

CHAPTER 4

The What of the Study

Building the Conceptual Framework

What is research? What is a research proposal? How do the two relate to each other? The social scientist may view research as a process of trying to gain a better understanding of the complexities of human experience—by asking basic questions. With somewhat different purposes, other researchers ask applied and practical questions aimed at contributing possible solutions to pressing challenges (as, perhaps, in nursing or educational research). In some genres of research, the aim is to identify productive ways to take action based on the research findings. Through systematic and sometimes collaborative strategies, the researcher gathers information about actions and interactions, reflects on their meaning, arrives at and evaluates conclusions, and eventually puts forward an interpretation, most frequently in written form.

Quite unlike its pristine and logical presentation in journal articles—“the reconstructed logic of science” (Kaplan, 1964, p. 67)—research is often confusing, messy, intensely frustrating, and fundamentally nonlinear. In critiquing the way journal articles display research as a supremely sequential and objective endeavor, Bargar and Duncan (1982) describe how, “through such highly standardized reporting practices, scientists inadvertently hide from view the real inner drama of their work, with its intuitive base, its halting timeline, and its extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives” (p. 2). This drama is delightful but also daunting.

The researcher begins by attending to interesting, mysterious, curious, or anomalous phenomena that he observes, discovers, or stumbles across. Like detective work or the most ethical traditions in investigative reporting, research seeks to explain, describe, explore, and/or critique the phenomenon chosen for study. Critical genres challenge dominant, taken-for-granted knowledge, as does postmodernism. Emancipatory genres, such as those represented by some critical, feminist, and participatory action research approaches, also make explicit

their intent to act toward the change of oppressive circumstances. The commitment of these emancipatory genres to social justice is increasingly present in all genres of qualitative inquiry. Thus, the research proposal is *a plan for engaging in systematic inquiry* to bring about a better understanding of the phenomenon and/or to change problematic social circumstances. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the finished proposal should demonstrate that (a) the research is worth doing, (b) the researcher is competent to conduct the study, and (c) the study is carefully planned and can be executed successfully.

A proposal for the conduct of any research represents *decisions* the researcher has made—that a theoretical framework, design, and methodology will generate data appropriate and adequate for responding to the research questions and will conform to ethical standards. These decisions emerge through intuition, complex reasoning, and the weighing of a number of possible research questions, possible conceptual frameworks, and alternative designs and strategies for gathering data. Throughout, the researcher considers the “should-do-ability,” “do-ability,” and “want-to-do-ability” of the proposed project (discussed in Chapter 1). This is the complex, dialectical process of designing a qualitative study. This chapter discusses how, in qualitative design, you are choosing from among possible research questions, frameworks, approaches, sites, and data collection methods the one most suited to your research project. Building the research proposal demands that the researcher consider all the elements of the proposal *at the same time*. As noted in Chapter 1, this recursive process is complex and intellectually challenging because he needs to consider multiple elements—multiple decisions and choices—of the proposal simultaneously.

But how to begin? This is often the most challenging aspect of developing a successful proposal. A quick answer is, “Start where you are.” Long ago, Anselm Strauss (1969) said, “The naming of an object provides directive for action” (p. 22). He pointed to how powerfully mobilizing it is to give one’s project a name—to be able to put it into a short, simple sentence.

Our experience suggests that research interests may have their origins in deeply personal experiences, professional commitments and concerns, intriguing theoretical frameworks, methodological predilections, and/or recurring social problems. Whatever their source, these interests must be transformed into a logical proposal that articulates key elements and demonstrates competence. We offer one model for those elements, recognizing that much thought and drafting have preceded this formal, public writing.

■ Sections of the Proposal

Proposals for qualitative research vary in format but typically include the following three sections: (1) *the introduction*, which includes an overview of the proposal, a discussion of the topic or focus of the inquiry and the general research questions, the study’s purpose and potential significance, and its limitations; (2) *a discussion of related literature* or “currents of thought” (Schram, 2006, p. 63), which situates the study in the ongoing discourse about the topic and develops the specific intellectual traditions to which the study is linked; and (3) *the research design and methods*, which detail the overall design, the site or population of interest, the specific methods for gathering data, a preliminary discussion of strategies for analyzing the data and for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study, a biography of the researcher, and ethical and political issues that may arise in the conduct of the study. In all research, these sections are

interrelated—each one building on the others. They are listed in Table 4.1. In qualitative inquiry, the proposal should reserve some flexibility in research questions and design, because these are likely to change. The qualitative research proposal is, actually, the researcher's very best reasoning about how he justifies his questions and how he can proceed to find answers. The next section provides some strategies for building a clear conceptual framework while retaining the flexibility to allow the unanticipated to emerge.

