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. Like the detective work of Sherlock Holmes or the best traditions in investigative reporting, research seeks to explain, describe, explore, and/or critique 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 toward the change of oppressive circumstances. The commitment of these emancipatory genres to social justice is increasingly present in all genres of qualitative inquiry. Thus, the research proposal is a plan for engaging in systematic inquiry to bring about a better understanding of the phenomenon and/or 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 theoretical framework, design, and methodology will generate data appropriate for responding to the research questions and will conform to ethical standards. These decisions emerge through intuition, complex reasoning, and the weighing of 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, dialectical process of designing a qualitative study. This chapter discusses 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. As noted in Chapter 1, this recursive process is complex and intellectually challenging because the researcher needs to consider multiple elements—multiple decisions and choices—of the proposal simultaneously. But how to begin? This is often the most challenging aspect of developing a solid proposal.

Our experience suggests that research interests may have their origins in deeply personal interests, professional commitments and concerns, intriguing theoretical frameworks, methodological predilections, and/or recurring social problems. Whatever their source, these interests must be transformed into a logical proposal that articulates key elements and demonstrates competence. We offer one model for those elements, recognizing that much thought and drafting have preceded this formal, public writing.
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, that situates the study in the ongoing discourse about the topic and develops the specific intellectual traditions to which the study is linked; and (c) the research design and methods, which detail the overall design, the site or population of interest, the specific methods for gathering data, a preliminary discussion of strategies for analyzing the data and for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study, a 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. They 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. The next section provides some strategies for building a clear conceptual framework while retaining the flexibility to allow the unanticipated to emerge.

Table 2.1  Sections of a Qualitative Research Proposal

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| Appendixes                  |  |
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 reviewed; 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 informs the reader of the study’s substantive focus and purpose. The design section then describes how the study will be conducted and showcases the writer’s ability to conduct the study.

Although separated into sections by convention, the narrative of the first two sections—the introduction and the review of related literature—is derived from a thorough familiarity with the literature on relevant theory, empirical studies, reviews of research, and informed essays by experts. A careful reading of the related literature serves two purposes. First, it provides evidence for the significance of the study for practice and policy and for its 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.

Because of the interrelatedness of the sections and because writing is developmental and recursive—a “method of inquiry” itself (Richardson, 2000, p. 923)—the writer may find it necessary to rewrite the research questions or problem statement after reviewing the literature or to refocus the significance of the research after its design is developed. Bargar and Duncan’s (1982) description of “extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives” (p. 2) captures this dialectical 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 is in developing, refining, and polishing the idea, the intellectual traditions that surround the idea, and the methods for exploring it.

Overview

The first section of the proposal provides an overview of the study for the reader. It introduces the topic or problem and the purpose of the
study, the general research questions it will answer, and how it is designed. This section should be crisply written, engage the reader’s interest, and anticipate 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, thereby forecasting the study’s significance. Next, the broad areas of theory and research to be discussed in the literature review are outlined. Then, the design of the study is sketched, focusing on the principal techniques for data collection and the unique features of the design. Finally, the introduction provides a transition to a more detailed discussion of the topic, the study’s significance, and the research questions.

The Topic

The curiosity that inspires qualitative research often comes initially from observations of the real world, emerging from the interplay of direct experience with emerging theory, of political commitment with practice, as well as from growing scholarly interests, as noted above. At other times, a topic derives from the empirical research and traditions of theory. Beginning researchers should examine journals specifically committed to publishing extensive reviews of literature (e.g., Review of Educational Research, the Annual Review of Sociology, the American Review of Public Administration, the Annual Review of Public Health), peruse policy-oriented publications to learn about current or emerging issues in their fields, and talk with experts about crucial issues. They might also reflect on the intersection of their personal, professional, and political interests.

