Choosing Topics and Anticipating Data Analysis

To obtain convincing results from a responsive interviewing project, research has to be carefully designed. To design a project, you pick an appropriate topic, formulate your research question, select an initial site or sites, choose your interviewees, and decide with what questions to begin and how to ask them. As research continues, you respond to what you have already learned and alter what you ask and of whom in order to better pursue the new material.

The first step in qualitative design involves choosing a topic; that is, determining what is of sufficient interest and importance to research. Then with a topic in mind work out a specific research question, the puzzle about that topic you will try to resolve. You make sure that both the topic and the research question are best answered through depth interviewing, that what you are asking is important, and that what you propose to do is feasible.

At the very beginning of your research, you anticipate the analysis by asking yourself what you are seeking to accomplish. Are you trying to explain a political puzzle, work out cultural concepts or themes, create a narrative from a series of linked events, determine whether a program is working or not, portray personal histories, or make others aware of persisting problems? You have to anticipate the analysis to make sure that your questioning provides you with material rich in examples and evidence to support any conclusions you might reach. You also ask yourself how far you want to generalize from what you have learned. Are you interested only in the case you are studying, or do you expect your results to apply to cases you did not study?

With a research question in mind and an idea of how far you want to generalize results, you then choose where the study will occur, with whom
you need to speak, and what organizations or groups you will need to include, and then map out roughly the type of questions you will ask. In this chapter we discuss how to choose a topic, translate it into a viable research question, and anticipate the later analysis. In Chapter 4 we discuss how to design the project to make the results convincing. In later chapters, we describe ways to structure the interviews and word questions to obtain the information needed for the planned analysis.

Choosing a Topic and Focusing the Research Question

You begin to design a project by picking a topic and then within that topic determining your research question. A topic refers to whatever it is that interests you: for example, how the police have adapted to a post-9/11 world, how divorcees find a mate, what rules guide corporate ethics. Research questions are the specific concerns that you want to answer through the project: Are local police taking advantage of post-9/11 insecurity to increase their power and budget? Do divorcees look for new mates in all the wrong places? Does the corporate culture differ from company to company in the same industry, or do industry-wide trends determine what is accepted as right and wrong?

Sometimes research questions are more formally presented as hypotheses, that is, statements that suggest how two or more concepts or underlying ideas are related. The following is a restatement of one of the example research questions just mentioned as a hypothesis: Industry trends determine what is considered right and wrong. In the hypothesis we are asking if one concept—industry trends—is related to another concept—perceptions of right and wrong—by questioning whether industry trends determine right and wrong.

In responsive interviewing projects, however, research questions are usually less formally stated. Research questions evolve as you pursue new themes that are suggested in the interviews, so you do not want to restrict yourself to examining only those hypotheses with which you begin. If you state your research question as a hypothesis, be prepared to drop it, modify it, or exchange it for a new one during the study. Depth-interviewing research requires openness to new ideas not anticipated at the beginning, and constructing formally stated hypotheses works against such openness.

Before starting a project you should be sure that depth interviewing is the best way to explore your topic and that the research question is important. You also need to be concerned with practical matters of feasibility, ensuring that you can complete the project with the time and
resources available and can find people knowledgeable about the topic who can be persuaded to participate.

Choosing a good topic and formulating a viable research question can take weeks or months, as both the topic and question emerge iteratively. The following hypothetical but realistic example shows how a student experienced an aggravating situation and then iteratively turned it into a research project:

### Example: Coming Up With a Topic and Research Question

Martha recently returned to the university for a degree after years of working. Through experience she learned that though the university advertised for adult students, it made insufficient provision for them. Day care was inadequate, parking was inconvenient and expensive, and faculty didn’t take into account how long it had been since the returning students had taken courses such as math and statistics. She was frustrated and angry but thought she could turn her anger to good use if she could study the university’s efforts to get adult learners enrolled (topic). She phrased the research puzzle as follows: Why would the university recruit a clientele they are not prepared to serve (research question)?

Martha had to think about what might cause this odd organizational behavior. After reading the student newspaper’s archives and talking to some of her professors, who acted as general informants, she decided on a number of possibilities. Maybe the enrollment dropped and the school was desperate for students and tuition revenues but lacked the money to add services for new clientele. Or maybe the faculty were traditionalists who continued to do the same thing from year to year, regardless of the changes in the background of their students. Or maybe the university culture was one of sink or swim, providing educational opportunities but leaving it to the students whether to avail themselves of those opportunities. A fourth possibility was that there is no communication between the admissions office and the faculty so that faculty did not know how their students were changing or what their backgrounds were until after students floundered in classes.

Examining the possible explanations with interviewees seemed to Martha to make a fine research project, but in initial, informal conversations to test out her ideas, interviewees denied that the university was ignoring the needs of returning students and seemed
unwilling to pursue the matter. Martha had to back up and rethink the project and modify it to mesh with the understandings of her potential interviewees.

She modified the topic to ask about a broader question of how the university was adapting to a shortfall in enrollments (topic), since the recruitment of adult learners was likely to be only one of several thrusts. She thought interviewees would be more aware of the enrollment decline and its financial threat than they were of implied promises to newly recruited students and they would be more willing to talk about this newer focus because it seemed less critical of them and the university. She also thought of another approach, that of interviewing the adult learners themselves, to see how they coped with the university without adequate support (topic), whether they protested, whether they banded together with each other or other student constituencies, and whether they persisted or dropped out, overwhelmed by the difficulties (research questions).

