When commencing a qualitative research project, it is essential that the researcher understand the variety of methods available and the relationships among research questions, methods, and desired results. In this chapter, we try to show how a researcher choosing a topic is led to a method, what is possible for the research to achieve, what the researcher can ask and hope to have answered, and how question, data, and analysis fit together. Once a researcher sees this fit, the choice of a method for any particular study is never arbitrary.

Not all qualitative methods integrate all aspects of the project in the same manner, and most contain considerable variety. In this overview, we ignore those variations to stress the two principles of qualitative methods that inform the rest of this book: methodological *purposiveness* and methodological *congruence*.

First, we establish how particular research *purposes* and questions lead the researcher to particular data sources and analysis strategies, sketching the links for three major methods. We then argue for the importance of *congruence*—the way in which what the researcher asks, where he or she asks it, and how he or she works toward an answer all fit together.

**METHODOLOGICAL PURPOSIVENESS**

There is almost always a best way to do any research project, a particular method that is best suited to each particular problem. The choice of best method always comes from the research purpose.
Of course, the choice is never entirely open. It is always constrained by something—the researcher’s familiarity with methods, the researcher’s resources, or sometimes the data themselves. At one extreme, researchers starting from the availability of particularly interesting data will quite normally have their methodological options predetermined. Although this can be restricting, such researchers may well be envied by other researchers for whom none of the elements in the equation are controlled: a general topic area, many possibilities for making data, and no methodological direction. Researchers in the latter group, in turn, may be tempted to claim constraint (“I have to do a grounded theory study because that’s the only sort of qualitative research accepted in my school”). But that’s where the danger lies—in a topic shoehorned into a particular method. Some seasoned researchers work the other way around, through commitment to one method, which means they ask only (even, it might appear, can ask only) certain sorts of questions. But they start with questions, and they must always be open to the possibility that a question requires a different method.

Especially when choice of method seems constrained, it is important that the researcher understands the process by which he or she selects a method, and that the researcher sees the selection as deliberate and as reflecting research purpose. The purpose may be to learn about a specific problem (e.g., “Why do residents not use the facilities?”) or to understand a situation (“I wonder what the experience of . . . is”). Or the purpose may be no more specific than to learn more about a particular topic or to do justice to those interesting data that suddenly became available. In such a project, exploring the literature and spending time in the setting will help the researcher to focus on a clearer problem and frame a sharper research question, and the data will direct further inquiry. In any project, a decision about method does not just happen by default. A purpose, however unspecific, guides the researcher to a more focused research question and hence to a choice of method.

The researcher actively creates the link between purpose and method through a process of reflecting on purpose, focusing on a researchable question, and considering how to address it. That link is never, of course, a simple one-way causal connection. Most projects commence with an opening phase in which the researcher conducts an armchair walkthrough and considers several routes and several methodological vehicles. The appropriate approach may not be a qualitative method. Sometimes the research purpose opens out to several research questions, each requiring a different qualitative method, or the interplay of qualitative and
quantitative methods. But, however it is arrived at, the link of purpose to method is what gets a project going.

**Why Are You Working Qualitatively?**

Why did you select a qualitative method? Often, the researcher has a very practical goal for beginning the project—it may be an unanticipated problem area in the classroom or a particularly puzzling patient situation that the experts seem unable to understand. It may be an area in which patterns of behavior are statistically clear (changes in the birthrate, for instance), but researchers can only guess at reasons for these patterns without an understanding of people’s own accounts of their behavior. It may be a policy area (such as urban planning) where the best-laid plans are thwarted by apparently irrational choices (incredibly, the slum dwellers didn’t want to be relocated!). In each of these cases, the researcher chose to work qualitatively, with complex unstructured data from which new understandings might be derived. Below, we summarize the major reasons for working qualitatively—the research question requires it, and the data demand it.

