How do I demonstrate to readers the transferability of my findings, the limitations, and the new research challenges uncovered by my research? Should I provide specific recommendations for change based on my research?

theoretical rationale that leads to focusing the research question and making decisions about where to go, what to look for, and how to move to real-world observations. It identifies the kinds of questions the researcher should ask at each stage. This framework is intended to be generic and, therefore, transferrable to research in an urban neighborhood, with a legislative body, in a rural village in West Timor, Indonesia, or with newly arrived immigrant groups.

This early conceptualization work is the most difficult and intellectually rigorous of the entire process of proposal writing. It is messy and dialectic, as alternative frames (scholarly traditions) are examined for their power to illuminate and sharpen the research focus. As noted earlier, exploring possible designs and strategies for gathering data also enters into this initial process. The researcher must let go of topics and captivating questions as he fine-tunes and focuses the study to ensure its do-ability. Although this entails loss, it bounds the study and protects the researcher from impractical ventures.

The role of intuition in this phase of the research process cannot be underestimated. Studies of eminent scientists reveal the central role of creative insight—intuition—in their thought processes (Hoffman, 1972; Libby, 1922; Mooney, 1951). By allowing ideas to incubate and through maintaining a healthy respect for the mind's capacity to reorganize and reconstruct, the researcher finds that richer research questions evolve. This observation is not intended to devalue the analytic process but, instead, to give the creative act its proper due. Bargar and Duncan (1982) note that research is a process "that religiously uses logical analysis as a critical tool in the *refinement* of ideas, but which often begins at a very different place, where imagery, metaphor and analogy, intuitive hunches, kinesthetic feeling states, and even dreams and dream-like states are prepotent" (p. 3).

Initial insights and the recycling of concepts begin the process of bounding and framing the research by defining the larger theoretical, policy, or social problem or issue of practice that the study will address. This complex thinking also begins to establish the study's parameters (what it is and what it is *not*) and to develop the conceptual framework that will ground the study in ongoing research traditions.

Purpose of the Study

The researcher should also describe her intent in conducting the research—its purpose. Generally embedded in the discussion of the topic (often only a sentence or two but nonetheless important), a statement of the purpose of the

Table 2.2 Matching Research Questions and Purpose

Purpose of the Study	*General Research Questions*
Exploratory:	
To investigate little-understood phenomena	What is happening in this social program?
To identify or discover important categories of meaning	What are the salient themes, patterns, or categories of meaning for participants?
To generate hypotheses for further research	How are these patterns linked with one another?
Explanatory:	
To explain the patterns related to the phenomenon in question	What events, beliefs, attitudes, or policies shape this phenomenon?
To identify plausible relationships shaping the phenomenon	How do these forces interact to result in the phenomenon?
Descriptive:	
To document and describe the phenomenon of interest	What are the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structures and processes occurring in this phenomenon?
Emancipatory:	
To create opportunities and the will to engage in social action	How do participants problematize their circumstances and take positive social action?

study tells the reader what the results of the research are likely to accomplish. Historically, qualitative methodologists have described three major purposes for research: *to explore, explain,* or *describe* the phenomenon of interest. Synonyms for these terms could include *to understand, to develop,* or *to discover.* Many qualitative studies are descriptive and exploratory: They build rich descriptions of complex circumstances that are unexplored in the literature. Others are explicitly explanatory: These studies show relationships (frequently as perceived by the participants in the study) between events and the meaning these relationships have. These traditional discussions of purpose, however, do not mention action, advocacy, empowerment, or emancipation—the purposes often found in studies grounded in critical, feminist, or postmodern assumptions. The researcher can assert *taking action* as part of the intention of the proposed study, as in action research. He can assert *empowerment* (the goal of participatory action research) as a goal—although he can, at best, discuss how the inquiry *may* create opportunities for empowerment (see Table 2.2).

The discussion of the topic and purpose also articulates the *unit of analysis*—the level of inquiry on which the study will focus. Qualitative studies typically focus on individuals, dyads, groups, processes, or organizations. Discussing the level of inquiry helps focus subsequent decisions about data gathering.

Significance and Potential Contributions

Convincing the reader that the study is significant and should be conducted entails building an argument that links the research to important theoretical perspectives, policy issues, concerns of practice, or persistent social issues that affect people's everyday lives. Think of the study's significance as discussing ways that the study is likely to contribute. Who might be interested in the results? With what groups might they be shared: Scholars? Policymakers? Practitioners? Members of similar groups? Individuals or groups usually silenced or marginalized? The challenge here is to situate the study as addressing a particular, important problem; defining the problem shapes the study's significance. For instance, a clinical psychologist identifies a theoretical gap in the literature about isolation and defines the topic for an ethnography of long-distance truck drivers as contributing to theory. The study may be relatively unconcerned with policy or practice; its contributions to theory are preordinate. On the other hand, a feminist sociologist frames a study of discriminatory thinking among business executives as addressing the policy and practice problems of persistent sexism in the workplace. A study of the impact of welfare reform on the lives of adult basic education learners could focus either on policy issues or on how this recurring social problem plays out in the learners' lives. Here, theoretical problems are less significant. The researcher develops the significance of the study through a definition of the problem to be addressed.

