



# Qualitative Research:

Designing Solid Research Questions

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DESIGN & ANALYSIS  
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

# Objectives

- By the end of the presentation, you should be able to:
  - ❖ Explain the components of a qualitative research question
  - ❖ Develop qualitative research questions
  - ❖ Identify appropriate qualitative research questions related to qualitative research design



# Approaches to Research

## ■ Quantitative

- Pre-determined methods
- Large samples
- Closed-ended questions
- Performance, attitude, observational, and census data
- Generalization
- Often replicable

## ■ Qualitative

- Emerging methods
- Smaller samples
- Open-ended questions
- Interview, observational, document, and audiovisual data
- In-depth
- Rarely replicable



# Nature of Qualitative Research



- Understanding **how** people interpret their experiences, **how** they construct their worlds, and **what meaning** they attribute to their experiences
- Exploratory – useful when not a lot is known about a subject or phenomenon
- Getting a snapshot of a phenomenon
- Point is not to generalize, but to understand how something works in a particular context



# Qualitative Research Process



## Identify Topic

Is it practical and useful to undertake this study?

## Literature Review

Related Research

## Research Question(s)

Open-ended questions: How...? What?

## Study Designs

Case study | Ethnography | Grounded Theory | Narrative | Phenomenology | Other/Generic

## Collect Data

Audiovisual | Documents | Focus Groups | Interviews | Observations

## Data Analysis

CAQDAS

Manually

## Create Theory and/or Report Results

Themes

Visualizations

Theory



# Qualitative Research Questions



“Research questions set boundaries to a research project, clarify its specific directions, and keep a study from becoming too large”

(Plano Clark & Badiee, 2010, p. 277)



# Qualitative Research Questions



“Good qualitative questions can be significant tools that shape a study design and analysis.”

“Good questions do not necessarily produce good research, but poorly conceived or constructed questions will likely create problems that affect all subsequent stages of a study. Ultimately, the quality of the initial questions impacts whether or not a study is approved by a dissertation committee, published, or funded.”

(Agee, 2009, p. 440)



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# Qualitative Research Questions



- “A beginning point” of a research study (Agee, 2009)
- Research questions are stated instead of objectives or hypotheses
- Guide inquiry – what do you want to know about a phenomenon, culture, person, an experience, etc.
- Will generally lead to answers that describe, explain, or outline the story of a social process (Saldaña, 2011, p. 71)
- Not the same as questions asked during data collection
- Evolving - may require several iterations
  - “Our questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem.” (Creswell, 2007, p. 43)





# Qualitative Research Questions



- Two forms:
  - 1) **Central** question
    - A broad question that asks for an exploration of the central phenomenon or concept in a study
    - Ask: “What is the broadest question that I can ask in the study?”
    - “What are the experiences of an Asian Indian immigrant family attending family therapy over a 3-month period?”
  - 2) Associated **sub-questions**
    - Can be more specific and can help narrow the broader focus of the overarching question(s)
    - Can emerge over the course of a study – during inquiry process and sometimes during data collection and analysis
    - “How do children in an Asian Indian immigrant family describe their Asian identity within their family after attending family therapy over a 3-month period?”



# Guidelines



- 1 or 2 central questions, 5-7 sub-questions
- Begin with the words **what** or **how** to convey an open and emerging design
- Use exploratory verbs (e.g. “seek to understand,” “describe,” “discover,” “explore”)
- Expect the research questions to evolve and change during the study



# Guidelines



- Questions should be broad, but not too broad (without context)
  - Reflect the particularities of your study
  - Need to move the researcher toward discovering what is happening in a *particular situation* with a *particular person* or **group**
    - “How do teachers perceive professional development on strategies for helping at-risk students?”
    - “How does a high school English teacher perceive a one-week professional development workshop that focused on instructional strategies for at-risk students?”



# Guidelines



- Open-ended
  - Avoid wording questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no.”
    - “Do child welfare workers suffer from secondary post-traumatic stress?”
    - “How do child welfare workers describe their experience working with neglected or abused children?”



