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QUESTIONS

Qualitative Studies: Developing Good Research Questions

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Abstract

Qualitative research is a type of research process that is widely used to give people a voice while researching a particular subject matter. In using this research process, one must understand how important it is to develop research questions within the qualitative research process. The development of research questions involves establishing research questions that are clear, open-ended, and researchable. The questions must also allow for the emergence of new hypotheses and additional questions as participants tell their story.

## Background

In order to satisfy a growing curiosity of an apparent educational problem, to fully understand an issue within the educational field, or to simply fill a knowledge gap, one must take on the role of becoming a researcher, delve into the existing research concerning the issue of interest, and hopefully contribute findings or confirm findings of current research. To become a researcher and conduct meaningful research, an individual must follow through a process and follow a set of general guidelines. This process is used throughout both types of qualitative research and quantitative research. The process involves developing a purpose, developing research questions, collecting and analyzing data, describing the methods used within the process, and presenting the information in a final conclusion or discussion section (Creswell, 2005).

## Purpose

As an individual embarks upon the role of becoming a researcher and establishes an area of interest or concern, the researcher must then evaluate the area of interest and make the decision of whether to use the format and guidelines of qualitative research or quantitative research. Creswell (2005) explains that qualitative research is best used for “research problems in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p. 45). Quantitative research is best used for answering “specific, narrow questions to obtain measurable and observable data on variables” (p. 47). Burck (2005) adds that qualitative methodologies and quantitative methodologies were created for various audiences and the determination of which type to use depends on the desired quality of information or desired quantifiable relationships. Frankel and Devers (2000) provide further reasons for using qualitative methods. These authors explain that qualitative research methods are best suited when the research questions

pose puzzles that cannot be fully solved using usual research methodologies. For the purpose of this paper, the qualitative type of research will be examined with focus given to the aspect of developing and creating the research questions. Good research questions set the stage and establish the end result of major findings.

### Review of the Literature

In order to begin a qualitative study, the researcher must identify a research topic and then compose the research questions. A study cannot begin without established research questions. In qualitative research, the research questions differ greatly from a research topic. Creswell (2005) explains that the research topic is a broad area in which “a central phenomenon is the key concept, idea, or process studied in qualitative research” (p. 45). The research questions “narrow the purpose statement to specific questions that researchers seek to answer” (p. 117). Once a draft of the research questions has been written, the researcher should examine the questions to identify some common characteristics. Bradley (2001) purports that good research questions “are stated clearly, are researchable, and involve some concept related to either theory or an applied context” (p. 574). This process of evaluating the research questions should consume a considerable amount of time and effort. Farber (2006) adds that a researcher must be truly interested and passionate about what is to be studied. With this intense passion and desire to fill a knowledge gap, a researcher will be more likely to follow through the research process and reach established research goals.

The research questions are not the same questions that are presented during the process of interviewing participants within the study. Burck (2005) agrees with the fact that research questions are the most important facet within the qualitative study. The research questions should be open-ended, to allow the researcher to generate hypotheses from

analyzing the collected data. These hypothesis-generating questions are one of the distinguishing factors between qualitative research and quantitative research. With qualitative studies, hypotheses are formed based on the research data. With qualitative studies, research questions are developed to confirm or void pre-conceived hypotheses, relationships, or correlations. Ohman (2005) further declares that qualitative questions are open-ended and allows “informants to tell their story” (p. 275). Also, a researcher must develop skills that allow him/her to gain trust with the participant being interviewed. In this manner, responses that are not always positive will be given to provide a clearer picture and provide more details to the participant’s story. Farber (2006) agrees with this notion and adds that qualitative research questions are open-ended to allow the researcher to keep an open mind. These questions guide the research study, but at the same time, these questions allow for subquestions to pave the way for new and emerging questions and hypotheses.

Bradley (2001) explains that “developing good research ideas is both a science and an art” (p. 569). Many beginning researchers are graduate students who have had little or no experience in the areas of research methodology. In order to gain experience and knowledge in these areas, a novice researcher should draw upon one of two knowledge bases. The researcher should base his/her knowledge from a theoretical lens or an ethical lens approach. As the beginning researcher decides upon which approach to utilize in the research process, educational instructors should encourage the beginning researcher to develop research questions that would expand the range and knowledge base that the beginning researcher possesses. In order to expand upon this knowledge base, Bradley (2001) suggests writing grant proposals to expose students to the process of approaching research questions and pursuing those questions.

Frankel and Devers (2000) support the authors above in professing that the main aspect in developing a qualitative study lies within composing good research questions. These two authors realize that many researchers have little experience in composing research questions, due to discovering new theoretical knowledge. In order to expand upon this knowledge, novice researchers can learn to write good research questions by drafting an exploratory research question, and then conducting a number of studies to clarify and define key terms. In this manner, more specific, narrow questions can evolve and provide a clear direction for the study. Law (2004) adds that a novice qualitative researcher may even conduct a literature review of the initial research questions or conduct a small study on the research questions, in order to determine whether or not the research questions are clear and researchable.

### Conclusion

As novice researchers begin to take on the task of conducting qualitative research, a researcher must choose a topic that is interesting and worthwhile to the researcher. As the first step of the research process begins to evolve, it is imperative that the researcher realize how crucial the qualitative research questions are to the study. From an initial topic, the research questions begin to take shape. These questions are questions of wonder. They must be open-ended and researchable. Also, a researcher may need to conduct a literature review to clarify the meanings of terms within the research question. It is vital that these questions be clear enough for the researcher, as these research questions will guide the research study and allow for subquestions. Research questions are the ultimate foundation for a research study. If the research questions are not clear, the study is sure to crumble.

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