Funding opportunities often focus a question. A welfare-to-work grants program calling for a multisite evaluation of programs for the "hard to employ" provides opportunities for the researcher. It also provides policy-oriented significance. Be cautious about such opportunities, however, because policy-delineated foci may seduce the researcher into agendas serving primarily the powerful elite (Anderson, 1989; Marshall, 1997; Scheurich, 1997). Recall the discussion of explicitly ideological research in Chapter 1. For further discussion of these issues, see Smith (1988).

A study may well be able to contribute understanding and action in all four domains, but it is unlikely to contribute equally to all four; the statement of

the topic should thus emphasize one particular domain. For example, a study of the integration of children with disabilities into the regular classroom could be significant for both policy and practice. Framing this study as a policy study requires that the topic be situated in national and state policy debates on special education. Alternatively, framing the study as most significant for practice would require the researcher to focus on structures supporting inclusive classrooms. Either frame is legitimate and defensible; the researcher's challenge is to argue for the study's potential contributions to the domains in which he is most interested. This, in turn, has implications for the literature review and the design of the study.

Significance for Theory

The discussion of the study's significance for theory is often an intellectual odyssey for the researcher that is more fully developed in the review of related literature. At this point in the proposal, the researcher should outline the project's potential contribution to fundamental knowledge by describing how the study fits into theoretical traditions in the social sciences or applied fields in ways that will be new, insightful, or creative. The significance statement should show how the study will contribute to research traditions or foundational literatures in new ways.

Often, the proposal identifies gaps in the literature to which the study will contribute. If the research is in an area for which theory is well developed, the study may be a significant test or expansion of the theory. The researcher may use concepts developed by previous researchers and formulate questions similar to those used in previous research. Data collection, however, may be in a different setting, with a different group, and certainly at a different time. Thus, the results of the research will constitute an extension of theory that will expand the generalizations or more finely tune theoretical propositions. The contribution of such research is the expansion of previous theory. For example, the study cited earlier by Cormier (1993) contributed primarily to theory by extending Gilligan's (1982b) notions of gendered moral reasoning to a new population—physicians.

When researchers conceptualize the focus of the study and generate the research questions, they may draw on a body of theory and related research that is different from previous research. Significance of this sort, however, generally derives from an extensive and creative review of related literature. Having developed that section of the proposal, the writer then incorporates

references to and summaries of it in the significance section. This type of significance is treated fully in the next section on the review of related literature. Generally, by answering the question, How is this research important? the researcher can demonstrate the creative aspects of the work.

The development of theory takes place by incremental advances and small contributions to knowledge through well-conducted and well-conceptualized research. Most researchers use theory to guide their own work, to locate their studies in larger theoretical traditions, or to map the topography of the specific concepts they will explore in detail. In addition, some very creative research can emerge when a researcher breaks theoretical boundaries and reconceptualizes a problem or relocates the problem area. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1980) reconceptualized children's learning processes by applying the concept of *ecology* to child development theory. Weick's (1976) metaphor of schools as *loosely coupled systems* profoundly altered theoretical conceptualizations of educational organizations. Often we follow a theoretical pragmatism, being "shamelessly eclectic" in the creative application of concepts from one discipline to another (Rossman & Wilson, 1994).

Significance for Policy

The significance of a study for policy can be developed by discussing formal policy development in that area and presenting data that show how often the problem occurs and how costly it can be. For example, to demonstrate the significance of a study of the careers of women faculty, the researcher could present statistics documenting persistently lower salaries for women than men at comparable ranks; this is the problem that the study will address. The study's potential contributions for university compensation policies could then be spelled out. Enrollment data depicting increasing adult participation in off-campus degree programs would establish that this is an increasing trend in university enrollments and therefore worthy of inquiry. Contributions to university degree program policy could then be articulated. In another example, the researcher could describe recent changes in welfare law and discuss how this reform was developed with little regard for those most affected—the problem the study will address. Potential contributions of the study to further reform of welfare law could then be described. In developing the topic and how the study might contribute to policy in that area, the researcher would demonstrate that the general topic is one of significant proportions that should be studied systematically.

A study's importance can also be argued through summaries of the writings of policymakers and informed experts who identify the topic as important and call for research pursuing the general questions. Both statistical presentations of incidence and persistence of the problem and calls for research by experts demonstrate that the study addresses an important topic, one of concern to policymakers in that area. In applied fields such as education, health policy, management, regional planning, and clinical psychology, for example, demonstrating a study's significance to policy—whether international, national, state, regional, or institutional—may be especially important.