Again, she needed to do some preliminary interviews to see which topic would be most feasible. She talked with some of the returning students and found herself becoming interested in the stories of those who persisted regardless of the difficulties. She saw their reactions to the problems they confronted—child care, time conflicts with jobs, out-of-date courses—as reflective of their ability to adapt to life problems more generally and began to formulate an idea about personal resources and social capital (of the returned student), what help they can get, how they cope with problems, and how they learn and grow (topic). In talking with university officials she found that they were interested in the problems of enrollment decline (topic). She reasoned that this topic had practical importance, and that when she was done with the project she would be able to tell university administrators what factors were most important in causing adult learners to drop out (importance of the research question), helping both the university and the adult learners.

She was intrigued by the adult learners and how they responded, but she could see that the topic about the university’s adaptations to enrollment declines was potentially more important for policy and was much easier to design and carry out. For the adult learners project, she would first have to figure out what personal resources and social capital consisted of, itself a major project. She chose the project that was more feasible. Later, Martha might attempt the more difficult project.
WHERE DO TOPICS COME FROM?

Sometimes the research topic is assigned to you by a professor or a supervisor or as part of an applied research contract. For example, on one consulting assignment, Irene was asked to explore why communications in a probation and parole office had broken down and how they could be fixed. Working as a consultant for the U.S. Agency for International Development, Herb did an evaluation project on economic development in the Philippines to find out if recipients spent foreign aid wisely. Asked by a friend who had a grant, Irene worked on an oral history project about the relationship between a small college and the community in which it was located. But if a topic is not assigned to you, you have to work out one on your own.

Most of us are bombarded with possible research topics all the time, but we tend to ignore them rather than see their possibilities. Often, finding a topic means paying attention to ordinary events and then asking which of these interests you the most. You can begin by thinking about what you do, your paid and volunteer work, your hobbies and relaxations, or your religious and family life, each sphere of activity suggesting something worth researching. Maybe you attended a family reunion and would like to figure out what happens at family gatherings, or you just came back from a bird-watching trip and would like to explain to those who have never been on one what goes on: the language, the goals, explicit and implicit, the competition, and the status orderings of a typical bird-watching trip. Reflecting on your own experience often suggests research ideas. For instance, you have probably had many experiences of meeting new people or groups of people. From these social interactions you might come up with the following possible research ideas: How do people function in groups of strangers? How much of themselves do they reveal? What kinds of things are inappropriate to discuss? How are newcomers socialized into the group?

Experienced researchers come across topics by seeing ordinary things through social-science lenses. Mitchell Duneier had been ignoring the tables set up by vendors in Greenwich Village in New York City to sell books and magazines. One day, though, he noticed a book he had written on one of these tables and struck up a conversation with the vendor. Because he was a sociologist, Duneier found himself intrigued by the answers, starting a multiyear study that examined how people living in poverty, often homeless, managed to create, maintain, and protect a business on the sidewalk (Duneier 1999).

Another way to start is to think about issues that concern you politically or socially. You might be interested in violence against women or gays,
computer dating, adoption, guerrilla warfare, or corporate intrigue; you might want to know why people lie or why they join model airplane clubs or church choirs. You could be fascinated by the role of lobby groups in government or how people know if they are doing a good job in their work. You might be interested in self-help groups for the chronically ill. With the right twist, any of these personal concerns could become a research topic.

Social anger motivates many qualitative studies. William Wilson observed increasing joblessness in the inner-city neighborhood near where he lived and set out to document why it was happening (Wilson 1996). Having friends with AIDS motivated Lather and Smithies (1997) to document their anguish. Sometimes when you see a social problem, you want to influence public policy. You might want to study ways to redesign and fund apartments to accommodate people with disabilities or look at programs in which tenants help manage public housing to see if increased responsibility leads to more success on the job market.

Topics often grow out of personal experiences that leave you puzzled or frustrated. One researcher who spent his life in the military was fed up with congressional micromanagement, so he wanted to study congressional oversight of executive-branch agencies (Merritt 1998). A student who ran into opposition from the city council when he tried to get a speed bump built on a neighborhood street was curious why council members resist citizen input and why some citizens persist in trying to make an impact (Berg 2002).

Topics reflect one’s personality. Herb, who in university matters is often opposed to the majority position in meetings, is deeply interested in how people dominate others. A colleague who works most of the night, sleeps late, and owns only one sports coat is deeply interested in what behavior gets labeled deviant. Irene is curious about how organizations, political candidates, and individuals deal with defeat and decline in a society that emphasizes success and growth. These interests can be turned into research questions by asking why people are afraid to complain, how law enforcement agencies treat those whose actions they don’t understand, and how bureaucratic agencies respond to budgetary cutbacks.

Sometimes topics develop out of the researcher’s ethnic identity. African American researchers may be especially interested in how the civil rights movement of the 1960s shaped current politics. Jewish researchers might feel drawn to studying the political movement that denies the murder of 6 million Jews in Europe during World War II. Those of Mexican or Caribbean ancestry might be especially interested in the impact of current immigration policies. Felix Padilla wondered why he was able to succeed academically when others of his ethnic group did not and began a study on the culture of Puerto Rican Chicago (Padilla 1992).
Research topics also emerge out of experiences in school and from readings in your field. Part of Herb’s graduate education focused on countries in Southeast Asia. With the exception of Thailand, each country had been a colony, and Herb wondered how the lack of colonial experience affected government in Thailand, a question that turned into his dissertation research. In an undergraduate class, Jay MacLeod learned about “blocked aspirations and mobility” as reasons why the poor do not move into the middle classes. He had at that time been doing volunteer work with teenagers in a low-income area and started interviewing them (as well as observing them) to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives, what preparations they were making for jobs, and what obstacles they faced (MacLeod 1995).