■ Building the Conceptual Framework: Topic, Purpose, and Significance

The proposal should present a convincing argument, showing how the proposed research will likely be meaningful and will contribute to improving the human condition. In the outline provided in Table 4.1, the introductory section presents an overview of this argument because it (a) describes the substantive focus of the research—the topic—and its purpose; (b) frames it in

Table 4.1 Sections of a Qualitative Research Proposal

<i>Introduction</i>
Overview
Topic and purpose
Significance for knowledge, for practical and policy problems, and/or for action
Framework and general research questions
Limitations
<i>Literature review and critique of related research</i>
Theoretical traditions and currents of thought for framing the question
Review and critique of related empirical research
Essays and opinions of experts and insiders
<i>Design and methodology</i>
Overall approach and rationale
Site or population selection and sampling strategies
Access, role, reciprocity, trust, rapport
Personal biography
Ethical and political considerations
Data collection methods
Data analysis procedures
Procedures to address trustworthiness and credibility
Appendices (may include entry letters, data collection protocols and management details, sampling strategies, timelines, budgets, notes from pilot studies)
References

larger theoretical, policy, social, or practical domains and thereby develops its significance; (c) poses initial research questions; (d) forecasts the literature to be reviewed; and (e) discusses the limitations of the study. The proposal writer should organize the information so that a reader can clearly ascertain the essence of the research study. This section, along with the review and critique of related literature, forms the **conceptual framework** of the study and informs the reader of the study's substantive focus and purpose. We share the good advice of Schram (2006), who suggests that, on the way to developing the theoretical framework, the researcher should be able to say, "Here's how I am positioning my problem within an established arena of ideas, and here's why it matters" (p. 62). The conceptual framework doesn't come out of the sky, or even from one theorist's book. Rather, it is developed by the researcher himself, and the task, says Schram, is in "uncovering what is relevant and what is problematic among the ideas circulating around your problem, making new connections, and then formulating an argument that positions you to address that problem" (p. 63). The design section (discussed in Chapter 5) then describes how the study will be conducted and showcases the writer's ability to do so.

Although our outline has separate sections, the researcher's narrative of the first two sections—the introduction and the review and critique of the literature—is derived from his thorough familiarity with the literature on relevant theory, empirical studies, reviews of previous research, and informed essays by experts. His careful review of the related literature accomplishes three main purposes. First, it provides evidence that the study has potential **significance for practice and policy** and is likely to contribute to the ongoing discourse about the topic (often referred to as contributing to "knowledge"). Second, it identifies the important intellectual traditions that guide the study—the "currents of thought" that frame it. Third, it identifies gaps in what is known—by critiquing previous research, extending existing theory, or pointing to practices and policies that are not working. These elements constitute the building blocks for a conceptual framework and help refine important and viable research questions. Before writing this section, the researcher probably has an intuitive sense that his questions are important or has pragmatic reasons for zeroing in on these questions. After writing the introduction and the literature review, he will be quite convincing in his argument and assertion that the research has larger meaning.

Because of the interrelatedness of the sections and because writing is developmental and recursive—a "method of inquiry" itself (Richardson, 2000, p. 923)—the writer may find it necessary to rewrite the research questions or problem statement after reviewing the literature or to refocus on the significance of the research after its design is developed. Bargar and Duncan's (1982) description of "extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives" (p. 2) captures this dialectical process. Our advice is that the writer be sensitive to the need for change and flexibility: Be prepared to rewrite sections numerous times, not rush to closure too soon, and learn to love the word processor's functions. Sound ideas for research may come in a moment of inspiration, but the hard work is in developing, refining, and polishing the idea—that is, the pursuance of the intellectual traditions that surround the idea—and in the methods used for exploring it.

The Overview Section

The first section of the proposal provides an overview of the study for the reader. It introduces the topic or problem and the purpose of the study, the general research questions it will

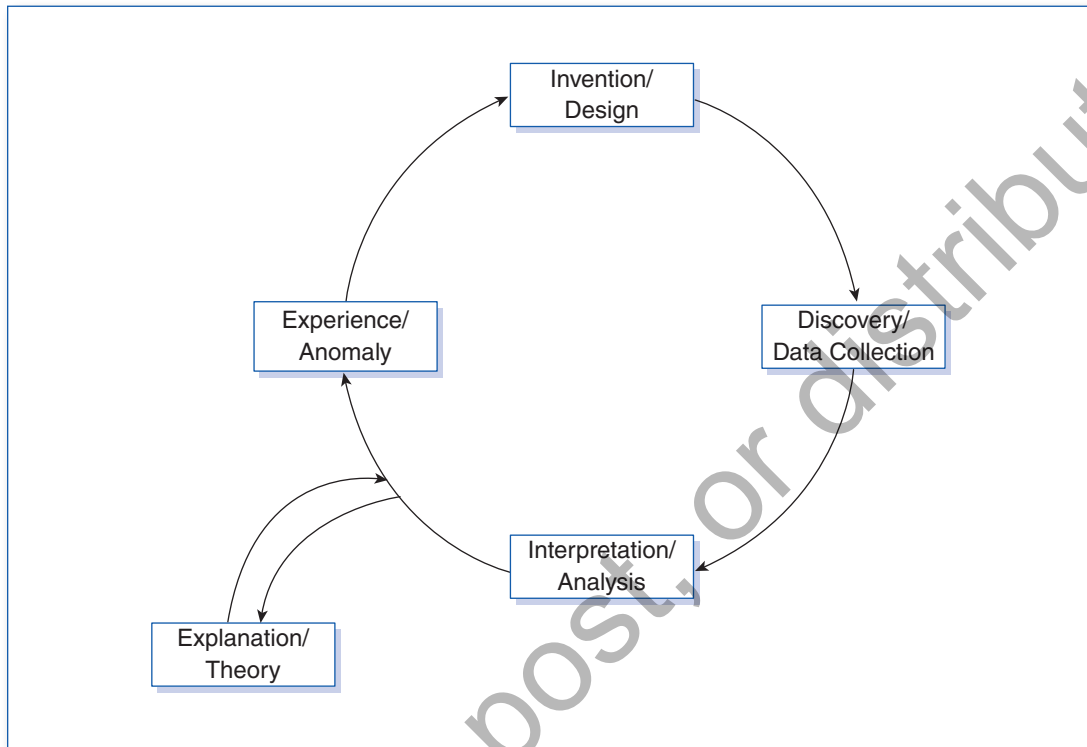
address, and how it is designed. This section should be written crisply, engage the reader's interest, and foreshadow the sections that follow. First, the topic or problem that the study will address is introduced, linking this to practice, policy, social issues, and/or theory, thereby forecasting the study's significance. Next, the broad areas of theory and research to be discussed in the literature review are outlined. Then, the design of the study is sketched, focusing on the principal techniques for data collection and the unique features of the design. This short overview provides a transition to a more detailed discussion of the topic, the study's significance, and the research questions.