Significance for Practice

Situating a study as significant for practice follows the same logic as developing significance for policy. The argument here should rely on a discussion of the concerns or problems articulated in the literature. This will involve citing experts, prior research, and summarizing incidence data. Recall the preceding discussion of a study about the inclusion of children with disabilities. Should the researcher want this study to focus on issues of practice, she would discuss the literature detailing the concerns of teachers about meeting the needs of children with disabilities in their classrooms. The study's potential contributions, then, would be to improve teachers' classroom practice. Shadduck-Hernandez's (1997) proposal for a study exploring how participation in community service classes affects immigrant and refugee college students' sense of ethnic identity summarized incidence data on the increasing enrollment of these students and the paucity of culturally relevant experiences the college curriculum offered them. She then detailed the study's potential contributions to pedagogical practice in university classrooms.

Significance for Social Issues and Action

Finally, a study may be significant for its detailed description of life circumstances that express particular social issues. The contribution of such a study may not be to try to influence policy, contribute to scholarly literature, or improve practice; it might be to illuminate the lived experiences of interest by providing rich description and to foster taking action. Action research and participatory action research genres stipulate *taking action* as central to their work. In these cases, researchers should argue that the proposed inquiry and its attendant action will likely be valuable to those who participate, as well as

to others committed to the issue. The challenge here is to identify how and in what ways.

Maguire's (1987) study with battered women was a participatory action research project. Her study's primary contributions were not intended to be to scholarly traditions, policy, or practice per se; rather, they were for the women involved in the work and for others committed to alleviating the abuse of women. The work was important because it focused on a major social issue. Lather and Smithies's (1997) study, collaborating with HIV-positive women, invites the reader to enter into the women's lives so as to create new connections and the possibilities for action.

In sum, through a discussion of relevant literature, this section articulates the topic to be studied and argues that further investigation of this problem has the potential to contribute to scholarship, policy, practice, or a better understanding of recurring social issues. This section defines who is likely to have an interest in this topic and therefore how and in what ways the study will contribute.

Of course, researchers preparing proposals for funding should adjust their statements about significance to the needs and priorities of the funding agencies. The foundation that takes pride in funding action projects or interventions will want to see statements about how the proposed research will directly help people or change a problematic situation. On the other hand, when seeking funds from an agency with goals of expanding knowledge and theory (e.g., the National Science Foundation), the researcher should emphasize the undeveloped or unsolved theoretical puzzles to be addressed to demonstrate the significance of the research.

Posing Research Questions

The qualitative approach to research is uniquely suited to uncovering the unexpected and exploring new avenues. This demands flexibility in the proposal so that data gathering can respond to increasingly refined research questions. Herein lies a dilemma, however. The proposal should be sufficiently clear both in research questions and design so that the reader can evaluate its do-ability; on the other hand, the proposal should reserve the flexibility that is the hallmark of qualitative methods. This suggests that the research questions should be general enough to permit exploration but focused enough to delimit the study. Not an easy task.

Focusing the study and posing general research questions are best addressed in a developmental manner, relying on discussions of related literature

to help frame and refine the specific topic. Often, the primary research goal is to discover those very questions that are most probing and insightful. Most likely, the relevant concepts will be developed during the research process, but the research proposal must suggest themes, based on knowledge of the literature.

Initial questions should be linked to the problem and significance and should forecast the literature to be reviewed in the next section. Questions may be theoretical ones, which can be researched in a number of different sites or with different samples. Or they may be focused on a particular population or class of individuals; these too can be studied in various places. Finally, the questions may be site specific because of the uniqueness of a specific program or organization. The example cited earlier in this chapter of the study of physicians' moral constructions of compensation issues (Cormier, 1993) could have been conducted in any setting that had physicians and conflict; the theoretical interest driving the research was not linked to a particular organization. A study of an exemplary sex education program, however, can be studied only at that site because the problem identified is one of practice. Thus, the questions posed are shaped by the identified problem and, in turn, constrain the design of the study.

Examples of *theoretical questions* include the following:

- How does play affect reading readiness? Through what cognitive and affective process? Do children who take certain roles—for example, play leadership roles—learn faster? If so, what makes the difference?
- How does the sponsor-protégé socialization process function in professional careers? Does it work differently for women? For minorities? What processes are operating?

Questions focused on *particular populations* could include these:

- How do neurosurgeons learn to cope with the realities that they hold the lives of people in their hands and that many of their patients die?
- What happens to women who enter elite MBA programs? What are their career paths?
- What is the life of the long-distance truck driver like?
- How do school superintendents manage relations with school board members? What influence processes do they use?
- What happens to change-agent teachers during their careers? Do organizational socialization processes change or eliminate them? Do they burn out early in their careers?