MOVING FROM TOPIC TO RESEARCHABLE PUZZLE

For the topic to turn into a research project, you need to find a puzzle or a problem that you can solve or answer. This puzzle is your research question. A single topic may yield dozens of research questions, in which case you pick one or two for your study.

One approach to working out the researchable puzzle is to think about your topic and ask about what appears to be wrong and then question why. Suppose you are interested in children’s sports and observe parents fighting with referees at children’s hockey games. This appears foolish, as these are little kids learning to play a sport; no one, least of all the adults, should come to blows about it. From this odd behavior a researchable question emerges: How do parents view their children’s games? Or, suppose you recognize that government programs to interdict drug supplies are not working, but government continues to throw money at these programs. Surely that is puzzling; why does that occur? You would then formulate research questions such as who advocates continuing existing government programs, or ask how drug control programs have worked in other countries.

Another way to come up with research questions is to read published reports and ask yourself if it is possible that the author got the direction of the causal arrows wrong. If a report says weather causes road deterioration, it is not likely that the reverse holds, that road deterioration causes weather. But, what if the report suggests that students who study hard get good grades? Might it not be the case that good grades cause or encourage more studying? For your research question you might want to ask how students react to low grades on exams, whether such grades stimulate more or less studying.
Sometimes recognizing contradictions in ordinary events opens up both a topic and a research question. For example, diners in a restaurant often continue to talk about very private things when a server is putting food on the table. The diners treat servers as if they were invisible or deaf or completely uninterested. The overall research topic might be finding out what privacy is, and when and how is it achieved. Research questions might deal with situations in which people believe that what they are doing is private even when there are other people around, such as when they use cell phones.

When the research topic concerns the culture of an organization or group, figuring out the research problem can take awhile. The first step is to examine the overall culture, the rules, meanings, and values that underlie and guide behavior. You may need to start off with some participant observation, joining the group and learning its ways, or you may need to collect stories and analyze them. From this preliminary work you learn about the taken-for-granted assumptions and rules and you ask yourself what about these assumptions seems most important or intriguing. For example, do several norms or values that you have seen seem contradictory? If an organization has strictly enforced rules against open conflict, how is competition for promotion handled or how are conflicts between divisions for resources resolved? These concerns become your research questions.

Research puzzles also emerge if you think about the opposites of what you are hearing or seeing. Suppose you were interested in decisions on whether to take someone who is in a coma off life support. What is the opposite of being in a coma? Being alive? Being mobile? Being conscious? Such a topic can suggest research questions on what it means to be alive and whether there is a continuum of life (or death) rather than just two end points with a sharp distinction between them. If you are studying economic development, and you hear advocates say that the community must give incentives to lure in new businesses, you can ask what the opposite of a financial incentive might be, and look for businesses that located in the community without the benefit of taxpayer-funded subsidies and study them. You can also look for options between ignoring new businesses and subsidizing them, and create research questions around these intermediate options.

Another way to come up with a research puzzle is to think about what has not occurred when you would have expected it to have happened. Suppose you are interested in comparative government and wonder how stability is maintained. One of the features of the United States, in comparison to other countries, is that there have been no military attempts to overthrow the government. Your research question could be
similar to the following: Why has the military never made a coup attempt against presidents who didn’t follow its wishes? Learning to see what is not happening, that could or should happen, that is warranted, provoked, and occurs elsewhere, but is not happening in the research setting, can suggest research puzzles.

To translate a topic into a research question requires some initial interviews in which you discuss your ideas with general informants or potential conversational partners. In these informal interviews, you find out if the question you have in mind resonates with the interviewees, if they think it is important, if they are willing to talk about it, or if they think you are on the wrong track. For example, Herb had done a lot of reading on community groups that used protest tactics to pressure government but noticed that there was not much written on community development organizations that built homes, opened stores, and created jobs in poor neighborhoods. He thought that contrasting the two approaches might make an interesting research question. When he talked to interviewees about his idea, they argued that it was passé, and suggested that he instead focus on how development groups accomplished projects against overwhelming odds. Herb pursued that research question for the next several years.

DETERMINING IF A TOPIC IS SUITABLE FOR QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

Once you have a suitable research topic, you need to make sure it is suitable for depth interviewing. To do so, answer the following questions:

Are You Looking for Nuance and Subtlety?

You might want to conduct a counting study to determine how the size of a prison population has changed, but undertake depth interviewing if you are interested in finding out how prisoners learn to survive in a brutal situation. You need depth interviews if you want to illuminate concepts such as privacy, pain, dominance, deference, and loyalty that collectively help define prison culture.

Does Answering the Research Question Require You to Trace How Present Situations Resulted From Prior Events?

Why are unions striking? How did the state get into such an incredible financial mess? How did that person get to be mayor? Each of these questions requires determining what past events brought about the current situation.
Is an Entirely Fresh View Required?

If existing literature does not explain your research problem or if the current approach is not working, you may need to look at your problem in a different way. Depth interviewing studies encourage considerable departures from current understanding. To gain new perspectives on problems such as why public housing policies have failed, you would want to listen carefully as residents, managers, and government officials described their experiences. If what you are looking for is a new approach to a practical problem or a new or considerably amended theory, depth interviewing is appropriate.

Are You Trying to Explain the Unexpected?

Why did one father beat up another boy’s father at his son’s hockey game? Why did France oppose the U.S. policy of attacking Iraq if Hussein didn’t disarm? Puzzling out problems that you would consider unusual or unexpected often requires responsive interviewing because you do not have prior experience from which to draw hypotheses to test.

Does Puzzling Out the Research Question Necessitate Layers of Discovery in Which Initial Questions Are Asked to Discover Alternatives That Are Then Explored in Turn?