**The Research Question Requires It**

For many of us, the first really good moment in a project occurs when we see how the research purpose can be pursued by one but not another means. In retrospect, this may be blindingly obvious. For instance, you need to understand what children *mean* to parents in this society before you can predict fertility rates, so what you must do is listen to parents’ stories of parenthood rather than ask predetermined questions about birth control. The only way of making sense of classroom problems is to get an understanding of the latent processes of power—observe, listen to what is said in the classroom and the staff room, and examine the words and their meanings rather than simply distribute a questionnaire. What if the apparently irrational behavior of slum dwellers makes sense to them? The only way to find out is to hang around and observe their daily life, rather than assume that the condition of their housing is their top priority. Each of these purposes points toward one of the methods we sketch in Chapter 3.

Researchers who are brought (sometimes kicking and screaming) to a qualitative method driven by the topic often combine qualitative with
quantitative methods. They may recognize their need to understand and
to develop meaning prior to or subsequent to, rather than instead of, a
quantitative study. Perhaps they require a larger-scale inquiry or system-
atic testing of hypotheses. In such situations, a qualitative component
may precede a quantitative project and provide different types of findings
for richer and more complete results. (We discuss such combinations of
techniques when we address triangulated design in Chapter 4.)

The Data Demand It

It may be, however, that you have no such research purpose directing
you to working qualitatively. What, then, has led you to such methods?
A powerful push can come from data; some data can be obtained only
through the use of a particular strategy. For example, it is not possible to
interview some participants—very young children who cannot talk or
elderly persons with Alzheimer’s disease may not be able to provide coher-
ent responses. In these cases, the nature of the participants requires that
researchers use observational strategies, obtaining data in the form of field
notes or videotape. If your topic forces you in such a direction, it will be
the first of many times in the project when data seem to be driving the
study. Recognizing such imperatives will always take you forward, because
qualitative methods are properly responsive to discoveries in data.

Many quantitatively trained researchers first started working qualita-
tively because they recognized that the statistical analyses of particular
survey responses did not seem to fit what those in the situations of inter-
est said or what people wrote in their open-ended answers. In avoiding the
temptation to dismiss their participants’ open-ended responses or to use
them merely to illustrate the reports, perceptive researchers sought ways
to analyze them. Action researchers might be brought to qualitative meth-
ods by complex social or political situations in which it is essential to
understand all sides of a controversy but the available documents and dis-
cussions defy neat categorization. For a study to be useful, the researcher
must make sense of such a situation. Practitioners might observe and
record the complexities of clinical situations that seem to be denied by tidy
reports of patient compliance; in seeking an understanding of that com-
plexity, they find they need ways of doing justice to the data.

Coming to a qualitative method because your data require it provides
high motivation but often high stress, too. The survey must be reported,
the action group informed, the patients helped; it seems that you must
become an instant qualitative researcher. If this is your situation, we
recommend that you go carefully through the nine points we list in Chapter 12 under the heading “How Do You Start?”

Should You Be Working Qualitatively?

The obvious first question is whether the research purpose is best answered by qualitative methods. We hope we have made it clear that we see nothing morally or methodologically superior about qualitative approaches to research. Other things being equal, a quantitative project will often be faster, easier for a researcher lacking qualitative training, and arguably more acceptable in many research contexts. Moreover, the research world is replete with questions that are properly and effectively answered quantitatively, and that will be badly answered, or not answered at all, if a qualitative method is imposed on them. Forcing such questions into qualitative methods has the same effect on projects and researchers as forcing the glass slipper onto their feet had for Cinderella’s ugly step-sisters’ marriage prospects—it won’t work, it will hurt a lot, and the result is a loss of credibility.

It is not our goal in this book to examine the philosophical origins of qualitative methods or the approaches to evidence and “reality” behind different methodologies, but it is important to note that we see no chasm between qualitative and quantitative techniques. It is our experience that many qualitative projects involve counting at some stage, and many questions are best answered by quantification. But given that we aim here to give those embarking on qualitative research an understanding of what it will be like, we assume that you, the reader, are about to embark. Thus the obvious first question is whether you should do so.