Introducing the Topic

The curiosity that inspires qualitative research often comes initially from observations of the real world, emerging from the interplay of direct experience and theoretical notions and of political commitment and practice, as well as from growing scholarly interests, as noted above. At other times, a topic derives from a review and critique of the empirical research and traditions of theory. Beginning researchers should examine journals specifically committed to publishing extensive reviews of literature (e.g., *Review of Educational Research*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *American Review of Public Administration*, and *Annual Review of Public Health*), peruse policy-oriented publications to learn about current or emerging issues and challenges in their fields, and talk with experts about crucial issues. They might also reflect on the intersection of their personal, professional, and political interests. Those with little experience with literature reviews can greatly benefit from the “road map” format in Bloomberg and Volpe's (2012) *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation*. It breaks down into meaningful and more manageable pieces the steps and stages of undertaking research—the ways of using different theorists, ways to be selective and integrate critiques, and ways to move from the review of literature to a conceptual framework.

Inquiry cycles between theory, practice, research questions, and personal experience. A research project may begin at any point in this complex process. Considering possible research questions, potential sites, and individuals or groups to invite to participate in the research may lead to a focus for the study. Imagining potential sites or groups of people to work with may reshape the focus of the study. Thinking about sites or people for the study also encourages the researcher to think about his positionality and possible strategies for gathering data. He may know of a site where intriguing issues of practice capture his imagination. Developing the research project proceeds dialectically, as possible focuses of the research, questions, sites, and strategies for gathering data are considered.

Crabtree and Miller (1999) offer useful conceptualizations of the *cycle of inquiry*. They argue that a metaphor for the process of much qualitative research is embedded in “Shiva's circle of constructivist inquiry,” Shiva being the Hindu god of dance and death (see Figure 4.1). The researcher enters a cycle of interpretation with exquisite sensitivity to context, seeking no ultimate truths. He must be faithful to the “performance or subject, must be both apart from and part of the dance, and must be always rooted to the context” (p. 10). They go on to note that “there is no ultimate truth; there are context-bound constructions that are all part of the larger universe of stories” (p. 10).

Figure 4.1 Shiva's Circle of Constructivist Inquiry

SOURCE: Crabtree and Miller (1999, p. 11). Reprinted with permission from SAGE Publications.

Crabtree and Miller (1999) also discuss the “critical/ecological” approach to inquiry (pp. 10–11), wherein the researcher seeks out expressions of domination, oppression, and power in daily life. Then his goal is to unmask this “false consciousness” and create “a more empowered and emancipated consciousness that incorporates social justice issues” of experience (p. 10). He may be inspired to embed empowerment goals, such as critical indigenous consciousness, in his research goals, as Lee (2006) did in her study of University of New Mexico’s summer leadership program. Thinking about this site and the issues and people in it fosters analysis of which research questions are likely to be significant for practice. These questions then shape decisions about gathering data. Whatever the qualitative genre or research goal, the cycle of inquiry entails question posing, design, data collection and discovery, analysis, and interpretation. Theory is used throughout, but especially for question posing and for guiding interpretation and explanation.

The **problematic** of an everyday world issue for institutional ethnography is the realization of the project of inquiry, according to Smith (2005), that begins “in the actualities of peoples’ lives with a focus of investigation that comes from how they participate and are hooked up into institutional practices” (p. 107). Especially in applied fields, such as management, nursing,

community development, education, and clinical psychology, a strong autobiographical element often drives the study. For example, one student of international development education studied the dilemmas in refugee and immigrant groups in the United States because of her own professional work with similar groups in community development (Jones, 2004). Another student studied Indonesian farmers' views on land use, because of her political commitment to indigenous peoples (Campbell-Nelson, 1997). And yet another student explored the deep experiences of coping among HIV/AIDS orphans and other vulnerable children in her native village in Kenya (Ochiel, 2009). A final example is the student of social psychology, deeply committed to the protection of the environment, who studied environmental attitudes from the perspective of adult development theory (Greenwald, 1992).

One's **personal biography** is often a source, an inspiration, and an initial way of framing a research question. In qualitative research genres, the influences of biography are often stated explicitly (although such statements are more often placed later, under "Research Design"—see Chapter 5). The following quote illustrates such a statement:

I strongly believe that for Black, Latina/o, Asian American, and Native American youth to succeed in this nation, we must have strong Black, Latina/o, Asian American, and Native American teachers. I also know, however, that many of us have been socialized through racially biased educational systems and carry skewed perceptions of ourselves, our communities, and other non-White racial or ethnic groups. (Kohli, 2008, p. 3)

Kohli (2008) continued with descriptions of sources for these beliefs, both personal and research based. By developing and including such personal biography statements, qualitative researchers show potential readers that they are addressing aspects of themselves that have led to their research focus and interest. Later, we will show how this is useful for the sections on research design (in Chapter 5), data analysis (in Chapter 8), and presentation of findings (in Chapter 10).