Finally, *site-specific* research questions might take the following form:

- Why is the sex education program working well in this school but not in the others? What is special about the people? The plan? The support? the context?
- How do the school-parent community relations of an elite private school differ from those in the neighboring public school? How are the differences connected with differences in educational philosophies and outcomes?
- What are the ways in which lobbying groups influence pollution control policy in the Massachusetts legislature?
- Why is there a discrepancy in the perceptions of the efficacy of affirmative action policy between university officials and groups of students of color at the University of North Carolina? What explains the discrepancy?

The above are examples of typical initial questions developed in the proposal. They serve as boundaries around the study without unduly constraining it. The questions focus on interactions and processes in sociocultural systems and in organizations and thus link to important research literature and theory, but they are grounded in everyday realities. The goal of this section of the proposal is to explicate the questions, thereby further focusing the study, and to forecast the literature to be discussed in the next section. The following vignette shows early development of an introductory statement for a proposal for a pilot study.

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Vignette 3

An Initial Statement

Joseph-Collins (1997) was deeply interested in the lack of African Americans enrolling in and successfully completing college. She was particularly concerned about African American males. In developing a proposal for a pilot study for her dissertation, she developed the following discussion of the focus of the study, its purpose, the preliminary research questions, potential significance, and design:

Perspectives on the Persistence of African American Males in Higher Education

Martin Carnoy (1995) contends that African Americans, especially African American males, are not reaping the benefits of higher education. He cites various studies that reveal the fact that African American males are more likely to drop out of college than African American females and people from other racial groups. According to Carnoy, the reasons for low enrollment include "hostile environments" on campus that lessen the incentives for African American males to attend and graduate from college, "a century of subordination and separation," "inherent cultural incompatibility with white middle-class values," and the idea that African American males are "caught up in cycles of poverty, violence, and despair" (pp. 66-67). Qualitatively, how can institutions of higher education support the inclusion of African American males?

This study will focus on deepening our understanding about the experience of African American males students in higher education so that policymakers, program developers, and teachers will be more conscious of the factors that can positively influence the persistence of African American males. My hope is that if people are equipped with knowledge and goodwill they will act to help put an end to the disparities.

The overall questions that will guide the research are as follows:

1. What are some of the motivational factors that encourage African American males to attend and graduate from college?
2. What type of conditions within higher education can help to stimulate and nurture the persistence of African American males in college?
3. What other conditions (outside of higher education) might contribute to the success of African American males in higher education?

My general approach to this research study will be to develop greater understanding about this issue through an in-depth, phenomenological case study involving an African American male college student who has aspirations of obtaining an advanced degree. The research design includes a series of four 1.5-hour videotaped interviews and at least 5 hours of classroom and campus observations. A participant for the study has been identified and an agreement has been reached for a collaborative approach to the study.

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As depicted in this vignette, Joseph-Collins has introduced the topic—persistence of African American males in college—given a brief discussion of purpose, posed the preliminary general research questions, forecast the significance, and stipulated the overall design and unit of analysis. This pilot study was small, but its logic holds for larger studies.

Following are two examples of other introductory paragraphs. Each states the topic, discusses the purpose, stipulates the unit of analysis, and forecasts the study's significance:[1]

> Children with physical handicaps have unique perceptions about their "bodiedness." Grounded in phenomenological inquiry, this study will explore and describe the deep inner meaning of bodiedness for five children. The study will result in rich description through stories of these children's relationships with sports. The central concept of bodiedness will be explicated through the children's words. Those working with children with physical handicaps, as well as policymakers framing programs that affect them, will find the study of interest.

> The Neighborhood Arts Center in Orange, Massachusetts, is an award-winning program that serves all members of its community. The purpose of this study is to explain the success of this program in bringing arts to members of this low-income community. The study will use an ethnographic design, seeking detailed explanations of the program's success. The study will help decision makers and funders design similar programs that involve groups historically underrepresented in the arts.

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Limitations of the Study

No proposed research project is without limitations; there is no such thing as a perfectly designed study. As Patton (1990) notes, "There are no perfect research designs. There are always trade-offs" (p. 162). A discussion of the study's limitations demonstrates that the researcher understands this reality—that she will make no overweening claims about generalizability or conclusiveness relative to what she has learned.

Limitations derive from the conceptual framework and the study's design. A discussion of these limitations early on in the proposal reminds the reader

what the study is and is *not*—its boundaries—and how its results can and *cannot* contribute to understanding. As discussed throughout this chapter, framing the study in specific research and theoretical traditions places limits on the research. A study of land use in Indonesia, for example, could be situated in development economics; reminding the reader that the study is framed this way helps allay criticism. The overall design, moreover, indicates how broadly applicable the study may be. Although no qualitative studies are generalizable in the statistical sense, their findings may be transferable. A discussion of these considerations reminds the reader that the study is bounded and situated in a specific context. The reader, then, can make decisions about its usefulness for other settings.