Qualitative methods are the best or only way of addressing some research purposes and answering some sorts of questions, such as in the following cases:

1. If the purpose is to understand an area where little is known or where previously offered understanding appears inadequate (thin, biased, partial), you need research methods that will help you see the subject anew and will offer surprises. Put bluntly, if you don’t know what you are likely to find, your project requires methods that will allow you to learn what the question is from the data.

2. If the purpose is to make sense of complex situations, multicontext data, and changing and shifting phenomena, you need ways of
simplifying and managing data without destroying complexity and context. Qualitative methods are highly appropriate for questions where preemptive reduction of the data will prevent discovery.

3. If the purpose is to learn from the participants in a setting or a process the way they experience it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience, you need methods that will allow you to discover and do justice to their perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations. Qualitative methods have in common the goal of generating new ways of seeing existing data.

4. If the purpose is to construct a theory or a theoretical framework that reflects reality rather than your own perspective or prior research results, you may need methods that assist the discovery of theory in data.

5. If the purpose is to understand phenomena deeply and in detail, you need methods for discovery of central themes and analysis of core concerns.

Each of these suggestions has a flip side. If you know what is being hypothesized and what you are likely to find, if you do not need to know the complexity of others’ understandings, if you are testing prior theory rather than constructing new frameworks, or if you are simply describing a situation rather than deeply analyzing it, it is possible that you should not be working qualitatively. Perhaps the research question you are tackling with in-depth interviews would be more properly addressed with a survey. In such a case, our best advice is that you review your general purpose and ask yourself if it can be addressed better that way. Many purposes are perfectly served by survey data, and very many purposes require surveys. Important examples are research questions seeking to establish the associations among easily measured factors across a group or setting. If your goal is to establish that women in the paid workforce use neighborhood services less than do women who don’t work outside the home, a survey will do it. But maybe what you really need to ask is how women in the paid workforce perceive neighborhood relations.

Or perhaps the research purpose can be addressed through the use of more straightforward techniques, such as quantitative content analysis. If you wish to know which words dominate discussions of medical
treatments, rather than the meanings the participants give those words, a qualitative approach is likely to delay your answer. But maybe you want to find out more—for example, maybe you want to discover whether there are dominant discourses underlying those discussions.

On reflection, in either of the above cases there might be aspects of the research topic that would be best addressed through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. As we will show in Chapter 4, such combinations fit easily with many qualitative methods.

Qualitative research is a proper response to some, but not all, research needs. We have both learned to be alert to risk in projects where the researcher is working qualitatively for the wrong reasons. These include reasons that are negative rather than positive ("I hate statistics" or "I can't use computers") and assumptions that qualitative research is more humanistic, moral/ethical, worthy, feminist, radical, or admirable. (The techniques we describe in the chapters that follow are also the most invasive, intrusive, and morally challenging, the only good reason a researcher should consider using them is that the research problem requires them.) Our point here is not just that you need a good reason for working qualitatively because of both practical and ethical considerations, but also that you need to have thought your way to this method if you are to start learning it. Good qualitative research requires purpose, skill, and concentration, and unless you recognize this and your purpose is clear and committed, the task will quickly become onerous.

How Should You Be Working Qualitatively?

What we have described as a fit between research question and method is never a simple cause-and-effect relationship. As you decide on the focus and scope of your study, the firming research question will indicate the best method for you to use, and your reading on methods will suggest ways in which you can focus the study. We start in Table 2.1 by comparing just three of the qualitative methods commonly described in textbooks. Usually (but not always), phenomenology best addresses a question about meaning: “What is the experience of . . .?” Ethnography offers researchers tools to answer questions such as “What is happening?” Researchers are directed to grounded theory by questions of interaction and process: “How does one become a . . .?” The link between question and data is obvious when one contrasts these three “classic” methods.
As the purpose points to the research question and the research question informs the choice of method, so the method fits the type of data to be collected. (See Table 2.2, which lists the types of data required by particular methods.) However, selecting a method and making data are not discrete events in the research process; rather, they are aspects linked by common ways of thinking. The distinction between a method and a way of making data is not at all rigid. Many researchers would speak of focus groups or participant observation as methods: They are ways of making data, with goals that fit these ways of making data, and each has a methods literature. But we prefer to consider these strategies; in Chapter 3, we discuss these as “incomplete” methods.