In Vignette 5, we see a researcher, Paul St. John Frisoli, beginning the challenge of taking a practical and policy question about West African youth and then combining it with his search for a focus that will give him personal significance. From his moment of insight, he is energized to search the literature and identify manageable data collection strategies.

Vignette 5 Intertwining My Research, My Self, and Real-World Significance

By Paul St. John Frisoli

I've been living and working throughout West Africa for the past 7 years. It's been a fantastic experience, but at times I feel like I'm leading two separate lives. At home, I'm a gay man ready to jump into a same-sex marriage while also trying to zero in on a dissertation research topic. In West Africa, I'm the practitioner who does not disclose his sexuality or divulge information about his life back home. Compounding this sense of contradictory identities is the realization that my dissertation research topic isn't clicking. I've been interested in issues affecting youth in West Africa but have been unsure how to proceed.

My “eureka” moment was the recognition of how to fuse my research topic with my own homo/hetero identities! This came at a time when issues of sexuality seemed to be popping up more frequently all over the world: Iceland designated the first ever openly homosexual prime minister. California rescinded same-sex marriage benefits. A major American motion picture depicting the life of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay American politician in the 1970s, was screened in major theaters throughout the country.

Homosexuality in African countries has also been in the news: Senegalese men staged a same-sex marriage to promote awareness that homosexual people do exist in West Africa. The Gambian president reported the need to cut off the head of any gay person in his country. Once again in Senegal, eight HIV/AIDS awareness public health workers who provided help and assistance to men who have sex with men were arrested and imprisoned for 8 years for violation of sodomy laws and enacting criminal activities. In summary, young men of differing sexualities are being persecuted in West Africa, while gay people are being chosen as heads of state. I realized that, in this divided world in which we live, my multiple identities may not be so odd after all. I want to know about other people who may be experiencing similar disjointed sexual lifestyles. More specifically, I want to ask the following question of West African men: What is it like to live a life that does not fit into a clean heteronormative lifestyle? This is my “want-to-do-ability”—a study to understand the lived experiences of young West African men who do not entirely conform to hegemonic concepts of gender and sexuality. My partner, Brad, told me that this project is also about me trying to discover something about myself, which is an assertion that I also believe to be true and valid for the want-to-do-ability of such a project.

Why is this important to anyone but me? How would I go about conducting such a study? Doing research in the contexts where people are being imprisoned and threatened did not seem like a safe pursuit for my participants or me. An Internet search with key words such as *gay* and *Africa* yielded a number of young African men’s blogs. Many of the blogs talked about identity issues in relation to their family, social, and professional lives. I immediately recognized the power of using the Internet to express oneself in a way that is safe, anonymous, and informative. These young men seem to have become Internet activists, using the Internet as a space for sharing their experiences, stories, and thoughts about their sexual identities. Not all of them claim to be “gay,” but they talk about their own discovery processes. These public blogs have also allowed not-so-gay-friendly Africans to respond, introducing voices that concur with hegemonic political and social discourses found throughout scholarly texts and the media.

Now this is territory uncharted in previous research! I imagine that the value of this study will be to describe and analyze the presence of counterhegemonic sexualities, to give voice to a population of people whose emotional, educational, and health needs may be different from those of other men. I’m now thinking that this study should be done, is potentially doable, and that I certainly want to do it.

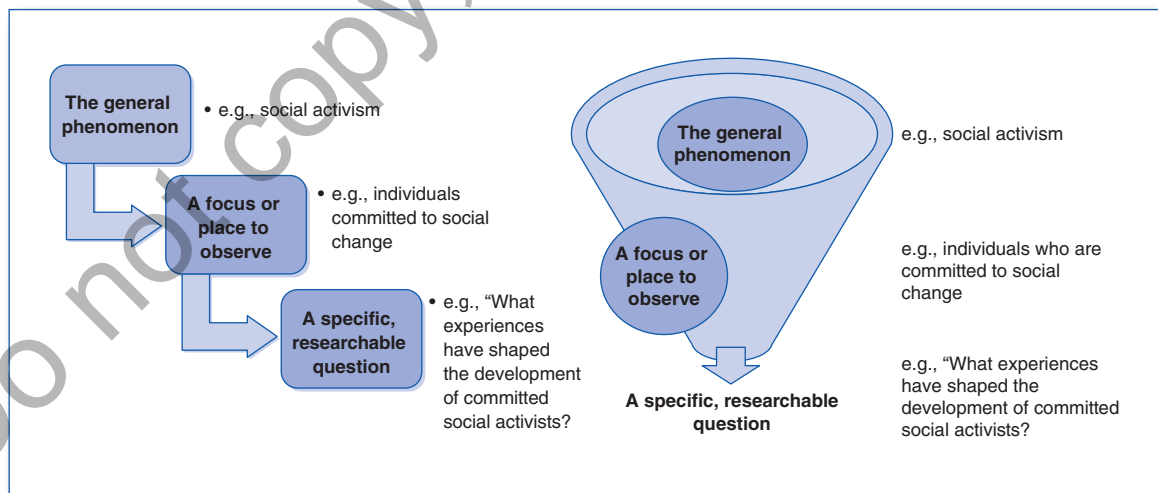
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For Paul, and for all researchers, the challenge is to demonstrate that this personal interest—increasingly referred to as the researcher’s *positionality*—will not preordain the findings or bias the study. Sensitivity to the methodological literature on the self and on one’s social identities in conducting inquiry, interpreting data, and constructing the final narrative helps accomplish this. Knowledge of the epistemological debate about what constitutes knowledge and knowledge claims, especially the critique of power and dominance in traditional research, is also valuable (see Chapter 2 on critical ethnography, feminist research, participatory action research, and postmodern perspectives).