Review of Related Literature

A thoughtful and insightful discussion of related literature builds a logical framework for the research that sets it within a tradition of inquiry and a context of related studies. The literature review serves four broad functions. First, it demonstrates the underlying assumptions behind the general research questions. If possible, it should display the research paradigm that undergirds the study and describe the assumptions and values the researcher brings to the research enterprise. Second, it demonstrates that the researcher is knowledgeable about related research and the intellectual traditions that surround and support the study. Third, it shows that the researcher has identified some gaps in previous research and that the proposed study will fill a demonstrated need. Finally, the review refines and redefines the research questions by embedding those questions in larger empirical traditions.

As the researcher conceptualizes the research problem, he locates it in a tradition of theory and related research. Initially, this may be an intuitive locating, chosen because of the underlying assumptions, how the researcher sees the world, and how he sees the research questions fitting in. As the researcher explores the literature, however, he should identify and state those assumptions in a framework of theory. This framework could be child development theory, organizational theory, learning theory, adult socialization theory, or whatever body of theory is appropriate. This section of the literature review provides the framework for the research and identifies the area of knowledge that the study is intended to expand.

The next portion of the review of literature should, quite literally, review and critique previous research that relates to the general research question.

This critical review should lead to a more precise problem statement or refined questions because it demonstrates the specific area that has not yet been adequately explored or it shows that a different design would be more appropriate. If a major aspect of the significance of the study arises from a reconceptualization of the topic, this is where that should be developed fully. Cooper (1988) provides a discussion of the focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organization, and audience for a literature review. An extended example of the integration and dovetailing of the significance and the review sections of the proposal is described in Vignette 4. Look for the ways the literature review led Marshall (1979, 1981, 1985b) to find new possibilities for pursuing the research questions.

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Vignette 4

Building Significance Through the Literature

When Marshall was researching the general problem of women's unequal representation in school administration careers, she first reviewed the work of previous researchers. Many researchers before her had conducted surveys to identify the attributes, the positions, and the percentages of women in school administration. A few researchers had identified patterns of discrimination.

In a significant departure from this tradition, Marshall reconceptualized the problem. She looked at it as a problem in the area of adult socialization and looked to career socialization theory. From a review of this body of theory and related empirical research on the school administrative career, including recruitment, training, and selection processes, and on women in jobs and careers, Marshall framed a new question. She asked, "What is the career socialization process for women in school administration? What is the process through which women make career decisions, acquire training and supports, overcome obstacles, and move up in the hierarchy?"

Marshall already knew from previous research that there was discrimination and that women administrators were different from women in other roles. With a background knowledge of organizational theory emphasizing the influence of organizational norms and the power of informal processes,

she created a new research question and a different research design. The literature review, therefore, determined the relevant concepts (i.e., norms, informal training) and the tentative guiding hypotheses. The need to identify how this research would be different from previous research focused this literature review. And from this review came the theoretical framework, key concepts, findings from previous research that would guide the new research, and a major aspect of the study's significance. The flow from theory to concepts to tentative hypotheses, moreover, helped focus the research questions.

Once the overall question was identified, the choice of qualitative methods was logical because this question required the exploration of a process not yet identified and not yet encompassed in theory. The research had to build in openness to the unexpected, to new findings, and it had to retain a flexible design that fostered the exploration of nuances of meaning in a complex, tacit process.

This reconceptualization came from asking the significance question: Who cares about this research? The question encouraged a review of previous research that demonstrated how other research had already answered many questions. It showed that women were as competent as men in school administration. But a critical review of this literature argued that this previous research had asked different questions. Marshall could assert that her study would be significant because it would focus on describing a process about which previous research had only guessed. The new research would add to theory by exploring career socialization of women in a profession generally dominated by men. It would also identify the relevant social, psychological, and organizational variables that are part of women's career socialization. This established the significance of the research by showing how it would add to knowledge.

The literature review also established the significance of the research for practice and policy with an overview of the issues of affirmative action and equity concerns. Thus, the research question, literature review, and research design were all tied in with the significance question. Responding to this question demanded a demonstration that this was an area of knowledge and practice that needed exploration. To ensure exploration, qualitative methods were the most appropriate for the conduct of the study.

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As the preceding vignette shows, the literature review can identify established knowledge and, more important, develop significance, new questions, and often turn old questions around. This "initiating function" (Rossman & Wilson, 1994) of the literature review can be quite creative. This review, moreover, provides the intellectual glue for the entire proposal, demonstrating the sections' conceptual relatedness. The researcher cannot write about the study's significance without knowledge of the literature. Similarly, she cannot describe the design without a discussion of the general research topic. The dissertation proposal is divided into sections because of tradition and convention; there is no magic to these divisions. To organize complex topics and to address the three critical questions posed at the beginning, however, the structure provided here is recommended. Another vignette illustrates how the conceptualization of a study can be creative and exciting, as the researcher forges links among historically disparate literatures.