Inquiry cycles between theory, practice, research questions, and personal experience. A research project may begin at any point in this complex process. Considering possible research questions, potential sites, and individuals or groups to invite to participate in the research may lead to a focus for the study. Imagining potential sites or groups of people to work with may reshape the focus of the study. Thinking about sites or people for the study also encourages the researcher to think about her positionality and possible strategies for gathering data. 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 which research questions are likely to be significant for practice. These questions then shape decisions about gathering data. Developing the research project proceeds dialectically as possible focuses of the research, questions, sites, and strategies for gathering data are considered.
Crabtree and Miller (1992) offer useful conceptualizations of the cycle of inquiry. They argue that a metaphor for the process of much qualitative research is embedded in “Shiva’s circle of constructivist inquiry,” Shiva being the Hindu god of dance and death (see Figure 2.1). The researcher enters a 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 process of inquiry is captured in Figure 2.2, which expresses critical, feminist, and some postmodern perspectives. Both 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 (Crabtree &
Miller, pp. 10–11). Figures 2.1 and 2.2 provide somewhat differing
images of the cycle of inquiry; note, however, that each entails question
posing, design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Especially in applied fields, such as management, nursing, com-
community development, education, and clinical psychology, a strong auto-
biographical element often drives the study. A doctoral student in
international development education, for example, studied insider-out-
sider tensions and dilemmas in refugee and immigrant groups in the
United States because of her own professional work with similar groups
in community development (Jones, 2004). A student in social psychology,
depth committed to the protection of the environment, studied environ-
mental attitudes from the perspective of adult development theory
(Greenwald, 1992). Another, a student in international development
education, studied Indonesian farmers’ views on land use because of her
political commitment to indigenous peoples (Campbell-Nelson, 1997).

Figure 2.2  Global Eye of Critical/Ecological Inquiry

NOTE: Hx = hypotheses.
The qualitative researcher’s challenge is to demonstrate that this personal interest—increasingly referred to as the researcher’s *positionality*—will not bias the study. Sensitivity to the methodological literature on the self and one’s social identities in conducting inquiry, interpreting data, and constructing the final narrative helps accomplish this. Knowledge of the epistemological debate about what constitutes knowledge and knowledge claims, especially the critique of power and dominance in traditional research, is also valuable (see Chapter 1 on critical ethnography, feminist research, participatory action research, and postmodern perspectives). When direct experience stimulates the initial curiosity, the researcher needs to link that curiosity to general research questions. The mouth of the conceptual funnel, if you will, contains the general, or “grand tour,” questions the study will explore; the specific focus for the proposed study is funneled from these questions.

Figure 2.3 illustrates the funnel as a metaphor, drawing on Benbow’s (1994) study about the development of commitment to social action. The mouth of the funnel represents the general conceptual focus—the issue of social activism and its role in ameliorating oppressive circumstances.
The focus narrows, as a funnel does, to a concern with individuals who have demonstrated and lived an intense commitment to social causes or, possibly, to a focus on social movements as group phenomena. A research question (or set of questions) about how life experiences help shape and develop a lifelong, intensive commitment to social activism will slip through the funnel.

People develop personal theories—theories-in-use or tacit theories (Argyris & Schön, 1974)—about events as ways to reduce ambiguity and explain paradox. Those who conduct inquiry, however, should be guided by systematic considerations, such as existing theory and empirical research. Tacit theory (one’s personal understanding) together with formal theory (from the literature) help bring a question, a curious phenomenon, or a problematic issue into focus and raise it to a level at which one might generalize about it. 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 (they 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 mediation of formal classroom expectations 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 concerning class participation?