When direct experience stimulates initial curiosity, the researcher needs to link that curiosity to general research questions. The mouth of the **conceptual funnel**, if you will, contains the general, or “grand tour,” questions the study will explore; the specific focus for the proposed study is funneled from these questions.

Figure 4.2 illustrates the conceptual funnel as a metaphor (as illustrated in Benbow’s 1994 study about the development of commitment to social action). The mouth of the funnel represents the general conceptual focus—for example, the general issue of social activism and its role in ameliorating oppressive circumstances. He then narrows the focus. Social activism becomes more researchable when the focus is on individuals who have demonstrated intense commitment to social causes or, possibly, on social movements such as group phenomena. A research question (or set of questions) can then funnel down to a more manageable and narrow focus on how life experiences help shape commitment to social activism. Researchers with very general and vague questions can benefit from putting their thoughts through the exercise represented by the funnel.

Figure 4.2 The Conceptual Funnel



Formal theories have traditionally been used to develop research questions and are useful as funnels or lenses for viewing the topic of interest. However, there is another meaning to “theories,” that is, the **personal theories**—theories in use or tacit theories (Argyris & Schön, 1974)—that people develop about events as ways to reduce ambiguity and explain paradox. If research inspiration derives from personal or tacit theory, however, the researcher should move beyond these and be guided by systematic considerations, such as existing theory and empirical research. Tacit theory (one’s personal understanding) together with formal theory (from the literature) helps bring a question, a curious phenomenon, a silenced or marginalized population, or a problematic issue into focus, and raises it to a more generalized perspective. The potential research moves from a troubling or intriguing real-world observation (e.g., a teacher reflecting, “These kids won’t volunteer in class no matter how much it’s rewarded”) to personal theory (e.g., the teacher saying, “I think they care more about what other kids think than they do about their grades”) to formal theory (e.g., the teacher considering doing research and using developmental theories of motivation to frame his thinking) to concepts and models from the literature (e.g., the teacher-researcher identifying previous research on students’ behavior in the classroom mediated by the informal expectations of the student subculture). These coalesce to frame research, providing a focus for this hypothetical teacher-researcher’s study in the form of a research question such as, “What are the expectations of the student subculture concerning class participation?” Schram (2006) says that theory is a way of asking, pulling from

a constellation of ideas and issues brought into focus by your inquiry . . . [and] provides something of a legitimizing and a narrowing influence upon the wide-ranging trajectories of hunches, tentative musings, and other forms of entry-level theorizing in which you have engaged. (p. 61)

To recapitulate, this complex process of conceptualizing, framing, and **focusing** a study typically begins with a personally defined question or identified problem. Personal observations are then transformed into systematic inquiry by reviewing the work of other scholars and practitioners on the topic, thereby building a theoretical rationale and conceptual framework to guide the study. Research questions can then be refined, and the design of the study can be more tightly focused; decisions about where to go, what to look for, and how to move to real-world observations become more specific. As the researcher moves back and forth through these various stages, the guidelines given in Figure 4.3 can help him visualize the process of moving from personal observations to conceptual framework to a specific focus and, finally, to useful and/or creative questions connected to the literature and real-life observations. They then help him visualize the research design: Where can I do this study? With whom? How can I actually gather data? How shall I plan for data analysis and reporting?

Framing the Research Process

However, the process is not nearly as linear as Figure 4.3 portrays. When, for example, the researcher is planning for the last “bubble” in the figure (categories, themes, patterns for findings), he will be asking himself what themes might be there and how the literature can help.

And when he is at the very last stage (reports and publications), he will harken back to the very first stage, recalling his original causal observations and concerns or desires for change as he decides on the reporting formats and calculates what audiences to address and to whom he will be reporting.

Figure 4.3 and these questions are intended to be suggestive of others to pose when going through this difficult process of conceptualizing and designing. However, this process applies generically whether the research is set in an urban neighborhood; with a legislative body; in a rural village in West Timor, Indonesia; or with newly arrived immigrant groups. Also, the process applies generically whether the research question is about health, human sentiments, leadership, economies, community building, rituals, or any other topic.

This early work of conceptualizing is the most difficult and intellectually rigorous in the entire process of proposal writing. It is messy and dialectical, as alternative frames (scholarly traditions) are examined for their power to illuminate and sharpen the research focus. As noted earlier, exploring possible designs and strategies for gathering data also enters into this initial process. The researcher must let go of some topics and captivating questions as he fine-tunes and focuses the study to ensure its do-ability. Although this entails loss, it bounds the study and protects him from impractical ventures. As Paul realized in Vignette 5, simply jumping into interviewing and observation in West Africa would put people in jeopardy and plainly would not work.

