

9 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

CONTENTS

Cutting Questions to Size	98
Specifying an Area of Interest and Delimiting the Issue	100
Sensitizing Concepts and the Triangulation of Perspectives	100
Types of Research Questions	101

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- understand why research questions are so important for running a successful study
- explain why it is important to carefully formulate and focus the research question
- articulate the different types of research questions from which you can choose one for your project

If you want to start your qualitative study, a first and central step, and one that essentially determines success in qualitative research but tends to be ignored in most presentations of methods, is how to formulate the research question(s). However, you not only are confronted with this problem at the beginning when you conceptualize your study or your project, but also have to deal with formulating the research question at several stages of the process: when you conceptualize the research design, when you enter the field, when you select the cases, and when you collect the data. Reflecting on and reformulating the research question are central points of reference for assessing the appropriateness of the decisions you take at several points. It becomes relevant when you decide about the method(s) of collecting data, when you conceptualize interview schedules, but also when you conceptualize the interpretation, *which* method you *use*, and *which material* you select.

You should formulate research questions in concrete terms with the aim of clarifying what the field contacts are supposed to reveal. The less clearly you formulate your research question, the greater is the danger that you will find yourself in the end confronted with mountains of data helplessly trying to analyze them.

Although the quoted "principle of openness" questions the a priori formulation of hypotheses, it by no means implies that you should abandon attempts to define and formulate research questions. It is important that you develop a clear idea of your research question but remain open to new and perhaps surprising results. Clear ideas about the nature of the research questions that are pursued are also necessary for checking the appropriateness of methodological decisions in the following respects: Which methods are necessary to answer the questions? Is it possible to study the research question with the chosen methods at all? Is qualitative research the appropriate strategy to answer these questions?² More generally, the elaboration of the research question in the research process may be characterized as in Figure 9.1.

Cutting Questions to Size

Research questions do not come from nowhere. In many cases, their origin lies in the researchers' personal biographies and their social contexts. The decision about a specific question mostly depends on the researchers' practical interests and their involvement in certain social and historical contexts. Everyday and scientific contexts both play a part here. Recent research studying scientific processes has demonstrated how much traditions and styles of thinking influence the formulation of research questions in scientific laboratories and in work groups in social sciences.

If you decide upon a concrete research question, this is always linked to reducing variety, and thus to structuring the field under study: certain aspects are brought to the fore, others are regarded as less important and (at least for the time being) left in

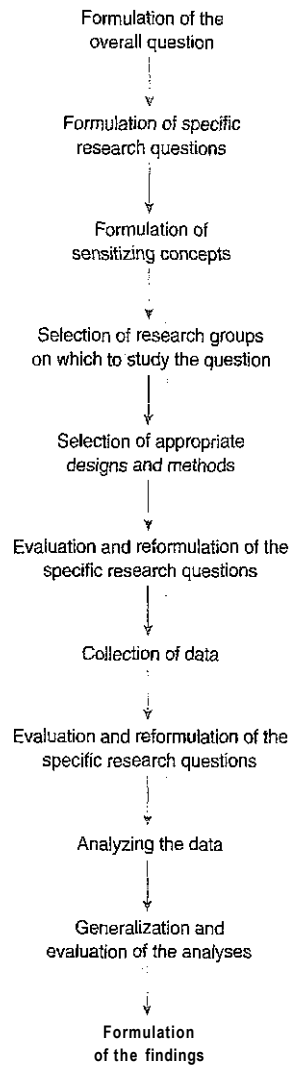


FIGURE 9.1 Research Questions in the Research Process

the background or excluded. For instance, in collecting data, such a decision is particularly crucial when you want to use single interviews (see Chapters 13 through 16). However, if you collect your data in a processual manner, as for example in participant observation (see Chapter 17) or with repeated interviews, you can change the consequences of such a decision more easily.

Specifying an Area of interest and Delimiting the Issue

The result of formulating research questions is that it helps you to circumscribe a specific area of a more or less complex field, which you regard as essential, although the field would allow various research definitions of this kind. For studying "counseling," for example, you could specify any of the following as areas of interest:

- ® interactive processes between counselor and client;
- organization of the administration of clients as "cases";
- organization and maintenance of a specific professional identity (e.g., to be a helper under unfavorable circumstances);
- subjective or objective manifestations of the patient's "career."