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Vignette 5

Creative Review of the Literature

When research questions explore new territory, previous literature and theory may be inadequate for constructing frameworks for the study. A case in point is that of Christman (1987), a graduate student in educational administration who searched the literature for a way to frame her study of women returning to graduate school.

Christman's forays into the literature on returning women students and her interaction with faculty and colleagues suggested a number of relevant and provocative questions for her research. Previous studies identified and described demographics about returning women and evaluated the effectiveness of support programs for these women. Many of these studies employed survey or quasi-experimental research designs focused on outcomes and/or products. It became clear that previous research failed to conceptualize the problem in terms of process. With an emphasis on experience, the meaning of experience, and development over time, a process conceptualization placed the study in the theoretical domains of adult socialization. The goal of the research then became the description and analysis of contexts, interactions, and processes.

Continuing to examine the graduate school experience of returning women students, Christman believed that placement of this experience within the context of psychosocial development would illuminate its meaning for the participant. Indeed, recent research had suggested a direct link between a woman's life stage and her understanding of her educational experience.

A curiosity about women's management of two domains—expressive/relational/domestic and instrumental/public/work—during the child-rearing years provided Christman with another set of questions about returning women students' experience. Piqued originally by Friedan's (1981) *The Second Stage,* this curiosity was then reinforced by the work of a growing number of social scientists who have called for research that explores the dynamic interaction of these domains (Giele, 1982; Kanter, 1977; Piotrkowski, 1979; Smelser & Erikson, 1980). Such interaction is complex. In some instances, the two domains may merge so completely as to render the distinction between the two largely artificial. At the same time, the construct of overlapping domains seemed useful in conceptualizing the study.

Christman quoted Kanter (1977) to describe the interplay among field data, literature, and the researcher's self-reflection:

> The other important base for this study should not be neglected. This was, of course, an extensive review of the sociological, social psychological, psychological, and organizational behavior literatures. I considered this a part of the study critical to its success. I worked back and forth between the literature and the field. I formulated hypotheses and questions from the literature, and I could test the generalizability of my field observations through the literature review. With C. Wright Mills I believe that reading can also be a valid form of research. (p. 298)

That no single strand of theoretical or empirical literature encompassed the entirety of her research questions was clear from the outset. Literature on returning women graduate students focused on the evaluation of programs designed to overcome obstacles. Literature acknowledging the interface of love and work was just emerging. With this emergence came the overthrow of the functionalists' assumptions that the institutions of family and workplace were divided into emotional and geographical units that were specialized in their separate activities, without mutual interference (Pleck, 1976, p. 179).

The relatively recent attention given to the developmental nature of adulthood by social psychology focused primarily on the life stages of men.

Critiques by Gilligan (1982a, 1982b) and Chodorow (1978) indicated that the values and dreams of the women involved in Christman's study would probably differ from those of men. Socialization theory pointed to role acquisition, the development of commitment to a profession, and the impact of formal and informal structures in graduate school that affect those being socialized in different ways.

Although Christman's literature review did not precisely set her research question within a particular framework, it did expose missing areas and the questions raised by existing literature. It also underscored her work as research into unexplored territory that promised to identify new ways of connecting previous knowledge to new grounded theory.

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Vignette 5 shows a creative blending of several strands of literature for framing the research. The integration of literatures helped shape a research focus that was theoretical in interest yet could help inform policy at the organizational level. Broad reading and knowledge of sociological role theory, adult development, organizational structures and processes, and feminist theory provided a rich background for this creative synthesis. Rather than narrowly constructing the study to focus on only one of the above topics, the author searched widely for illuminating constructs from other disciplines. Such work, although at times tedious, confusing, and ambiguous, enhances the research to follow and demonstrates that the researcher has engaged in significant intellectual work already.

Another example of integrative literature reviews comes from the proposal for a study of the decision process of a major research university to adopt a multimillion dollar information system (Alvarez, 1998). In developing the conceptual framework for her study, Alvarez (1998) integrated innovation theory and institutional theory, arguing that neither theoretical tradition with its attendant research could adequately explain the adoption process. Excerpts from her proposal are presented in Vignette 6.

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Vignette 6

Integrating Theoretical Perspectives

Why and how do organizations evaluate, adopt, and implement innovations? An innovation is considered any idea, practice, or material artifact

perceived to be new by the adopting organization or individual (Zaltman, Duncan, & Holbeck, 1973). The question is especially relevant for information technology innovations. As organizations confront new information technologies in an atmosphere of uncertainty, they are forced to make very expensive and long-term decisions with far too little information about the product's benefits, long-term viability, and potential fit with the organization.