Quantitative studies have shown that women are more likely to die after an initial heart attack than are men, suggesting that a suitable research question for depth interviewing might be to determine why. In the first round of interviewing, you could ask about differences in behavior and discover that women do not get as much exercise as men. That’s important and does suggest needed changes in behavior. But it also poses another question: Why do women get less exercise than do men? Are women more fearful after a heart attack than men and so limit their activity? Do women feel social pressures that curtail their behaviors? Are women more depressed and withdrawn after suffering a heart attack than are men? Or perhaps there is a combination of reasons. A second set of conversations is required, precisely the approach taken in responsive interviewing.

CHOOSING A TOPIC FOR IMPORTANCE

Topics need to be important to the interviewer, the interviewee, and a broader public. A topic the researcher thinks is unimportant is not likely to be investigated thoroughly. At the same time, if the interviewees find
the topic trivial, they will provide only superficial answers. You certainly do not want to spend many months or years researching a topic only to confront the “who cares?” question from readers when the study is done.

Sometimes showing the importance of a topic is simple. The research may be on matters that affect hundreds or thousands of lives, cost billions of dollars, or explain major historical events. If you can put your results in the middle of a policy debate, no one is likely to question its importance. For example, Irene is working on a project on government contracting out, that is, hiring private firms to do government work. For several years the president has been pushing for more contracting out at the national level, which has become highly controversial, as unions protest the loss of public-sector jobs and legislators question whether some jobs are inherently governmental and therefore should not be contracted out. Regardless of the content of her findings, the results are likely to inform an ongoing policy argument.

However, it may be more difficult to justify the importance of studying some relatively common cultural process. You may need to explain that ordinary events routinely have major impacts not only on the participants but also on the society. Routine decisions at work may empower employees or repress them, creating either a model of democracy or a hotbed of unionism and conflict. The (unfortunately routine) physical danger of some inner-city neighborhoods contributes to the formation of gangs and probably contributes to higher occurrences of high blood pressure and strokes. Working together in unions with people from different ethnic backgrounds can help forge a class consciousness with far-reaching social effects.

Another way of showing the importance of a cultural research topic is to argue that if you can track down how particular norms are learned, you may be able to intervene, to make needed changes. If you understand how children get hooked on drugs, maybe you can design a more effective program to prevent them from starting. If you can trace out where some police officers pick up the norms that justify violence against suspects, maybe you can adjust training to minimize that violence.

Sometimes the important impact of a cultural study is to help bring about change to solve problems. When managers first enter an organization, they come with their solutions to long-term problems only to find that many of the projects they launch die quickly, whereas others take off with a velocity that startles them. Without an understanding of the organizational culture and the ways in which these projects threaten or reinforce that culture, a manager may have a hard time predicting what solutions are likely to work. Obtaining this kind of knowledge can save time and frustration.
You can justify the importance of a narrowly defined study if you can show that what you are studying represents a larger problem. If you are examining corruption in a small city, you can make the case that what you learn applies to corruption in general. If you want to study the meaning of tattoos in one prison, you would argue that though tattoos might not seem important, what they represent more broadly is. Tattoos might symbolize defiance, group affiliation, self-expression, or responses to limitations of freedom, all of which are issues that go far beyond body markings. To justify a project, you should be able to demonstrate what broadly applicable principles are involved.

Sometimes self-reflection suggests the ways in which a research question addresses broader issues. Suppose you want to study life histories of middle-age women. What do you hope to find out? How did you get interested in this topic? Your answer could be something like this: “I am interested in the lives of middle-age women because our society focuses so much attention on the young that some middle-age women feel invisible. I wonder what it is like to feel invisible. I am interested in invisibility more broadly, and this could be an example.” Explaining invisibility is the broader issue that gives intellectual importance to the life histories you are gathering.

Sometimes a topic is important because it makes a problem clear or gives a voice to people ignored by society or too cowed to protest what is happening to them. Interviews with imprisoned adults and their spouses about how they deal with their children may help give voice to the unintended victims of the public policy of incarcerating people for possession of small amounts of illegal drugs—the children. By giving voice to the voiceless, cultural studies help balance the record. If a study gives dignity to work that has traditionally been invisible and thankless, by explaining the work that women do in caring for their parents or preparing meals, for example, the study becomes important. Similarly, a study may be important if you can lead readers to understand and accept a group that society has stereotyped or stigmatized. For example, Angrosino’s Opportunity House (1998) looks at the lives of a handful of mentally disabled adults, and in doing so substitutes engaging portraits of individuals for seemingly inexorable social stereotypes.

Cultural studies are important when they pass along the values, norms, and beliefs of one generation to another, so grandchildren know what their grandparents or parents lived through. What was it like to live through the Great Depression or World War II at home or in the field? What was it like to be a coal miner in West Virginia a generation ago? Or to be an African American before the Civil Rights movement?
There are, in short, many ways to justify the importance of a research question. If you are having trouble finding a way of doing so, maybe you are really not interested in that topic and should find another.

THE FEASIBILITY OF THE RESEARCH

Feasibility requires that you conduct a project with the financial resources available, that you have sufficient time and energy to complete the work, and that you are emotionally up to researching the matter. Sometimes limitations are practical: Can you travel away from home? Do you have the money? Can you get someone to take care of your children? Can you arrange a place to stay overnight? If the project interests you but appears to be too large, ask yourself if the scope can be reduced, perhaps by breaking it up into smaller pieces that can be done sequentially.

A project might be within your financial and time constraints but be too emotionally draining as depth interviewing exposes crushing problems that the researcher might find stressful. Talking with people who work in day-care centers caring for babies with AIDS might be an important project, but the stories volunteers tell might be too heartbreaking to pursue. The researcher’s feelings about some subjects might be so intense that hearing certain examples or narratives would be difficult. Someone who has been raped may not be able to pay proper attention to the narratives of rapists. If you feel that bankers and lawyers are parasites, you may conduct superficial interviews with them or goad them into angry responses.