This complex process of conceptualizing, framing, and focusing a study typically begins with a personally defined question or identified problem. Personal observations are then transformed into systematic inquiry by reviewing the work of other scholars and practitioners on the topic, thereby building a theoretical rationale and conceptual framework to guide the study. Research questions can then be refined and the design of the study can be more tightly focused; decisions about where to go, what to look for, and how to move to real-world observations become more specific. As the researcher moves back and forth through these various stages, there are pertinent questions to pose:

- **Personal observations:**
  - How do I move from casual observations to systematic inquiry?
  - What previous research can help to frame my interests?
- **Conceptual framework:**
  - What is my specific focus?
  - What are useful and/or creative questions?
  - How do I connect the literature to real-life observations?
• Research design:
  – Where can I do this study? With whom?
  – How will I actually gather data?
  – What will I do with the data?
• Data analysis:
  – How will I manage the data?
  – Will I use software?
  – What themes might be there? How can the literature help here?
• Reporting:
  – Who is my audience?
  – What form should this take? How can I be creative?
  – How can I ensure the trustworthiness of my assertions? What canons do I use?
  – Who might want to use this research? How do I make it accessible to them?

This framework and these questions are intended to be suggestive of others to pose when going through this difficult process of conceptualizing and designing. However, as generic principles, the ideas apply 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 work of conceptualizing is the most difficult and intellectually rigorous of the entire process of proposal writing. It is messy and dialectical, 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 some 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.

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 (Briggs, 2000; Hoffman, 1972; Libby, 1922; Mooney, 1951). By allowing ideas to incubate and 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 recycled 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 it in ongoing research traditions.

**Purpose of the Study**

The researcher should also describe her intent in conducting the research—its purpose. Generally embedded in a discussion of the topic (often only a sentence or two but important nonetheless), a statement of the purpose of the study tells the reader what the research is likely to accomplish. Historically, qualitative methodologists have described three major purposes for research: *to explore, explain, or describe* a phenomenon. Synonyms for these terms could include *understand, develop, or 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: They show relationships (frequently as perceived by the participants in the study) between events and the meaning of the relationships. These traditional discussions of purpose, however, are silent about critique, 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. But he can only, 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 social issues that affect people’s everyday lives. Think of it as an opportunity to discuss ways that the study is likely to contribute to policy, practice, or theory or for taking social action. 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 an important problem; defining the problem shapes the study’s significance. A clinical psychologist might identify a theoretical gap in the literature about isolation and define the topic for an ethnography of long-distance truck drivers. Such a study may be relatively unconcerned with policy or practice; its contributions to theory, however, are preordained. A feminist sociologist could frame a study of discriminatory thinking among business executives for policy and practice by addressing the problem of persistent sexism in the workplace. A study of the impact of welfare reform on the lives of adult

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<th><strong>Purpose of the study</strong></th>
<th><strong>General research questions</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Exploratory:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>To investigate little-understood phenomena</td>
<td>What is happening in this social program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>To identify or discover important categories of meaning</td>
<td>What are the salient themes, patterns, or categories of meaning for participants?</td>
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<td>To generate hypotheses for further research</td>
<td>How are these patterns linked with one another?</td>
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<td><strong>Explanatory:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>To explain the patterns related to the phenomenon in question</td>
<td>What events, beliefs, attitudes, or policies shape this phenomenon?</td>
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<tr>
<td>To identify plausible relationships shaping the phenomenon</td>
<td>How do these forces interact to result in the phenomenon?</td>
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<td><strong>Descriptive:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>To document and describe the phenomenon of interest</td>
<td>What are the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structures and processes occurring in this phenomenon?</td>
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<td><strong>Emancipatory:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>To create opportunities and the will to engage in social action</td>
<td>How do participants problematize their circumstances and take positive social action?</td>
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learners in basic education courses could focus either on policy issues or on how this recurring social problem plays out in the lives of the learners. In that event, theory is less significant. The researcher develops the significance of the study by defining the problem.