Intuition in this phase of the research process cannot be underestimated. Studies of eminent scientists reveal the central role of creative insight—intuition—in their thought processes (Briggs, 2000; Hoffman, 1972; Libby, 1922; Mooney, 1951). By allowing ideas to incubate and maintaining a healthy respect for the mind's capacity to reorganize and reconstruct, the researcher finds that richer research questions evolve. This observation is not intended to devalue the analytic process but, instead, to give the creative act its proper due. Bargar and Duncan (1982) note that research is a process

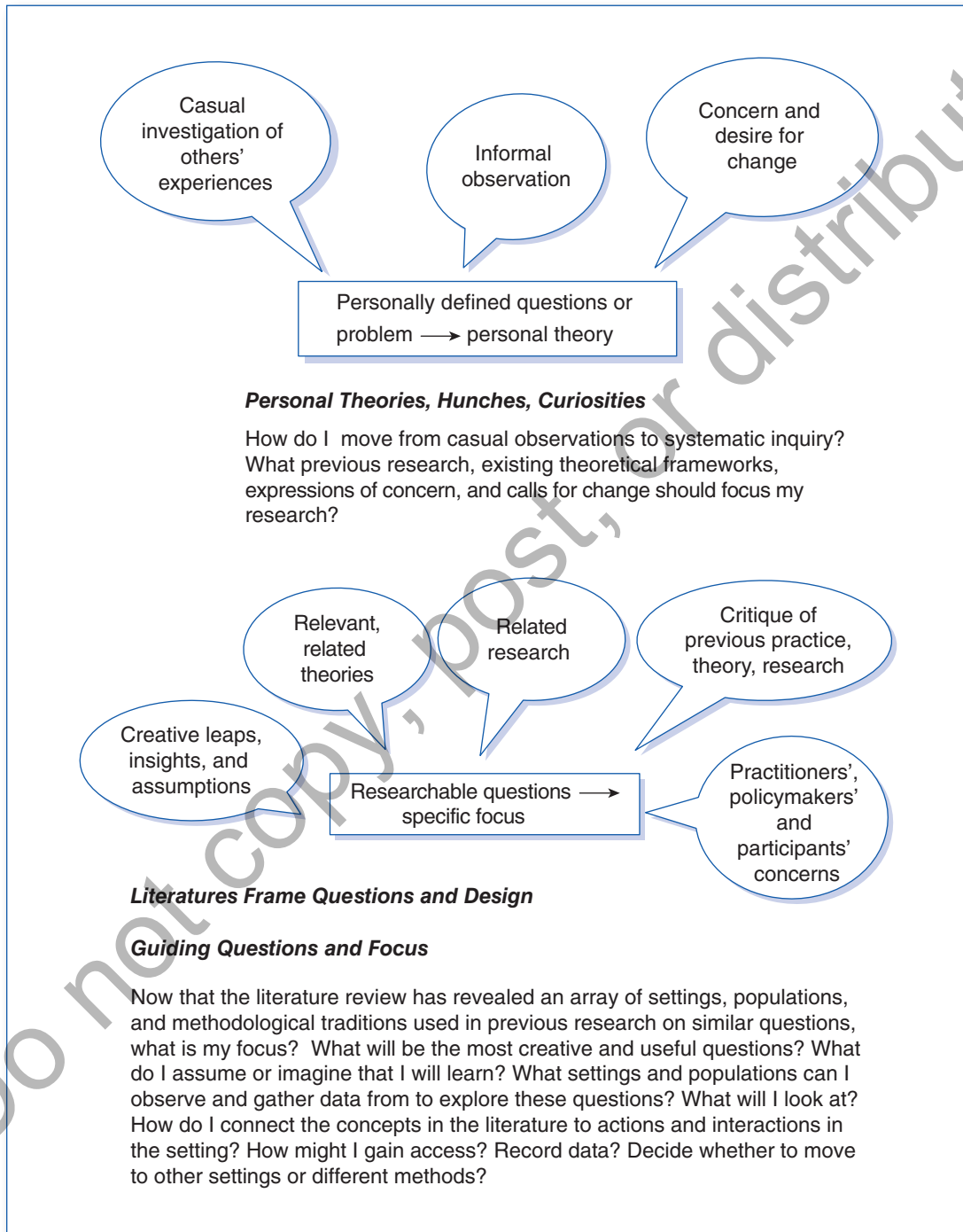
that religiously uses logical analysis as a critical tool in the *refinement* of ideas, but which often begins at a very different place, where imagery, metaphor and analogy, intuitive hunches, kinesthetic feeling states, and even dreams and dream-like states are prepotent. (p. 3)