In the chapters to come, we discuss types of data, ways of handling data, and analytic techniques that belong to no particular method and are used in many. For now, our goal is to suggest the ways some data fit some methods. This does not mean that a way of making data is a method or implies a method. The fact that you are interviewing people tells an observer nothing about why, or about what you will do with those data. But the content and form of interviews and what you see in them will be different for different methods. This is because how you think about the data differs from method to method.

Table 2.1 The Fit of Question and Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Question</th>
<th>Method That Might Be Appropriate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions about meaning (e.g., What is the meaning of . . . ?) and about the core or essence of phenomena or experiences</td>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observational questions (e.g., What are the behavioral patterns of . . . ?) and descriptive questions about values, beliefs, and practices of a cultural group (What is going on here?)</td>
<td>Ethnography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process questions about changing experience over time or its stages and phases (e.g., What is the process of becoming . . . ?) or understanding questions (e.g., What are the dimensions of this experience . . . ?)</td>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Selecting a Method to Making Data
From Choosing Sources and Sorts of Data to Managing and Analyzing Data

There is a further link in this methodological chain of research purpose, research question, choice of method, and the type of data needed. It is hardly surprising that the ways the researcher handles, manages, explores, and analyzes data are all part of the same chain.

Once again, our simple tabulation of the three methods shows commonalities. It is possible to describe in similar terms the strategies, or techniques of analysis, used within each of these different methods. The difference is not in the technique per se but in the way the strategy is used. Different ways of approaching the research will mean that the same techniques are used in different ways and produce different results. For example, researchers using very different methods may all code and, while coding, use the same technique—selecting a portion of text and assigning it to a category. But the similarity ends there. For each of them, the way of approaching and thinking about the data means that codes are applied in a particular way, and this results in a particular way of linking data to categories. The differences show when we ask questions such as the following: What is a category? What data are coded there? Is the collection of data for a category the end or the beginning of analysis? How do you think about the category, and how do you use categories? The answers are very

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chosen Method</th>
<th>Likely Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td><em>Primary:</em> audiotaped, in-depth conversations; phenomenological literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Secondary:</em> poetry; art; films</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td><em>Primary:</em> participant observation; field notes; unstructured or structured interviews (sometimes audio- or videotaped)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Secondary:</em> documents, records; photographs; videotapes; maps, genograms, sociograms; focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td><em>Primary:</em> interviews (usually audiotaped); participant and nonparticipant observations; conversations recorded in diaries and field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Secondary:</em> comparative instances; personal experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.3  The Fit of Method, Data, and Analysis Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Data Sources and Types</th>
<th>Analysis Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>Audiotaped, in-depth conversations; phenomenological conversations; phenomenological literature</td>
<td>Theme-ing, phenomenological reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Memoing and reflective writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>Primary: participant observation; field notes; structured or unstructured interviews Secondary: documents; focus groups</td>
<td>Thick description, rereading notes, storing information, and coding by topic; storying; case analysis Coding, recording field notes, and diagramming to show patterns and processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>Primary: audiotaped interviews; observations Secondary: comparative instances; personal experience</td>
<td>Theoretical sensitivity, developing concepts, coding at categories, open coding for theory generation Focused memoing, diagramming, emphasis on search for core concepts and processes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Different from method to method. Although different qualitative methods may utilize similar strategies, how you think while using particular strategies differs. We can expand Table 2.2, adding the mode of handling data and the analysis that fits; the results are displayed in Table 2.3.

**Methodological Congruence**

In explaining the purposeful nature of qualitative inquiry, we arrive at our second principle of qualitative methods. Tables 2.1–2.3 show the way projects acquire methodological congruence—that is, fit between the research problem and the question, fit between the research question and the method, and, of course, fit among the method, the data, and the way
of handling data. All of these components of the research process mesh
to make the best possible end product. Thus each method is a distinctive
way of approaching the world and data.