Much of the scholarly research [on innovation adoption] . . . is informed by innovation theory (Zaltman et al., 1973). . . . Innovation theory provides insightful explanations of relationships among task, technology, individual and work outputs to explain the successful adoption and implementation of technology. Most studies define, or operationalize, successful adoption as amount or level of technology use. Accordingly, many of the studies seek to discover independent variables, or factors, that tend to influence technology use, including the adopter's characteristics or the innovation's characteristics (cf. Kwon & Zmud, 1987). . . . Generally speaking, these studies draw on a perspective that is concerned with maximizing the use of technology and assume, implicitly at least, that adoption will enhance work activities and outputs.

Yet while this research has provided much in the way of understanding why individuals or organizations adopt a new information technology, it has done little to provide a more complete picture of the entire adoption process. As Meyer and Goes (1988) have suggested, the technology adoption process is a dynamic, multilevel, and lengthy decision process involving a host of actors and actions. However, the tools of innovation researchers, intended to capture these relationships through the discrete measurement of factors, or "snapshots," do not lend themselves to capturing the *adoption process as a whole*. For instance, we are not told how technical criteria, such as "flexible" and "integrated" systems, get on the agenda, or why decision makers believe that these criteria are important, much less why some work requirements become subordinated to technical requirements, while others compel technological adjustments. And finally, how do decisions based on these criteria diffuse over a period of time throughout the organization and its environment? The end result is that innovation research falls short of providing a complete picture of what is a considerably more complicated process of evaluating, adopting, and implementing a new technological innovation.

Institutional theory is a set of approaches to the study of organizations that seeks insight into less determinate goal-driven institutions like universities. This study will draw on institutional theory to integrate the isolated

parts of technology adoption to provide a holistic picture. One of the underlying premises of institutional theory is that organizations are not merely technical systems. Instead, the theory suggests that the wider social and cultural context constitutes and shapes an organization's structures, processes, and practices (Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1992). Institutional theory allows us to examine how organizations choose and legitimate courses of action in situations governed by formal rules and technical rationality. Much of the stability and order we associate with the existence of organizations does not flow from stable material forces such as technology or production systems but, rather, from less determinate elements such as knowledge systems, myths, rituals and beliefs. The concepts of *institutional rules* and *rational myths* (Meyer & Rowan, 1992) and *institutionalization* as a political process (DiMaggio, 1988) are used to examine why and how particular decisions leading to the adoption of a new information system are considered, selected, and diffused throughout the organization.

In this dissertation I will combine innovation theory and institutional theory to examine managers' practices and choices during the introduction of the proposal and subsequent adoption of a university-wide information system. Innovation theory is used to categorize and describe objective and perceived influencing factors that lead to successful adoptions and implementations of new information systems. I plan to use innovation theory, in this dissertation, to create an organizational framework and to identify the objective and predicted, but static, factors that tend to influence the decision to adopt a new information system. At the same time, I plan to use institutional approaches to unfold the course by which technology adoption was charted. I shall seek to chart the manner in which the decision to adopt diffused throughout the organization and its environment. In this regard, I shall examine organizational practices that sustain and continually renew the decision to adopt both internal and external to the organization.

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In this proposal, Alvarez (1998) integrates two diverse theoretical perspectives to provide a more complete framework for her study than could be provided by either theory alone. In so doing, she defines the important questions and concepts that each perspective brings to the research.

Yet another example is offered in Vignette 7. Framed as a study of high school cultures undergoing change, the conceptual framework and research

design for this study had to address fundamental definitions of change, culture, and the interaction of the two. The researchers then had to argue that these notions applied to schools. Specifically, the researchers were challenged to blend distinctive writings on organizational culture (derived from social anthropology and applied in organizational behavior studies), change in social systems (found in sociology, social psychology, and again, organizational behavior), and recent research depicting and analyzing the complex processes of what was then called school improvement (today we would call this restructuring). Vignette 7 describes this framework development.

* * * * *

Vignette 7

Developing Concepts Through the Literature

As part of an ongoing interest in school improvement and school change, the Applied Research Group at Research for Better Schools became interested in exploring the notion of culture as a lens for viewing school change, improvement initiatives, and mandates for reform. This interest arose because the researchers believed that a significant portion of the effective schools research expressed or implied that school culture was a significant aspect of effectiveness. More important than any one particular finding, Rossman, Corbett, and Firestone (1984) argued, was the way those elements were melded together to create a school culture that supported and encouraged learning and respect for one another.