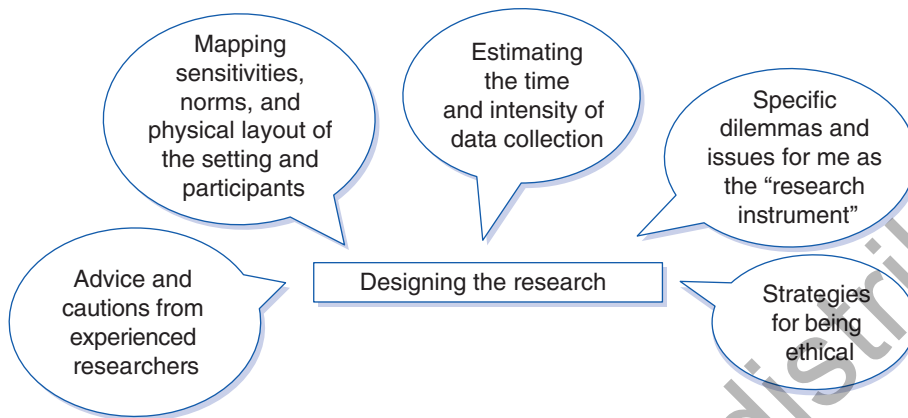
Initial insights and recycled concepts begin the process of bounding and framing the research by defining the larger theoretical, policy, or social problem or issue of practice that the study will address. This complex thinking also begins to establish the study's parameters (what it is and what it is not) and to develop the conceptual framework that will ground it in ongoing research traditions.

The Purpose of the Study

The researcher should also describe his intent in conducting the research—that is, its purpose. Generally embedded in a discussion of the topic (often only a sentence or two but important nonetheless), a statement of the purpose of the study tells the reader what the research is likely to accomplish. Historically, qualitative methodologists have described three major purposes for research: to *explore*, *explain*, or *describe* a phenomenon. Synonyms for these terms could include *understand*, *develop*, and *discover*. Many qualitative studies are

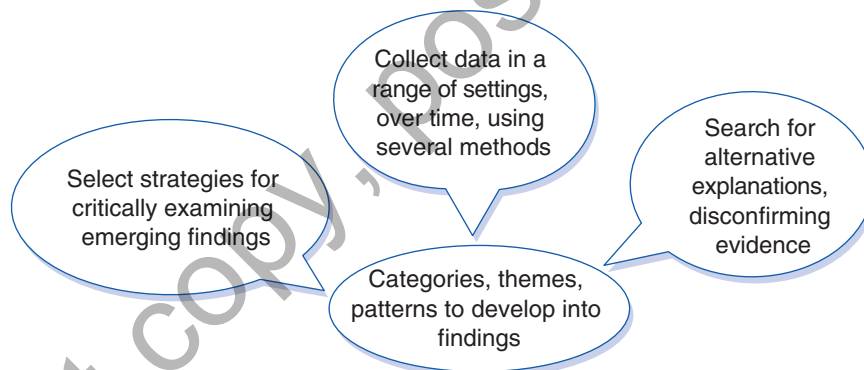
Figure 4.3 Framing the Research Process





Research Design, Data Collection, and Management

As I gather data, what strategies will I use to organize the data? How will I begin to identify patterns and work systematically to ensure that I am finding useful and significant themes? How can I ensure that the processes and report will be credible and trustworthy?



Reporting Findings Through Various Modalities

What modes of sharing the findings are ethical, appropriate to a specific audience, useful for my career, useful for participants and others? How might I use different modalities: video? photos? social media? exhibits? How do I convince audiences of the trustworthiness of the study? of its usefulness?

Reports? Videos? Multi-media productions? Drama? Poetry?

descriptive and exploratory: They build rich descriptions of complex circumstances that are unexplored in the literature. Others are explicitly explanatory: They show relationships between events (frequently as perceived by the participants in the study) and the meaning of those relationships. These traditional discussions of purpose, however, are silent about critique, action, advocacy, empowerment, and emancipation—the purposes often found in studies grounded in critical, feminist, or postmodern assumptions. The researcher can assert *taking action* as part of the intention of the proposed study, as in action research. He can assert *empowerment* (the goal of participatory action research) as a goal, but he can only, at best, discuss how the inquiry *may* create opportunities for empowerment (see Table 4.2).

The discussion of the topic and purpose also articulates the *unit of analysis*—the level of inquiry on which the study will focus. Qualitative studies typically focus on individuals, dyads, groups, processes, or organizations. Discussing the level of inquiry helps focus subsequent decisions about data gathering.

The Significance and Potential Contributions of the Study

Convincing the reader that the study is likely to be significant and should be conducted entails building an argument that links the research to important theoretical perspectives, policy issues,

Table 4.2 Matching Research Questions and Purpose

<i>Purpose of the Study</i>	<i>General Research Questions</i>
<i>Exploratory</i>	
To investigate little-understood phenomena	What is happening in this social program?
To identify or discover important categories of meaning	What are the salient themes, patterns, or categories of meaning for the participants?
To generate hypotheses for further research	How are these patterns linked with one another
<i>Explanatory</i>	
To explain the patterns related to the phenomenon in question	What events, beliefs, attitudes, or policies shape this phenomenon?
To identify plausible relationships shaping the phenomenon	How do these forces interact to result in the phenomenon?
<i>Descriptive</i>	
To document and describe the phenomenon of interest	What are the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structures and processes occurring in this phenomenon?
<i>Emancipatory</i>	
To create opportunities and the will to engage in social action	How do participants problematize their circumstances and take positive social action?

concerns of practice, or social issues that affect people's everyday lives. Think of it as an opportunity to discuss ways the study is likely to contribute to policy, practice, or theory, or to measures for taking social action. Who might be interested in the results? With what groups might the results be shared? Scholars? Policymakers? Practitioners? Members of similar groups? Individuals or groups usually silenced or marginalized? The challenge here is to situate the study as addressing an important problem; defining the problem shapes the study's significance.