The concept of methodological congruence does not mean that data
sources or analysis methods are predetermined for the researcher once he
or she has chosen a method. It isn’t that easy. Nor does it mean that a
researcher has no flexibility once he or she has embarked on a particular
path. Methodological congruence refers to the fact that projects entail con-
gruent ways of thinking. The researcher working with phenomenology
must learn to think phenomenologically if the fit of purpose, method, and
data is to work well. If you are working with grounded theory, it is impor-
tant that you learn how to think as a grounded theorist. The same sorts
of data (e.g., field notes) will be interpreted differently by researchers
using different methods, and similar data analysis techniques (e.g., coding)
employed by researchers using different methods will have quite different
analytic results, because each researcher is thinking a different way.

Qualitative research is not just a matter of performing techniques on
data; rather, each qualitative method is a specific way of thinking about
data and using techniques as tools to manipulate data to achieve a goal.
Each component of the research process is linked to the next, and the
chosen method dictates combinations of strategies to be used in particular
ways to ensure consistency throughout the research process. As we show in
Chapter 3, not all methods are as complete as the ones sketched in Tables
2.1–2.3. But all methods entail certain distinctive ways of thinking.

Seeing Congruence by Doing It

The webs of methodological congruence are most easily illustrated by
an exploration of the different ways a real research topic can be handled.
In what follows, we present a fictitious project concerning human attach-
ment. If you have data from a previous study or a growing sense of your
research interest, you might try applying what you read below to your
approaches to that topic.

What is “human attachment”? Which literature should we look to?
We have many choices—we could look at the literature on bonding
between mothers and infants, at the family studies literature on family
relationships, or even at the social support literature. We could extend
this to the relationship literature on interaction, the literature on mar-
riage, or the literature on mothering. We could choose a situation in
which we could observe the concept as well as obtain personal accounts of attachment. From our broad topic and scan of the literature, let’s choose to study public displays of attachment behavior at the arrivals and departures gates at airports. There we could observe attachment (and detachment) behaviors as passengers depart or as they greet family and friends on arrival. We could interview individuals (the passengers themselves or their relatives and friends) about the experience of greeting and leaving. Or we may consider interviewing “experts” who have observed many passengers greeting or leaving each other (porters, staff at car rental booths, security personnel waiting to check carry-on luggage, cleaning staff, and so on).

Given this topic (human attachment) and having identified a research context, our next step is to create a research question. Different questions will lead to us to particular methods, and the method in turn will help us to decide details of the research design, such as who the participants will be, what the sample size should be, how data will be created and analyzed, and, most important, what type of results we will obtain.

Let us explore the topic by conducting an armchair walkthrough—that is, by taking a mindful stroll through the topic and visualizing what it might look like when we anticipate doing the study using each of the three major methods sketched above. The first concern of all qualitative researchers is locating the project. The setting for the research must be one in which the phenomena of interest are likely to be seen—frequently, and in an intense form. Those we choose to interview must be “expert participants,” with much experience with the phenomena of interest. We must deliberately and purposefully select a setting or context where we will best see what we want to study. We do not usually choose a place or a sample randomly, for we would then have to rely on luck to see what we are interested in; we do not choose the “average” experience, as then the characteristics of the phenomena are diluted and less evident.

**THE ARMCHAIR WALKTHROUGH**

How does one prepare to do a research study? Obviously, one may approach a particular problem in several different ways, developing several different questions, so that each one could be answered using a different method and could produce a slightly different result. Which one is best, and how is that determined?
One way to reduce the uncertainty is by conducting an armchair walkthrough—that is, by mentally going through the process. If I ask this research question, then I will need to use this particular method, seek this type of data and involve these participants, ask these interview questions, handle and analyze data this particular way, and the results will be in this form. On the other hand, if I do it using that method, then I will ask the questions that way, use that method, and involve those participants; data will look that way, and my results will be in that form.