All these areas are relevant aspects of the complexity of everyday life in an institution (counseling service, socio-psychiatric service). You can focus on each of these areas in a study and embody it in a research question. For example, you could approach a complex (e.g., institutional) field with the aim of focusing on gaining an understanding of the viewpoint of one person or of several persons acting in this field. You could also focus on describing a life world. Similarly, you could be dedicated to reconstructing subjective or objective reasons for activities and thus to explaining human behavior. Alternatively, you can concentrate on the relation between subjective interpretations and the structural features of activity environments that can be described objectively.

Only in very rare cases in qualitative research does it make sense and is it realistic to include this multitude of aspects. Rather it is crucial that you define the field and the research question in such a way that the latter can be answered with the available resources and a sound research design can be derived. This also calls for the formulation of a research question in such a way that it does not implicitly raise a lot of other questions at the same time, which would result in too indistinct an orientation to the empirical activities.

Sensitizing Concepts and the Triangulation of Perspectives

At this stage, you will face the problem of which aspects you want to include (the essential, the manageable, the relevant perspective, and so on) in your research and which to exclude (the secondary, the less relevant, and so on). How should you shape this decision in order to ensure the least "frictional loss" possible (i.e., ensure that the loss of authenticity remains limited and justifiable through an acceptable (degree of) neglect of certain aspects)?

Sensitizing concepts that give you wide access to a spectrum of processes relevant in a field may be the starting point of your research. Glaser and Strauss call these "analytical and sensitizing concepts" (1967, p. 38). For instance, when I studied the institutional everyday life of counseling, a concept like "trust" proved to be useful. This concept could be applied, for example, to aspects of interactions between counselor and client. I could also use it to study the counselor's task, the clients' impressions of the institution and their perceptions of the counselors' competence, the problematic of how to make a conversation a consultation, and so on.

The factional loss in decisions between research perspectives can be reduced by the approach of systematic triangulation of perspectives (see Flick 2007b). This refers to the combination of appropriate research perspectives and methods that are suitable for taking into account as many different aspects of a problem as possible. An example of this would be the combination of attempts at understanding persons' points of view with attempts at describing the life world in which they act. According to Fielding and Fielding (1986, p. 34), structural aspects of a problem should be linked with reconstructing its meaning for the people involved (see Chapter 32 for triangulation). In the previous example, I realized this by linking the reconstruction of counselors' subjective theories on trust with a description of the process of producing trust in a conversation in the special world of "counseling."

If you use key concepts to gain access to the relevant processes and triangulation of perspectives to disclose as many different aspects as possible, you can increase the degree of proximity to the object in the way you explore cases and fields. This process may also enable the opening up of new fields of knowledge.

Generally speaking, the precise formulation of the research question is a central step when you conceptualize your research design. Research questions should be examined critically as to their origins (what has led to the actual research question?). They are points of reference for checking the soundness of your research design and the appropriateness of methods you intend to use for collecting and interpreting your data. This is relevant for evaluating any generalizations: the level of generalization that is appropriate and obtainable depends on the research questions pursued.

Types of Research Questions

There are different types of research questions (according to Lofland and Lofland 1984, p. 94):

- What type is it?
- What is its structure?
- How frequent is it?
- What are the causes?
- What are its processes?

- What are its consequences?
- What are people's strategies?

These typologies of research questions include links to the "coding paradigm" that Strauss (1987, p. 27) suggests for formulating questions on text to be interpreted (for more details see Chapters 23 and 31). Lofland and Lofland also suggest that you reflect on which "units" you want to choose for analyzing phenomena relevant for answering your research question. They suggest the following ones (1984, p. 94), which could be complemented by other units according to the specific research questions you have:

- Meanings
- Practices
- Episodes
- Encounters
- Roles
- Relationships
- Groups
- Organizations
- Lifestyles

Generally speaking, we can differentiate between research questions oriented towards describing states and those describing processes. In the first case, you should describe how a certain given state (which type, how often) has come about (causes, strategies) and how this state is maintained (structure). In the second case, the aim is to describe how something develops or changes (causes, processes, consequences, strategies).

The description of states and the description of processes as the two main types of research question may be classified in terms of increasingly complex "units" (Lofland and Lofland 1984). This classification can be used for locating research questions in this space of possibilities and also for checking the selected research question for additional questions raised.

Finally, you can assess or classify research questions as to how far they are suitable for confirming existing assumptions (like hypotheses) or how far they aim at discovering new ones, or at least allow this. Strauss calls the latter generative questions and defines them as follows: "Questions that stimulate the line of investigation in profitable directions; they lead to hypotheses, useful comparisons, the collection of certain classes of data, even to general lines of attack on potentially important problems" (1987, p. 22).