Funding opportunities often focus a question. A welfare-to-work grants program calling for a multisite evaluation of programs for the so-called hard to employ provides other opportunities for the researcher. It also has significance for policy. Be wary of research opportunities focused on policy for their potential to seduce the researcher into agendas serving primarily the powerful elite (Anderson, 1989; Marshall, 1997a; 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 opportunities for action in all four domains, but it is unlikely to contribute equally to all four; the statement of the topic should thus emphasize one of them. For example, a study of the integration of children with disabilities into regular classrooms could be significant for both policy and practice. Framing this as a policy study requires that the topic be situated in national and state policy debates on special education. Framing it as most significant for practice would require the researcher to focus on structures supporting inclusive classrooms. Both frames are 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 the researcher can pursue more fully in the review of related literature. At this point in the proposal, the researcher should outline the project’s potential contribution to knowledge by describing how it 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 con-
tribution of such research is the expansion of previous theory. 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 sig-
nificance 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-conceptualized and
well-conducted research. Most researchers use theory to guide their
own work, to locate their studies in larger scholarly 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 relo-
cates the problem area. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1980) reconcep-
tualized 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 conceptualiza-
tions of educational organizations. Often researchers follow a theoreti-
cal 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 dis-
cussing 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 per-
sistently lower salaries for women than men at comparable ranks; this
is the problem that the study will address. The study’s potential contri-
butions for university compensation policies could then be spelled out.
Contributions to university degree program policy could then be artic-
ulated. 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. Statistical presentations of incidence and persistence of the problem as well as 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, referencing prior research, and summarizing incidence data. Recall the preceding discussion of a study about the inclusion of children with disabilities. The researcher who wants this study to focus on issues of practice 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 improvement in teachers’ classroom practice. Shadduck-Hernandez’s proposal for her dissertation research (1997) about immigrant and refugee college students’ sense of ethnic identity summarized incidence data on enrollment and the paucity of culturally relevant experiences for them in the college curriculum. 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. Such a study may not influence policy, contribute to scholarly literature, or improve practice; it may illuminate the lived experiences of interest by providing rich description and 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 (2000) study with battered women was a participatory action research project. Her study’s primary contributions were not intended for 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. Extending this work (although not explicitly linked to it), Browne’s (1987) study of battered women who kill their assailants provided a critique of the legal system that does little to protect women under threat; it led to increased activism for women in these circumstances. Lather and Smithie’s (1997) study collaborating with HIV-positive women invited the reader to enter into the women’s lives so as to create new connections and the possibilities for action.

Through a discussion of relevant scholarship and the concerns of practice, the significance 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 the topic and therefore how and in what ways the study may 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 whose goals include expanding knowledge and theory (e.g., the National Science Foundation), to demonstrate the significance of the research, the researcher should emphasize the undeveloped or unsolved theoretical puzzles to be addressed.

**POsing RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Qualitative approaches to inquiry are 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 one’s knowledge of the literature.

Initial questions should be linked to the problem and its significance and should forecast the literature to be reviewed. Questions may be theoretical ones, which can be studied in a number of different sites or with different samples. They may focus on a 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 study of refugee and immigrant college experiences (Shadduck-Hernandez, 2005) could have been conducted in any setting that had newcomer students; 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, 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 the following:

- How do neurosurgeons cope with the reality that they hold people’s lives in their hands? 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?

These are typical examples of 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 also 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. Vignette 3 shows early development of an introductory statement for a pilot-study proposal.

VIGNETTE 3

An Initial Statement

A doctoral student from China, Fan Yihong (2000), became deeply concerned about the fundamental purposes of education, especially as enacted in
universities. Her experiences in universities in China and the United States led her to see that much of the organizational practice—procedures, norms, disciplinary boundaries—on both continents was deadening human spirit and creativity. She immersed herself in organizational theory, science and technology, and the development of the “new sciences” and complex systems theory in relation to Eastern philosophy. During this journey, she came upon the emerging theories of the holographic universe and the holotropic mind (Capra, 1975, 1982, 1996; Senge, 1990; Wilber, 1996) that stress the wholeness of people, events, nature, and the world, and the innate capacity of the mind to comprehend reality in a holistic manner. Based on these interests, she posed four overarching research questions that would allow her to integrate the various complex intellectual traditions that framed her study:

1. What serves as triggers and preconditions for individuals to change their worldviews?

2. What processes have they undertaken to enable them to transform their changed ways of knowing to their changed ways of doing, and then to their changed ways of being, and to finally becoming transformed human beings?