By conducting an armchair walkthrough, we are trying to predict the research process and the outcome rather than go into research blindly. In this way, without losing flexibility or the ability to change some of our choices, we can focus on the data rather than on decisions about the administration of research. Although this type of conceptualizing will not detect every problem that may be encountered, it lets us get some sense of what we may learn by using each method. It allows for some level of informed choice about which method has the potential to provide the most suitable type of results, and it is helpful as we make preliminary preparation for writing the proposal. On the other hand, we need to be aware that such decisions are not carved in stone, and we should always be prepared to reevaluate and make changes if necessary. Table 2.4 displays the thinking that came out of the armchair walkthrough for our hypothetical project “Arrivals and Departures: Patterns of Human Attachment.”

AND NOW—YOUR TOPIC?

“What are you studying?” is possibly the most common question asked of the researcher, and it is also quite often the most troublesome one. Interestingly, the issue of how to find a topic is not answered in any of the textbooks on qualitative research. This is because when you select a topic, you still have not started the research project. Selecting a topic involves also seeing the purposiveness of the study and the congruence of question, method, and what your project will be like.

Selecting the topic also involves selecting where you will go to do the study—it is not the research question you ask when you get there, or the method you use to answer it. If you find yourself telling inquirers, “I’m doing classroom authority/nurses’ experiences of chosen childlessness/inflicting pain . . . .” listen to the words you are using. The researcher does not “do” a topic as the mindless tourist “does” Belgium, checking off
Table 2.4  Comparison of Three Methods to Conduct a Hypothetical Project, “Arrivals and Departures: Patterns of Human Attachment”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Setting and Participants</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Types of Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>What is the meaning of separation from or rejoining your spouse?</td>
<td>Interviews at interviewees’ convenience; person who has traveled recently. 6–10 in each group.</td>
<td>In-depth audiotaped conversations. Reflection on the phenomenological literature and other sources.</td>
<td>In-depth reflective description of the experience of separating from or rejoining your spouse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>What are the patterns of human attachment displayed during arrivals and departures at the airport?</td>
<td>Airport departure and lounge arrival - passengers, friends, relatives, experts at the scene (airport personnel). Approximately 30–50 informants.</td>
<td>Unstructured, audiotaped interviews and participant observation at the gate. Field notes and other documents.</td>
<td>Description of the patterns of greeting behaviors or styles of farewell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>What is the process of greeting or leaving your family?</td>
<td>Interviews anywhere, observations at the airport gate of passengers, family members. Approximately 30–50 participants.</td>
<td>Audiotaped interviews and observations. New data as theory directs research.</td>
<td>Theory about leaving and reunion; focus on the social psychological processes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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museums between France and Scandinavia. The *topic* of a research project is where it is located, where you are going to place your study, not what you will ask, how you will ask it, or how your research will provide answers when you are there. (Incidentally, the term comes from Aristotle’s *Topics*, which contains commonplace arguments, from the Greek *topikos*, “of a place.”)

A topic may be any researchable area, subject, or experience (such as an organization, living in a community, or having a particular learning disability), a concept (such as corporate structure, classroom learning, social support, or coping), a setting (such as a boardroom, a school, a village, a hospital ward), a group of persons (such as teachers, doctors, or teenagers), some aspect of their everyday activities (such as teachers’ talk in the lounge), or activities that are unusual (teaching students with dyslexia). Those are all research locations or areas within which research questions can be defined. A topic may combine perspectives, so a researcher may be able to make an important argument for studying one of the above topics in a particular group by asserting that the experience of that group is sufficiently different from the experiences of other groups reported in the literature.

You may have several topics burning to be researched. The challenge, then, is to walk through each, asking how questions would be framed and what sorts of research they would require. Or you may have no topic, but instead a requirement that you get a project up and running. It seems harder to start that way, because then research presents itself as the push of duty, not the pull of interest in a topic. Wanted: a good topic!