These ideas were developed into a conceptual framework and research design (Rossman, 1985) that guided the study. The conceptual framework explored literatures from four traditions: anthropology, sociology, organization theory, and education. The first three were drawn on to build the definition of culture that guided the research, emphasizing the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of culture. Next, the researchers turned to the literatures on cultural change and transformation, some of which had been applied to the study of organizations, and the literature on educational change and innovation. These traditions were used to develop the idea that change in school culture could be conceptualized as evolutionary, additive, or transformative. Further examination of the literature on educational innovation and implementation helped refine this into the idea that change initiatives

(broadly construed) could affect school culture. This search identified places where the concept of culture was relied on either directly or implicitly.

Finally, a search through the literature on successful schools and other types of organizations generated five domains, or large categories of meaning, that might well be present in schools in the process of fundamental changes in their meaning structures. These domains encompassed two basic sets of questions about organizations and organizing. First, how did those who participated in this organization relate to one another in the workplace? What were the norms governing how they interacted? The two domains identified here were *collegiality* and *community.*

The second set of questions captured how participants defined the nature of the work. How were goals and expectations for others defined? Was there a belief in taking risks that was supported by others? And what constituted knowledge among those actors? To what authorities were claims made? Three domains were described to capture this set of questions: *goals and expectations, action orientation or risk taking,* and *knowledge base.* Together, these five domains fostered a creative use of literature outside the field of education and helped frame data collection for the research project.

* * * * *

The literature review serves many purposes for the research. It supports the importance of the study's focus and may serve to validate the eventual findings in a narrowly descriptive study. It also guides the development of explanations during data collection and analysis in studies that seek to explain, evaluate, and suggest linkages between events. In grounded-theory development, the literature review provides theoretical constructs, categories, and their properties that can be used to organize the data and discover new connections between theory and real-world phenomena.

The sections of the proposal discussed thus far—introduction, discussion of the topic and purpose, significance, general research questions, and literature review—stand together as the conceptual body of the proposal. Here, the major (and minor) ideas for the proposal are developed, their intellectual roots are displayed and critiqued, and the writings and studies of other researchers are presented and critiqued. All of this endeavor is intended to tell the reader what the research is about (its subject), who ought to care about it (its significance), and what others have described and concluded about the subject

(its intellectual roots). All three purposes are interwoven into these sections of the proposal.

The final major section—research design and methods—must flow conceptually and logically from all that has gone before. Here, the researcher makes a case, based on the conceptual portion of the proposal, for the particular methods, sample, data analysis techniques, and reporting format chosen for the study. Thus, the section on design and methods should build a rationale for decisions about the study's overall design and specific data collection methods. Here, the researcher should develop a case for the selection of qualitative methods.

The researcher must *not* decide to do a qualitative study and then search for a research problem. The methods should be linked epistemologically to the focus of the study and the research questions. In fact, novice researchers sometimes pose questions that demand quantitative responses and then find themselves in a quandary because they believed they were developing a proposal for qualitative work! Other times they suppose that qualitative research will be easier to conduct. Researchers should design the study according to the research questions they seek to answer. This suggests, of course, that there are many questions not appropriate to pursue through qualitative methods.

Although there are parallels, qualitative and more traditional quantitative proposals differ. In the development of a qualitative proposal, the researcher first orients the proposal reader to the general topic to be explored. This will not be a statement of specific research questions, propositions to be tested, or hypotheses to be examined. The discussion of the topic may be a general discussion of the puzzle, unexplored issue, or group to be studied. It becomes more precise and focused through the literature review that often includes several bodies of literature because, in exploratory studies, it is hard to predict which literature will be most relevant and encompassing.

In some cases, the literature review yields cogent and useful definitions, constructs, concepts, and even data collection strategies. These may fruitfully result in a set of preliminary guiding hypotheses. Using such a phrase—"guiding hypothesis"—may assist readers accustomed to more traditional proposals. It is essential, however, that the researcher explain that guiding hypotheses are merely tools used to generate questions and to search for patterns and may be discarded when the researcher gets into the field and finds other exciting patterns of phenomena. This approach retains the flexibility needed to allow the precise focus of the research to evolve during the research process itself.

By avoiding precise hypotheses, the researcher retains her right to explore and *generate* questions in the general area of the topic. The guiding hypotheses illustrate for the reader some possible directions the researcher may follow. The researcher, however, is still free to discover and pursue other patterns.

We do not intend to suggest that proposal development proceeds in a linear fashion. As noted in Chapter 1, conceptualizing a study and developing a design that is clear, flexible, and manageable is dialectic, messy, and just plain hard work. As the researcher plays with concepts and theoretical frames for the study, she often entertains alternative designs, assessing them for their power to address the emerging questions. Considering an ethnography, a case study, or an in-depth interview study as the overall design will in turn reshape the research questions. And so the process continues as the conceptual framework and specific design features become more and more elegantly related. The challenge is to build the logical connections between the topic, the questions, and the design and methods; we turn now to that last topic.

Note

1. These paragraphs are adapted from Rossman and Rallis (1998).

Further Reading

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