3. What characterizes these change processes?

4. How does individual awakening, recognizing the need for change, help bring about collective and organizational transformational change?

The potential significance of the study was described in terms of its contributions to understanding how personal and organizational transformation are possible, through rich descriptions of people and organizations that were radically different from traditional ones. Thus the study would potentially contribute theory and practice, building a thoughtful and detailed analysis of the processes of transformation.

Fan Yihong has introduced the topic—the persistent problem of confining versus liberating educational environments—posed the preliminary general research questions, and forecast the study’s potential significance. While this approach is not at all typical, it represented congruence with her theoretical framework and personal epistemology and cosmology. 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.
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.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

All proposed research projects have limitations; none is perfectly designed. As Patton (2002) notes, “There are no perfect research designs. There are always trade-offs” (p. 223). 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 about 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. Framing the study in specific research and scholarly 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, however, indicates how broadly applicable the study may be. Although no qualitative studies are generalizable in the probabilistic 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.
A thoughtful and insightful discussion of related literature builds a logical framework for the research and locates 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 scholarly 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 them in larger traditions of inquiry. We describe the literature review as a *conversation* between the researcher and the related literature.

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 could be child development theory, organizational theory, adult socialization theory, critical race theory, or whatever body is appropriate. This section of the literature review provides the framework for the research and identifies the area of knowledge the study is intended to expand.

The next portion of the review of literature should, quite literally, review and critique previous research and scholarly writing that relates to the general research question. This critical review should lead to a more precise problem statement or refined questions because it demonstrates a specific area that has not yet been adequately explored or 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, it should be developed fully here. Cooper (1988) provides a discussion of the focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organization, and audience for a literature review. An extended example of integrating and dovetailing the significance and the review sections is provided in Vignette 4. Look for the ways the literature review led Marshall (1979, 1981, 1985b) to find new possibilities for pursuing the research questions.
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?”

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.

As the preceding vignette shows, the literature review can identify established knowledge and, more important, develop significance and
new questions and often turn old questions around. This “initiating function” (Rossman & Wilson, 1994) of the literature review can be quite creative. The review, moreover, provides intellectual glue for the entire proposal by demonstrating the sections’ conceptual relatedness. The researcher cannot write about the study’s significance without knowledge of the literature. 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, not because of a magical formula. To organize complex topics and to address the three critical questions posed at the beginning, however, the structure provided here is recommended. Vignette 5 illustrates how the conceptualization of a study can be creative and exciting, as the researcher forges links among historically disparate literatures.

VIGNETTE 5

Creative Review of the Literature

When research questions explore new territory, a single line of previous literature and/or theory may be inadequate for constructing frameworks that usefully guide the study. A case in point is that of Shadduck-Hernandez (2005), a graduate student in international development education, who searched the literature for a way to frame her study of a community service learning initiative serving refugee and immigrant youth and undergraduate students at a major research university.

Shadduck-Hernandez’s forays into the literature on community service learning and the relationships between institutions of higher education and the communities they serve identified a substantial gap. Previous studies described demographics about participants in community service learning projects, noting that typical projects involved white, middle-class undergraduate students working with communities of color. However, few critiqued the hegemonic practice embodied in such projects or called into question the continuing Eurocentric values in university and community relations. It became clear that previous research failed to conceptualize the problem in terms of a sustained critique of the university, from the perspectives of those often marginalized from mainstream university discourse: refugee and immigrant students of color.

Having established that the study was situated in scholarly writing and research on community service learning and university-community relations, Shadduck-Hernandez still felt incomplete. This literature helped to establish the context for her study, but did not provide theoretical concepts or propositions
that would help illuminate students’ experience. She turned to the literature on critical pedagogy to more fully frame the principles of the project. She also discussed situated learning theory with its key notions of context, peer relations, and communities of practice to provide analytic insights into the learning milieu of the project. Finally, she relied upon the anthropological concept of funds of knowledge—“the strategic and cultural resources that racially and ethnically diverse and low-income students and communities possess” (pp. 115–116). Her discussion of these literatures was tested against their usefulness in understanding community service learning among similar and familiar ethnic groups and for developing a gentle but quite pointed critique of the university.