**How to Find a Topic**

Any attempt to summarize reasons for selecting a topic runs the risk of appearing to present the process as orderly. It usually is not. Insights about suitable topics occur to researchers as they stand on high hills, while they are in the shower, or when they are in the library; topics demand attention when you are trying to do something else. A sort of typology is possible, however. If you are stumped, try locating your research in each of the five ways listed below. But remember to locate the project to ask how your topic would be studied and what the outcome project would be like.
You Are Already There

Statistically, “already being there” is undoubtedly the most common reason for topic selection. It is also the most exciting and the most dangerous. Because you are there, you possibly have, or may be convinced that you have, intimate knowledge of the topic as a participant. It seems you can get going fast—the preparatory work has been done. You are familiar with the setting and comfortable with the people there. But be careful: You were there for reasons other than research (such as employment or group membership or shared experience). These required a different type of preparatory work for you to become a good participant or actor in the setting. Being a researcher there may perhaps provide you with the opportunity to contribute new knowledge to an area you care about. And so you may, but you will have to ensure that your contribution represents valued research results and not merely what you wanted to prove or get done as a participant. If these ends are the same, you will have to be especially careful to establish that they were the same and that your study is rigorous.

There Is a Gap in the Literature

Topics that are amenable to qualitative inquiry have often been relatively ignored in the literature. Of course, this may be because they are inaccessible to researchers or, worse, simply uninteresting. The fact that nobody has studied a particular topic is not a good reason for taking it up. On the other hand, such topics may be neglected because they are areas in need of qualitative inquiry, areas where it is not easy to frame clear questions, areas that are difficult to access, or areas that are obscured by received interpretations.

Of course, this is a double-edged sword. If a topic has not been investigated, you will have an explorer’s challenge of discovering a new place, mapping the area, displaying it to an admiring world, maybe even getting your name on it. Classic qualitative research projects have opened up whole areas of investigation in this way. With the second wave of feminism, qualitative studies returned to topics in the hitherto taken-for-granted social lives of women, opening up research areas addressing motherhood, social support networks, and even housework.

However, as Columbus found, undiscovered places are hard to sell. This is particularly important if you are a student applying for funding for research expenses. Research into topics that are “fashionable”—that is,
topics that a number of other researchers are also investigating (or have investigated)—is generally easier to get funded, but there is usually a considerable amount of literature on those topics in the library already.

**Another Way of Looking Is Needed**

You might suspect that the literature may be poorly focused, or that there is something wrong, invalid, or inaccurate about the presentation and interpretation of the topic. Perhaps the received knowledge does not fit with the evidence, or results of the studies reported in the literature have been presented within the context of a theory that is invalid or inappropriate. It is time to take a fresh look at the phenomenon and reexamine the theory from within, taking into consideration the perceptions of those being studied. In recent decades, women’s studies and studies of health and illness exemplify this approach, as qualitative studies challenged the functionalist paradigm, reopening questions of power and conflict.

**What’s Going On Here?**

Qualitative methods are frequently used to discover the answers to quite pragmatic questions, such as “What is going on here?” or “How are we doing with this innovation?” Evaluation studies are of this type: The researchers are trying to understand and describe efficiently the processes or structures of particular phenomena. Much action research sets out to find out “what is going on here”—the topic is “here,” this community, this fight, this local government organization, and so on.

**Supplementing Quantitative Inquiry**

The topic may be an area where there is considerable knowledge of events or patterns from quantitative research, or where quantitative work needs prior backgrounding. The qualitative project may form the groundwork for subsequent quantitative inquiry or be used to supplement quantitative inquiry, or quantitative inquiry may be used to illustrate qualitative inquiry. The end result of a qualitative project may be insight into a problem, a rich description, a hypothesis, a theory to be tested further in quantitative research, or a qualitatively derived theory that is ready to use. You should consider the purpose of the qualitative project before commencing the project and selecting the method.
From Topic to Researchable Question: Focusing Qualitative Inquiry

Deciding on a topic locates your research; this is where you are researching. Framing a qualitative question is harder, because it requires that you think about what needs to be asked in this research location as well as what you can ask and reasonably expect have answered given your resources and skills. A research question is a starting point only if it is researchable.

