

Chapter 3

Formulating Effective Qualitative Research Questions

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ABSTRACT

Arguably, the most critical element of a research design, that drives all other components including methodology, and often determines the success or failure of a research project is the research question. In this chapter, the authors delve into the process of formulating the qualitative research question from the perspective of qualitative research professors guiding doctoral-level students in qualitative research courses and through dissertation completion. The authors begin with a definition of the qualitative research question followed by the purposes of research questions, types of qualitative research questions, framing the questions with frames such as PICO and SPIDER, using Artificial Intelligence to craft research questions, aligning the research question with other elements of the study such as the research purpose and data forms, characterizing effective research questions, exploring problems associated with ill-formed research questions, equitably phrasing questions, revising and reconfiguring them during the course of a study, and reflecting upon them.

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BACKGROUND

The research question of a study, whether qualitative or quantitative, is one of several decisive factors that determine a study's success or failure (Creswell, 2014; Doody & Bailey, 2016; Ratan et al., 2019). Its importance cannot be understated as the research question frames the entire research project (Oddone, 2003). In our work with doctoral students in qualitative research classes and with those who are in the process of completing their qualitative dissertations, we have found that while these students are generally adept at articulating a research problem and purpose, crafting effective research questions proves a more daunting task than many of them initially realize, an issue also identified by Tomaszewski et al. (2020) and Mantzoukas (2007). Moreover, dissertating students often do not carefully consider the research question in general, and underestimate its significance, instead attributing greater value and time commitment to a study's conclusions and findings (Mantzoukas, 2007). Nor do many students realize the need to cautiously contemplate every word of their research questions as each word impacts what they are asking. All words that make up research questions are critical, including secondary words such as 'what', 'how', and 'why' as these words are closely connected to methods. In addition, research questions communicate the question's direction, congruence with methods, the topic of the research, and to whom the question is posed, driving an entire investigation and setting the stage for overall research success or failure, all while maintaining its flexibility and remaining "open to the interventions of the context and data analysis" (Neri de Souza et al., 2016). The literature is deficient in studies devoted to developing the qualitative research question and many published studies either do not have or disregard the research question(s), making studying the research question in general, and examining how other scholars craft it difficult (Mattick et al., 2018; White, 2013).

Formulating an effectual research question that reflects all these elements is a struggle for novice and veteran researchers alike (Fandino, 2019). Thus, we spend a lot of time helping students understand the process of articulating effective research questions, a foundational research skill, before allowing them to move forward with their studies. We always maintain that the questions are open for fine-tuning or modification throughout an investigation. In this chapter, we will review the literature for best practices associated with qualitative research question formulation and share some strategies we utilize with students.

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