Can you interview people of whom you disapprove? Our colleague Jim found it difficult to interview some prison staff because he found them hostile and racist, but he had to learn to curb his antagonism because to understand prison life he really needed to hear their side. Strong positive bias can also create interviewing problems. Herb, whose writings advocate for the indigent, has trouble listening when his interviewees express frustration at the self-defeating behaviors of the poor.

A feasible project requires you to have access to appropriate interviewees. You might have a wonderful topic to study, for instance, how judges make their decisions, but cannot get permission to carry out the study because judges refuse to talk to you. Years ago, Irene tried to conduct a study comparing budgets in private and public universities, but was not allowed access at the private universities and had to change the research design to focus only on the public institutions.

Research questions and approaches can be adjusted to make the work more feasible. Though community development is a national movement, to reduce expenses, Herb limited the scope of his study of the subject to
organizations no farther than a day’s drive from home. When Irene was picking a topic for her dissertation, she decided to study problems of failure, decline, and losing. Her first thought was to talk with individuals who had failed at something, such as political candidates who lost elections or students who did not pass comprehensive examinations. Finding students after they failed comprehensive exams was difficult, if not impossible, and politicians who lose elections often disappear from sight. Instead, she formulated her research question to examine organizations that were suffering financial declines. Organizations cannot hide easily and individuals inside the organization were less likely to blame themselves for the decline and be more willing to talk about what was happening to the organization (I. S. Rubin 1977).

Sometimes access is easiest to gain at a place where researchers work or have close friends. In such situations, you work out a research question appropriate for the setting, rather than pick a setting to investigate your research question. If you have access to prisons, you might think about research questions that deal with freedom, privacy, sex, status, protection, or violence. A hospital setting suggests interviewing about pain management, family support of patients, the occupational hierarchy, the sick role, status among medical personnel, or even the role of humor in reducing tension. Among less obvious topics might be the practice of working two shifts back to back with resulting fatigue and fear of mistakes, hospitals’ adaptation to governmental regulations, and romances between nursing staff and patients. You still want to be sure that the topic is important, but within that constraint, why not do your research where you have good access?

**Design With Analysis and Theory Development in Mind**

Once you choose an important and feasible research question that is appropriate for a depth interviewing project, the next stage of design involves looking to the end of your research. You ask yourself now, as you begin, what type of analysis you plan to do and what kind of theory you hope to build. Only by anticipating what you plan to do with the data early on can you ensure that you obtain the needed information. If you anticipate analyzing how people use particular concepts—the underlying ideas through which people understand and explain their world—you need to plan questions to elicit those concepts, refine them, and get examples of how they are used. If you want to create a narrative—a rendition of events that reconciles various accounts you have received—you need to be sure that you have built into your questions inquiries about specific events you are interested in, as well as ways of checking the truth value of different versions.
ANTICIPATING THE ANALYSIS

Suppose your study is about how people respond in arguments. In your first few interviews, you learn that people respond differently when they are contradicted. Some people report that they get angry, others say that contradictions make them think, and a few say they do not mind. You analyze these preliminary interviews and decide that you are working toward a theory focused on how people handle being contradicted rather than the more general topic of arguing.

Anticipating what information you will need in your final analysis, you redesign your questioning to ask for detailed examples of how individuals respond to being contradicted, paying close attention to the specific circumstances. Are some contradictions made in ways that are embarrassing or rude? Do people react differently to gentler contradictions? You also ask yourself how people might differ in how they handle contradictions. To answer this question, you need to plan with whom to talk so you have enough variation to make interesting comparisons. Do men and women differ? Do bosses and workers handle contradictions differently? Does educational background affect how people respond? You might also wonder if the situation in which the contradiction occurred affects how people respond. Are contradictions made in private more acceptable than public ones? Do contradictions that occur in conversations between couples at home elicit a different response from those that occur at work? You now have reformulated your research question to focus on a theory about what makes a contradiction embarrassing and when. In anticipating this theory, you have modified the questions you will ask, figured out what groups of people you need to talk to, and determined the kind of sites you need to include in the study.

In cultural studies, you begin with a less formulated idea of where you are going, so early analysis is vital. At the beginning, your interviewing involves general questioning because you often start out with little idea about the content of the culture. You ask people to talk about their typical days or what happened at some ceremonies. By itself, however, such information leads nowhere unless you anticipate its theoretical significance by noting what core cultural concepts and themes are mentioned that explain how the people you are studying understand their world. With this goal in mind, you redesign your interviews to elicit examples of the concepts and themes that are central to the interviewees’ understanding, ask about each, and then follow up for detailed examples. Doing so provides you with the data needed to draw nuanced conclusions about the content of the culture.
In topical studies, you are trying to explain events that have happened, in the order in which they occurred, and what it all means. You begin to interview with a set of initial research questions: for example, how the opposition won the mayoralty or what happened when the new computer system was introduced. Based on your analysis of these preliminary interviews, you focus the research questions to mesh with what you have discovered: If the mayoral election was won because of neighborhood organizing, you concentrate on learning who organized the neighborhoods, the issues that rallied the neighbors, and the nature of the organization that was built. In the second example, if you find out that yes, the new computer system changed a lot, but it was just part of the move into a more centralized business model, you may now want to explain how that approach came about.