One of the most difficult tasks for the beginning researcher is to think qualitatively before the research begins. A researchable qualitative question is not the most obvious outcome of reflecting on a topic. The big first questions are as follows:

- **What** needs to be asked?
- **How** should it be asked? What data are required, and where will the researcher have to go to find answers to these questions?
- **Can** it be asked, and if so, what sort of a researcher or research stance is needed?

Ethical as well as practical considerations must be explored (we discuss these in detail in Chapters 10 and 11). If you are planning to do research with vulnerable populations (such as groups in schools, prisons, hospitals, or some cultural groups), you must obtain special permission at the institutional level as well as at the guardian or parent, care provider, and individual levels. Once you have obtained access, you must have in place strategies to protect the identity of the participants. Consider who will have access to the raw data. How will it be stored? How will identities of participants or places be protected? Who will have access to the final report? And who will need to review it or approve it prior to publication?

**WHAT CAN YOU AIM FOR?**

By now it should be clear that qualitative researchers are aiming for an outcome that is more than a good story. It's the fit of method, data, and analysis that makes the difference between journalism and qualitative research. Good journalism and good qualitative research share goals of understanding people's situations, thoroughly researching and vividly
illustrating what’s found. But all qualitative methods aim for abstraction and analysis, not only description. (Robert Park, a founder of the Chicago School of Sociology, and a journalist by training, called sociology “journalism with a theory.”)

And it will be a particular sort of analysis. In all the examples given above, the outcome is something new, a discovery from the data. This goal explains much in the techniques for handling data throughout this book. Qualitative coding, for example, aims to retain the detail of the data, so it can be explored and rethought. The researcher resists, or delays, reducing that detail to numbers, since to do so would prevent further discovery. Unlike much (though not all) quantitative research, the qualitative project is unlikely to be testing existing theories. Much more likely is that from the data will be created a new theory or a new explanation of the phenomenon studied.

These are not unreachable goals. Discovered theories may be very small and local. In Chapter 7, we discuss the task of abstraction and the ways it is done. Meanwhile, as you work toward a topic, ask, what could you aim for? What would be a good outcome of this study? What would be good enough, and what would be excellent? (For discussion of possible study outcomes, see Richards, 2005, pp. 125–145.)

**SUMMARY**

We see the principles we have discussed in this chapter—the purposiveness of qualitative inquiry and methodological congruence—as the hallmarks of good qualitative research. They mean that a project’s goals and its methods cannot be considered separately or severed from the strategies of a research design. A research strategy is only a tool, and how one uses a tool depends on the purpose of inquiry, the method used, and the type of data. This is important: One may learn a strategy, but the way one uses it depends on the method. In Chapter 3, we start to sketch this process.

In this chapter, we have emphasized the wholeness of methods—the fit of question, data, and analysis. In Chapter 3, we address the flip side of this wholeness: Although qualitative methods are congruent, they are not always complete, and they do not always fully direct each stage of the project. We compare the same three methods discussed above in terms of completeness, showing how some convey full instructions for the entire project whereas others leave the researcher to choose a methodological path.
RESOURCES

Read different types of qualitative research studies to get a feel for the differing results.

This book provides a brief overview of the main types of qualitative inquiry and includes articles of each type as examples. It is useful for comparing and contrasting the types concerning the results that might be expected from research using the different methods.

Chapters on each stage of tasks involved in doing the research, and on being able to see the project as a whole. Chapter 7 has a sketch of possible outcomes.

Other Resources


Qualitative Research by Discipline

We provide here a recent text in each of a range of disciplines, as a starting point for your reading in the relevant literature.


**Journals**

*Ethnography*

*Field Methods*

*Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [http://qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.html]

*International Journal of Qualitative Methods* [http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm]

*International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*

*International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health & Well-Being*

*Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*

*Qualitative Health Research*

*Qualitative Inquiry*

*Qualitative Report* [http://www.nova.edu/ssss/qr/index.html]

*Qualitative Research* [http://www.sagepub.com/journalsProdDesc.nav?prodId=Journal201501]

*Qualitative Research Journal* [http://www.latrobe.edu.au/aqr/]

The Integrity of Qualitative Research