Case Study 9.1 Adoption of a Public Health Orientation by Doctors and Nurses

In this project (Flick, Fischer, Walter, and Schwartz 2002), we were generally interested in whether and how far a public health orientation had reached some of the key institutions of home care services in the health field. This is of course not yet a research question, which you can use for starting an empirical study. So, we had to

pin down this general interest to a more focused perspective. Therefore, we focused on health concepts held by home care nurses and general practitioners. Then we focused on the attitude held towards prevention and health promotion as parts of their work, and more concretely with a specific part of their clientele—the elderly.

Against this background, we developed a set of questions we wanted to pursue in a study using interviews:

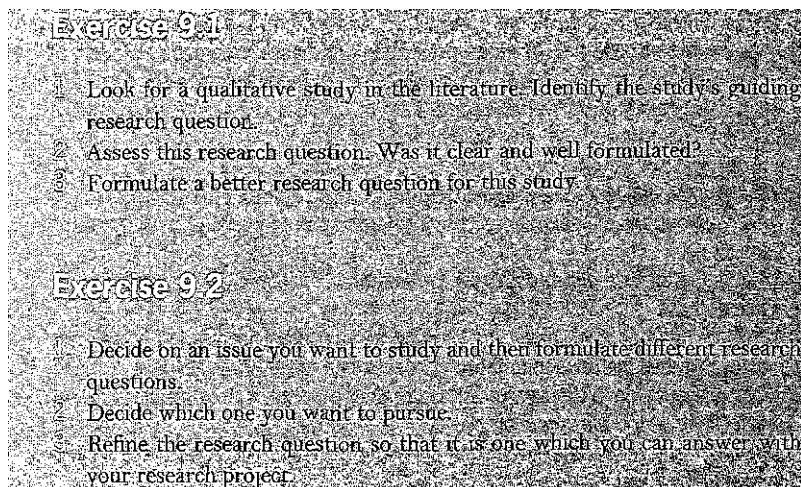
- What are the concepts of health held by doctors and nurses?
- Which dimensions of health representations are relevant for professional work with the elderly?
- What is the attitude of professionals towards prevention and health promotion for the elderly?
- What are the concepts of ageing held by general practitioners and home care nurses? What is the relation of these concepts with those of health?
- What relevance do professionals ascribe to their own concepts of health and ageing for their own professional practice?
- Are there any relations between the concepts of health and ageing and professional training and experience?

We took these research questions as a starting point for developing an instrument for episodic interviews (see Chapter 14) with doctors and nurses. Looking back on this project, we thought critically about the number of different research questions included in the above list. Particularly, if you are a novice to qualitative research, I suggest that you concentrate on one or two such questions in planning a similar project to the one we did.

Research questions are like a door to the research field under study. Whether empirical activities produce answers or not depends on the formulation of such questions. Also dependent on this is the decision as to which methods are appropriate and who (i.e., which persons, groups, or institutions) or what (i.e., what processes, activities, or lifestyles) you should include in your study. The essential criteria for evaluating research questions include their soundness and clarity, but also whether they can be answered in the framework of given and limited resources (time, money, etc., see Chapter 12). You should take into account that formulating a research question means to define the overall guiding question for your entire project and not to formulate the concrete questions you will ask in your interviews, for example.

KEY POINTS

- It is absolutely essential to formulate a clear research question.
- Most issues of research can be addressed by several research questions. It is important when you start your research to decide which one of these questions you will focus on.
- Research questions are refined and reformulated as an empirical research project proceeds.



Further Reading

The first two texts deal with linking perspectives in research questions in some detail, whereas the others give classical and more elaborate information about how to deal with research questions in qualitative research:

- Fielding, N.G. and Fielding, J.L. (1986) *Linking Data*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.
- Flick, U. (2007b) *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.
- Flick, U. (2007c) *Designing Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.
- Lofland, J. and Lofland, L.H. (1984) *Analyzing Social Settings* (2nd edn). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Strauss, A.L. (1987) *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Notes

- 1 Almost no textbook dedicates a separate chapter to this topic. In most subject indexes, one looks for it in vain. Exceptions can be found in Silverman (1985, Ch.1; 1993), Strauss (1987, p. 17), and Strauss and Corbin (1990, pp. 37-40).
- 2 If the research question in a study implicitly or explicitly leads to the determination of the frequencies of a phenomenon, quantitative methods are not only more appropriate but generally also simpler to apply.