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 theoretically interesting yet could help inform policy and practice in universities. Broad reading and knowledge of the history of institutions of higher education relative to their local communities—richly augmented by more theoretical literature on critical pedagogy, situated learning, and funds of knowledge—created a variegated and highly creative synthesis. Rather than narrowly constructing the study to focus on only one topic, the researcher searched widely for illuminating constructs from other disciplines. This 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.

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 phenomenon.

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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 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; these are discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. In the design and methods section, the researcher makes a case, based on the conceptual portion of the proposal, for the particular sample, methods, data analysis techniques, and reporting format chosen for the study. Thus, the section on design and methods should build a rationale for the study’s design and data collection methods. Here, the researcher should develop a case for using qualitative methods. These topics are also discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

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 involve a statement of specific research questions, propositions to be tested, or hypotheses to be examined. It can include a general discussion of the puzzle, the unexplored issue, or the group to be studied. Discussion becomes more focused through the literature review because, in exploratory studies, it is hard to predict which literature will be most relevant; the focus of the study may best be served by an intersection of literatures.

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 the term guiding hypothesis may assist readers accustomed to more traditional proposals. It is essential, however, that the researcher explain that guiding hypotheses are tools used to generate questions and to search for patterns; they may be discarded when the researcher gets into the field and finds other exciting patterns of phenomena. This approach retains the flexibility needed to permit the precise focus of the research to evolve. By avoiding precise hypotheses, the researcher retains her right to explore and generate questions. The guiding hypotheses illustrate for the reader some possible directions the researcher may follow, but the researcher is still free to discover and pursue other patterns.

We do not intend to suggest that proposal development proceeds in a linear fashion, as we have noted. Specifically, in Chapter 1, we
argue that 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. 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.

**DIALOGUE BETWEEN LEARNERS**

*Melanie,*

In reading through the first few chapters, I’m struck with the trials of striving to give a sense of order to the messiness of qualitative research. We try to imagine that there is some type of logical order to our work, only to find that different aspects of our research designs bump into and merge with one another. I think about this often when we talk about conceptual framework in our classes. As a student, I feel that I’m often looking for the “right” theoretical lens with which to make sense of my qualitative work. It is, of course, a hopeless quest. There doesn’t ever seem to be a perfect fit to our own research contexts. Yet in classes, we try one on and see how it fits, and then we try on another and see how the fit may be different. And then, of course, we begin our own work on dissertations and such and suddenly we’re meant to, in some way, construct our own. Perhaps we piece a few theoretical perspectives together, finding links and overlaps that others might not have intuited. And it’s all so very messy and, at times, disconcerting. I’m just beginning work on my dissertation and am (obviously) struggling a bit with this desire (hope?) for clarity.

Sorry to ramble so. Hope all is well,

Aaron
Aaron,

I completely agree with you about the messiness of qualitative research. I’m in the dissertation phase now, too, you know, and the theoretical piece is killing me! In theory (no pun intended), I understand what we mean by conceptual framework but I have such a hard time articulating that in my own work. How do I pull from disparate works to create a logical whole? At what point does the framework stand on its own? How do I successfully craft a framework when the pieces are still coming together as I dig into the analysis?

One thing I’ve slowly realized about qualitative research—and I hope this is a legitimate understanding!—is that the process is not only nonlinear but hopelessly intertwined, almost like we’re struggling to unravel a Gordian knot of our own making. Sometimes the interest in my research subject is the only thing that keeps me picking away at my confusion! Like you said, it’s messy and it’s complex and it’s frustrating—perhaps that’s part of the appeal?

I’m afraid I’m rambling now, as I’m quite tired and rather hungry. So, time for a late dinner and bed!

Melanie

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1. These paragraphs are adapted from Rossman and Rallis (2003).

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FURTHER READING