As you reformulate your research question, you also think about what broader implications will be apparent and interview to obtain information on these larger concerns. In the previous examples you may ask questions such as the following: Where does opposition to the mayor come from? Who has the ability to mobilize sufficient support to topple an incumbent? Did the mayor make some important mistake that the opposition was able to capitalize on? Did he or she just go too far, get greedy or extreme in his or her policies? With these ideas in mind, you may also ask in other places if the mayor took his or her policies to extremes or if an effective opposition arose and wrested the mayoralty out of his or her hands.

In our other example, you may have learned about how computer change came about in one organization, but what are the broader implications of this study? One possible implication might be that to be successful, technical innovations that also create a lot of chaotic change need support from the top; another is that integrated changes, where three or four related changes are made at the same time, are less likely to be successful, because any part that doesn’t work will seriously damage other parts that are working. You continue to ask about the computer changes but you focus more on questions concerning support from the top or integrated changes because these are the themes that have implications beyond the research setting.

In a topical study, as you build toward your final analysis, you require answers to specific questions, such as what efforts were made to bring down the mayor or reduce his or her power and why were they not successful, or what happened when a second or third management reform was introduced after the new computer system was put into place. You want to be reasonably sure that what you learn is right, so you will build into the interviews checks on what people know, how good their memories are, and what biases they may have, so that you can figure out which interviews
to lean on more heavily when you put the results together later. When events are controversial, you want to make sure that you have interviewed people who can provide the various sides. In addition, you need to work out some time to try out your new ideas on your interviewees, see what they think of them and how they might modify them, or whether they have evidence contradicting your tentative conclusions.

ANTICIPATING THE TYPE (NOT THE CONTENT) OF CONCLUSION YOU WANT

In your design, you ask yourself about the purposes of the research and the types of conclusions you want to obtain. For instance, in a study of the delivery of medical services, you might be looking for general statements about how hospitals deal with pain or you might be more interested in narrower findings that describe the battles in a specific hospital between those who want to alleviate suffering (through the use of pain medicine) and those who want to aggressively and continuously attack symptoms even if they result in pain. Depending on where you see your work going, you would pick different research sites and interviewees while asking somewhat different questions.

You analyze your individual interviews while the project is underway to look for core concepts and themes that ultimately will be used in structuring a theory, and after doing so, you work out follow-up questions about them. However, you may have heard many concepts and themes in any given interview. How do you choose which ones to follow up? One answer is to look ahead to what kind of report you want to produce and pick the concepts and themes that are the most relevant for that kind of report.

Suppose you were interviewing in a retirement community, and in one interview heard the term *growing old*, which you assume is a basic concept summarizing how residents see their experience. You then follow up on this concept to learn what it means to the retirees and hear a variety of component ideas, including fear of illness, loss of physical strength, reduction of sex drive, loss of good looks, financial insecurity, and loneliness. In the same interviews you also hear some upbeat concepts, including fewer responsibilities, less concern for how people view them, more realistic expectations of people, and the pleasures of grandchildren.

Each of these components is itself a concept that might warrant additional exploration, but which ones you explore depend on the goal of your research. If you intend to create an academic theory on the life course, moving from childhood to adulthood to maturity and finally old age, you might explore how the loss of good looks relates to self-esteem, or how the
types of loneliness people feel affect the types of new relationships, if any, they form. A researcher with a more psychological bent might examine how people balance the negatives—fear of illness, loss of physical strength, loneliness—with the positive aspects of aging—fewer responsibilities, less concern for how people view them, more realistic expectations of people, the pleasures of grandchildren. In contrast, a policy person working for the retirement home might focus more on the physical and financial well-being of those living there and spend time following up on matters such as loss of physical strength and financial insecurity.

ANTICIPATING THE THEORY BUILDING AND GENERALIZING OF RESULTS

In the responsive interviewing model, theories are induced from the data to discover how different concepts and themes mentioned in the interviews relate to one another. To successfully work out such a theory, you have to recognize the concepts and themes central to your research while you are still collecting data and then modify your questions to make sure you obtain more detail on what each of the concepts and themes mean, get examples of each, and learn how they relate to one another.

Concepts are core ideas that can be summarized as nouns, noun phrases, or gerunds. Though any interview is replete with different concepts, you focus only on those that help you move toward the theory you are developing. You become sensitive to concepts by listening to recorded interviews or reading over transcripts and noting the words or phrases that interviewees use to explain their examples or describe their work or their personal lives. Some of these words might sound unusual to you, as the technical jargon within a field often does. Or a concept may just be an ordinary term that interviewees repeat a lot because it is important to them. Community developers describe their work using terms such as empowerment, social equity, and housing affordability; budgeters use terms such as cash balance, earmarked revenues, and off-budget expenditures. Among the police, terms such as perp (perpetrator), mark (victim of a fraud), and scumbag (a person of low moral character) are labels for underlying concepts. These terms often convey goals or values, perceptions or attitudes toward the work or the customers, clients, or victims, or represent strategies that frame action. They are the clues to what is going on in the setting.

Sometimes the interviewees do not actually name the idea; they just describe its characteristics, and the researcher has to provide the label for the concept. Frequently used symbols and stories are often indicative of important underlying concepts. In the famous Uncle Remus stories, Br’er
Rabbit prevailed against opponents by outwitting them without open defiance. A researcher could label the underlying concept *wiliness* or possibly *safe defiance*. The first term emphasizes the cleverness, the second the success of the tactic.

Sometimes interviewees use one concept and name it, and refer to other concepts without naming them. For instance, in discussions on budgets, Irene heard frequent mention of earmarked money, money in a budget that has to be spent on a particular item and cannot be spent on anything else. She also heard interviewees talk about money that could be spent on any range of items. This second kind of money was highly valued, because it was more flexible and could solve a wider range of problems. The interviewees did not explicitly label this second type of money, so Irene called it *nonearmarked money*. She then explored this second concept, asking where the nonearmarked money came from, who controlled it, and how it was spent.