# Guidelines



- Focus on a single phenomenon or concept
  - “How do wellness clinic administrators in a large urban clinic describe their professional collaborations with other clinic administrators and staff members, and their roles as collaborators?”
  - “How do wellness clinic administrators in a large urban clinic perceive their collaborations with other administrators?”
  - “How do wellness clinic administrators perceive their collaborations with staff members?”
  - “How do wellness clinic administrators describe their roles as collaborators?”



# Guidelines



- Avoid leading questions
  - Assumptions, world view
    - “What are the benefits of the XYZ program to adolescents’ social development?”
  - Assigning attributes in advance
  - Arriving at conclusions before collecting data
    - “What events and interactions are occurring in middle school social studies classrooms that show self-regulated learning?”
    - “What kinds of learning strategies are evident in three urban middle school classrooms after the teachers engaged in professional development on self-regulated learning?”



# Guidelines



- Ensure that the question(s) are answerable
  - Feasibility, resources, time frame
    - 3 questions to ask: 1) What are you asking? 2) How are you asking it? 3) What data will you need to provide a good answer?
    - “How do immigrant males feel about being fathers?”
    - “How do immigrant Latino males living in the DFW area describe their feelings about fathering?”
- Reflexivity needed
  - Researcher’s position in the study
  - Relationship to participants



# Question Development Example



- “How or what is the theory/story/phenomenon/cultural pattern/issue of central phenomenon **for participants at location/site?**” (Creswell, 2014)
  - Example: How do women in a psychology doctoral program describe their decision to return to school?





# Question Development Example



- **Research interest:** Graduate student retention in the state of Texas
- **Research problem:** Most graduate students in Texas public universities do not complete their graduate degree
- **Research purpose:** To explore the experiences of graduate students at a Texas public university with regard to their ability to graduate
- **Research question:** “How do graduate students at a Texas public university describe their journey toward graduation?”



# Question Development



After developing research questions, you can make decisions about:

- Type of qualitative research design
  - Type(s) of data collection
  - Data analysis and process



# Research Questions and Design



Design	Purpose	RQ Language
Case Study	In-depth exploration of a bounded system	Explore a process
Ethnography	Describing and interpreting a culture	Seek to understand
Grounded Theory	Developing a theory generated from data	Discover
Narrative Research	Exploring life experiences of an individual or individuals	Report the stories
Phenomenology	Describing people's lived experiences and interpretations of the world	Describe the experiences



# Case Study

- In-depth exploration of a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases)
- Explore a process
  - Research question: How did higher education administration decide to create a safe ride program at Case Study College? (Mohlfield, 2017)



# Ethnography

- Describing and interpreting a culture
- Seek to understand
  - Research question: What is the nature of the caring relationship experienced by first-time mothers and the care providers assigned to them?

(Anna Frei & Mander, 2011)



# Grounded Theory

- Developing a theory generated from data collected from research participants and/or social situations
- Discover
  - Research question: How can systems thinking characteristics be examined to classify an individual's level of systemic thinking to deal with a complex problem domain? (Jaradat, 2014)