You can listen for concepts, and then ask questions that will help you understand what they mean and how they are used and gradually weave the concepts together into themes, that is, longer explanatory phrases or statements. Sometimes the interviewees state the themes themselves to explain why things occur, and by doing so move you rapidly toward an inductive theory. Herb’s interviewees might say, for example, “The bankers don’t respect community groups, so we have to compromise sometimes to get funds.” The two concepts are respect and compromise, and they are linked to form a theme, that lack of respect results in forced compromises.

Themes are statements that explain why something happened or what something means and are built up from the concepts. As part of an iterative design, the researcher constructs theories of how and why things happen, doing so by combining separate themes that together explain related issues. The implications of the emerging theory are then examined with further questions that explore the themes in more detail and are asked both of the original conversational partners and of additional interviewees whose insights now seem relevant.

To illustrate how the researcher moves from identifying and modifying concepts to hearing themes and linking them into possible theories, suppose you were interviewing professors about problems they have had with students. In the first set of interviewees, professors complained about students who missed deadlines and students who submit the same paper to several different professors. You summarize the material initially as illustrating two concepts, lateness and cheating. You continue to interview asking about other problems and learn that professors complain about students making up wild excuses for not coming to class or failure to get
assignments in on time. You expand your idea of what professors are
talking about beyond cheating to ways of getting out of work, a different
underlying concept. Handing in the same paper to several instructors may
be less cheating than just another form of getting out of work.

In the interviews, you also heard professors explain that they feel put
upon when the students do not treat the faculty with the respect that their
intellectual achievements deserve. In the same interviews professors con-
demned the students for spending too much time drinking and partying.
These answers introduce two more concepts, lack of respect and time
spent partying.

The next step in building a theory on professor-student interaction
might be working out integrative themes to explain how the professors
interpret what is going on with the students. You do so by combining sep-
arate ideas that you have heard to see if they seem to make sense. One
theme to investigate might be that students try to get out of work because
they lack respect for professors as intellectuals, whereas another might be
that students try to find ways of getting out of work because they are
captured in a culture that emphasizes partying. In subsequent interviews,
you then ask for examples that support or fail to support these possible
thematic connections.

The next phase of the work therefore would be to interview some
students to obtain their perspectives on your emerging theory by asking
for examples. You ask students if they sometimes failed to get their assign-
ments in on time, and if so, what the reasons were. You question further
about what acceptable excuses are (as well as the real reasons) and what
it means when a student gives an off-the-wall excuse to a professor. You
would ask and then listen carefully to hear if and how student interview-
ees relate the concepts of respect, getting out of work, and partying.
You would discuss with them whether they respect their professors and
what partying entails. When students describe a professor whom they
really respect, you follow up to learn if they work more in his or
her course than in others. If these ideas do pan out, you then explore them
in more detail asking students what respect means, who they respect, who
they don’t respect, and how they behave in the classes of professors they
respect. You would also look at partying, what it means, whether it is an
antidote to loneliness and boredom, whether it is just a time-out from
studying, or whether partying represents an anti-academic attitude. From
these evolving questions, you might get a very different picture than from
the professors about how your themes relate to each other, but both the
interviews with the professors and those with the students are geared
toward developing a theory on student-professor relations.
The cycle of theory building and redesign can take you in a number of different directions, depending on your interests, the audience for the report, and the theoretical or policy purposes of your research. If you are concerned with pedagogical matters, you would want to know what happens to the quality of teaching when professors perceive that many students are trying to get out of work. Do some professors become demoralized and reduce the effort they put into teaching, or do they become angry at administrators for admitting students who are not interested in learning? Do the professors try to sort out the students who are interested in learning and give them special attention and invest their egos in the success of these students?

A different avenue might be followed if you were focusing on student life, in which case you would want to inquire if the culture of excuses that grows up in the university affects other student actions. Do students think such excuses are okay? Did they make such excuses when they were in high school? Do they offer similar excuses in their jobs? Each possible avenue of inquiry suggests further concepts to look for, questions to design, and a choice of whom to interview.

If you have the time and resources, you can continue theory building by picking different sites to see how well your initial theory fits. In doing so, you may change your mind about what the important themes are and how they relate to one another.

Suppose as part of a policy study you examined a prison that had a riot, and the guards, the prisoners, and the warden all argued that bad food precipitated the riot. The emerging theme linking having a riot to quality of food is what you want to explore and test. As part of the ongoing design, you now pick two sites in which the pattern discovered does not hold and examine them to figure out why. One site is a prison noted for having bad food but relative social calm and the other reputedly has decent food but did have a riot. If your tentative theory is correct, bad food should lead to riots and good food should lead to the absence of riots. These exceptions should make you wonder if there are conditions that lead to social calm even when the food is bad and whether there are conditions that lead to riots even when the food is good. In each of the new settings, you interview guards, prisoners, and the warden about both food and social order. You also ask about prison life in general. You want to test the importance of the quality of food but not exclude other reasons why riots happen.

You now have three settings to compare. Suppose that in both prisons that had riots you learn that guards and prisoners referred to each other in ways that showed mutual racial disdain. In one, the riot was triggered as the guards yelled out, “You [racial epithet] deserve to eat this slop,” whereas in the other, the guards locked up the prisoners and yelled...
out “You [racial epithet] should be kept in cages like the animals you are.” The prisoners retorted, “F***ing [racial epithets].” You start to suspect that the riot stemmed from racial tension rather than food; the food was simply an excuse. This conclusion is strengthened as you learn that in the second prison that also had a riot, the food improved because of an advocacy effort of the Good Prison Association, though little effort was made to improve the racial climate. Your conclusion is given further credence as you learn that in the prison that avoided a riot, the food was miserable, but the guards spent time commiserating with the prisoners over the terrible food and racial antagonism seemed relatively low.