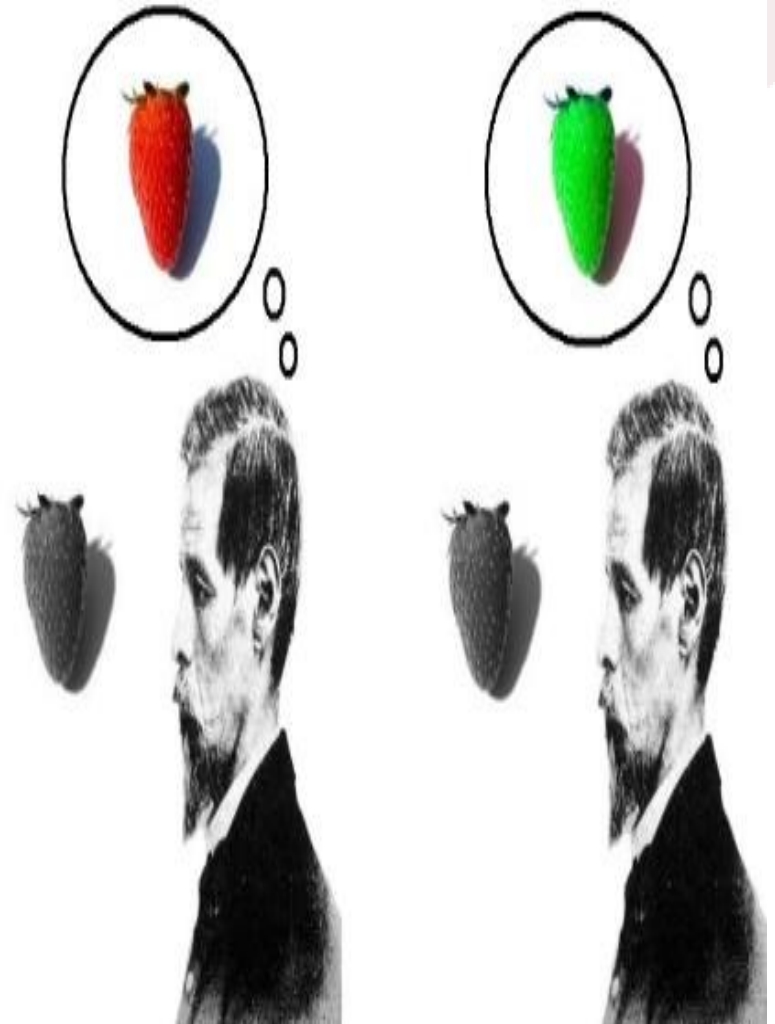
# Narrative Research

- Exploring life experiences of an individual
- Report the stories
  - Research question: How is disability constructed and negotiated through the emerging stories used in multi-ability/dimensional families? (Kim, 2016)



# Phenomenology

- Focus on people's lived experiences and interpretations of the world
- Describe the experiences
  - Research question: What are the embodied experiences of heterosexual women who are distressed about their compulsive sexual behaviors? (Teller-Holt, 2014)





# Question Development: Exercise 1

- Finders (1996) used ethnographic procedures to document the reading of teen magazines by middle-class European American seventh-grade girls. By examining the reading of teen zines (magazines), the researcher explored how the girls perceive and construct their social roles and relationships as they enter junior high school.
- “**How or what is the theory/story/phenomenon/cultural pattern/issue of central phenomenon for participants at location/site?**” (Creswell, 2014)



# Question Development: Exercise 1

- The author's research question:
  - How do early adolescent females read literature that falls outside the realm of fiction?



# Question Development: Exercise 2

- Padula and Miller (1999) conducted a multiple case study that described the experiences of women who went back to school, after a time away, in a psychology doctoral program at a major Midwestern research university. The intent was to document the women's experiences, providing a gendered and feminist perspective for women in the literature.
- **“How or what is the theory/story/phenomenon/cultural pattern/issue of central phenomenon for participants at location/site?”** (Creswell, 2014)



# Question Development: Exercise 2

- The authors' research questions:
  - a) How do women in a psychology doctoral program describe their decision to return to school?
  - b) How do women in a psychology doctoral program describe their reentry experiences?
  - c) How does returning to graduate school change these women's lives?



# Qualitative Research Questions



## Do

- Limit number of questions
- Begin with: “How” & “What”
- Use non-directional, exploratory verbs: “Describe” “Discover” “Explore” “Understand”
- Expect change
- Make questions: broad, open-ended, with single focus, answerable
- Be reflexive

## Don't

- Close-ended questions
- Hypothesis
- Variables
- Words: “Relate” “Influence” “Impact” “Effect” “Cause” “Why”
- Make assumptions
- Arrive at conclusions prematurely
- Several aims in one question



# Questions



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