Example: Selecting Sites to Build a Theory

When Irene began to study how budget processes change in cities, she started in one city where she had good contacts, and then chose additional initial case studies from across the country, knowing that administrative practices in budgeting varied in different regions of the country. After initial interviewing, as she compared the cases, she also discovered that the legal form of government affected how budgeting was done. Whether the mayor (an elected official) or the city manager (an appointed professional) had real power seemed to have important implications for the budget process, an unanticipated finding. With that tentative new theme in mind, she redesigned her work and added two more cases that reflected clear examples of different governmental structures, a strong mayor form in Boston, Massachusetts, and an effective council-manager form in Dayton, Ohio. This redesign now included two cases with powerful managers, two with powerful mayors, and two in-between. When she was doing the final analysis, she looked to see if the cities (cases) with powerful managers budgeted alike, and whether cities with powerful mayors were similar to each other but different from the cities with powerful managers. The choice of cases allowed for the development and testing of a theory that came about from what she had discovered during the research: that the structure of the government and distribution of power strongly affected how budgeting was done.

As Irene’s budgeting study and the prison example indicate, designing qualitative interviewing to build a theory involves not only thinking about what ideas you will test and questions you will ask, but also where you do
the study and whom you interview. Further, the process of theory building is continuous, as you test your initial ideas, modify them, and retest them until fewer and fewer changes are made with each analysis-theory cycle.

For instance, from an analysis of his early interviews in a few cities, Herb learned that community development organizations feared that if they directly pressured city government for additional support, officials would retaliate and cut off all their funds. Instead of directly pressuring funding agencies, community developers formed advocacy coalitions that did not themselves rely on government funds (and so could take some risks), and these coalitions worked aggressively to get cities to pay for community projects. To test the emerging theme that coalitions buffered financially dependent community organizations from retribution, Herb chose other cities in which to interview, some with stronger coalitions and others with weaker ones. In each site, Herb asked about how the city government and community development organizations worked with one another. In the cities with weaker coalitions, interviewees told Herb that the government ignored the development organizations. By contrast, in cities with strong coalitions, interviewees gleefully described campaigns that changed governmental agendas. The emerging theory of the importance of coalitions was strengthened by the interviews from the comparative sites.

At some point, you decide that you have created the theory that best fits your case or cases, and begin to think about how far you want to extend it. Do the results apply only to the research site in which you collected your data, or can you generalize more broadly? To generalize, you design your project to include interviewing in a variety of settings, some quite similar on background characteristics to those in which you initially interviewed and others quite dissimilar. Similarity-dissimilarity sampling helps you decide how far your results extend.

If your theory is right, the similar sites should produce findings close to what you learned initially. If you do not come up with similar results in the similar site, you have to question whether the site really was similar or whether your theory was wrong. Suppose you are doing an oral history to learn about the obstacles Latino organizers face and have interviewed those who worked with César Chávez, an organizer in California, and noted certain consistent themes. You might want to conduct a comparative study, this time interviewing those who worked with Ernesto Cortes, a community organizer in Texas, in many ways similar to Chávez, to see if similar themes turn up. If you find similar themes, then you can have more confidence in your conclusions. They should hold in this new setting and they do. In fact, studies that have been done on the topic confirm that the results hold up well (Levy 1975; Rogers 1990; Warren 2001).
Another way to extend your results further is to choose a setting that is very different in background or site characteristics or both and then ask the interviewees in that setting the same questions you asked before. If you find the same themes in this very dissimilar setting, you gain confidence that your findings hold more generally.

Suppose you are studying how students understand the purpose of college. In your initial cases you interviewed white male fraternity brothers (a background characteristic) on academic probation (a background characteristic) from Playboy Private U. (a site characteristic) and heard the theme that “going to school is just buying a degree.” To test out how far this theme extends, you look for interviewees who differ greatly in background characteristics. For instance, you would interview African American females (background characteristic) who are graduating Summa Cum Laude (background characteristic) from Prestige Tech U. (site characteristic). If in this very different setting you hear the identical theme, you can reason that buying a degree might be a broader theme in student culture, though of course you would check it out in more than these two cases.

Central to extending your results through dissimilarity sampling is learning how to choose interviewees in ways that best vary background features. Assume you are researching how married faculty women combine career and family and have worked out an initial theme that the women feel so pressured to spend more time with their children that they feel guilty for every minute they are not at home with the children. To test out the generality of this theme, you vary the background characteristics of the academic women that you subsequently interview—how oriented they are to research and publication, the willingness of their husbands to spend time with the kids, and the income level of the family (the ability to pay for good-quality day care). In picking the background features to vary, you need to work out for yourself how each one might influence the theme of guilt about child care and include only those characteristics that have a logical connection. Having varied the backgrounds of the interviewees, if you find that each one expresses guilt in a similar way, you gain confidence that the themes you found initially are descriptive of academic women in general.

Conclusion

Design in qualitative interviews at first seems unsystematic, but what appears chaotic is merely a continuous redesign. With continuous design, you keep building on your new findings, while gathering evidence for, testing, and
changing your emerging theory. You modify questions to test emerging ideas and then choose new sites and interviewees to see how far you can generalize your theory. This approach to design ensures that when you finish gathering data, you will have answered your research question and have sufficient material to produce a rich and nuanced report. The design also ensures that when the project is done, the results will be on target, convincing, and important. Ideally, the results will also be generalizable.