A clinical psychologist might identify a theoretical gap in the literature on isolation and define the topic for an ethnography of long-distance truck drivers. Such a study may be relatively unconcerned with policy or practice; its contributions to theory, however, are preordained. A feminist sociologist could frame a study of discriminatory thinking among business executives for policy and practice by addressing the problem of persistent sexism in the workplace. A study of the impact of welfare reform on the lives of adult learners in basic-education courses could focus either on policy issues or on how this recurring social problem plays out in the lives of the learners. In that event, theory is less significant. The researcher develops the significance of the study by defining the problem. Some researchers are inspired to add a dimension of action to the study's significance for policy and practice. When overly narrow views of policy and practice miss a range of meanings and needs, qualitative researchers want to provide a holistic presentation and use their research as a tool for action (Bustelo & Verloo, 2009; Lee, 2006; Wronka, 2008).

Funding opportunities often focus on a question. A welfare-to-work grants program calling for a multisite evaluation of programs for the so-called hard to employ might provide funding and an already interested audience. It also has direct significance for policy. These are rare opportunities for the researcher. Be wary of research opportunities focused on policy for their potential to seduce the researcher into agendas serving primarily the powerful elite (Ball, 2012; Marshall, 1997a; Scheurich, 1997). Recall the discussion of explicitly ideological research in Chapter 1. For further discussion of these issues, see Smith (1988).

A study may well be able to contribute understanding and opportunities for action in all four domains, but it is unlikely to contribute equally to all four; the statement of the topic should thus emphasize one of them. For example, a study on the integration of children with disabilities into regular classrooms could be significant for both policy and practice. Framing this as a policy study requires that the topic be situated in national and state policy debates on special education. Framing it as most significant for practice would require it to focus on structures supporting inclusive classrooms. Both frames are legitimate and defensible; the researcher's challenge is to argue for the study's potential contributions to the domains in which he is most interested. This, in turn, has implications for the literature review and design of the study.

Significance for Knowledge

The discussion of the study's **significance for knowledge** is often an intellectual odyssey, which the researcher can pursue more fully in the review of related literature. At this point in the proposal, he should outline the project's potential contribution to knowledge by describing how it fits into theoretical traditions in the social sciences or applied fields in ways that will be new, insightful, or creative. The significance statement should show how the study will contribute to research traditions or foundational literatures in new ways.

Often, the proposal identifies gaps in the literature to which the study will contribute. If the research is in an area for which theory is well developed, the study may be a significant test or expansion of the theory. The researcher may use concepts developed by previous researchers and formulate questions similar to those used in previous research. Data collection, however, may be in a different setting, with a different group, and certainly at a different time. Thus, the results of the research will constitute an extension of theory that will expand the generalizations or more finely tune the theoretical propositions. The contribution of such research is the expansion of previous theory. When researchers conceptualize the focus of the study and generate the research questions, they may draw on a body of theory and **related research** that is different from previous research. Significance of this sort, however, generally derives from an extensive and creative review of related literature. Having developed that section of the proposal, the writer then incorporates references to and summaries of it in the significance section. This type of significance is treated fully in the next section, on the review of related literature. Generally, by answering the question, “How is this research important?” the researcher can demonstrate the creative aspects of his work.

The development of theory takes place by incremental advances and small contributions to knowledge through well-conceptualized and well-conducted research. Most researchers use theory to guide their own work, to locate their studies in larger scholarly traditions, or to map the topography of the specific concepts they will explore in detail. In addition, some very creative research can emerge when a researcher breaks theoretical boundaries and reconceptualizes a problem or relocates the problem area. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1980) reconceptualized children’s learning processes by applying the concept of *ecology* to child development theory. Weick’s (1976) metaphor of schools as loosely coupled systems profoundly altered theoretical conceptualizations of educational organizations. Often, researchers follow a theoretical pragmatism, being “shamelessly eclectic” in the creative application of concepts from one discipline to another (Rossman & Wilson, 1994).

Significance for Practical and Policy Problems

The significance of a study for policy can be developed by discussing formal policy development in that area and presenting data that show how often the problem occurs and how costly it can be. For example, to demonstrate the significance of a study of the careers of women faculty, the researcher could present statistics documenting persistently lower salaries for women than for men at comparable ranks; this is the problem the study will address. The study’s potential contributions to university compensation policies could then be spelled out. Based on that, contributions to the university degree program policy could then be articulated. In another example, the researcher could describe recent changes in welfare law and discuss how this reform was developed with little regard for those most affected, which is the problem the study will address. Potential contributions of the study to further reform of welfare law could then be described. In developing the topic and how the study might contribute to policy in that area, he would demonstrate that the general topic is one of significant proportions that should be studied systematically.

A study’s importance can also be argued through summaries of the writings of policymakers and informed experts who identify the topic as important and call for research pursuing the

general questions. Statistical presentations of the incidence and persistence of the problem, as well as calls for research by experts, demonstrate that the study addresses an important topic, one of concern to policymakers in that area. In applied fields such as education, health policy, management, regional planning, and clinical psychology, for example, demonstrating a study's significance to policy—whether international, national, state, regional, or institutional—may be especially important.

Situating a study as significant for practice follows the same logic as developing significance for policy. The argument here should rely on a discussion of the concerns or problems articulated in the literature. This will involve citing experts, referencing prior research, and summarizing incidence data. Recall the preceding discussion of a study about the inclusion of children with disabilities. The researcher who wants this study to focus on issues of practice would discuss the literature detailing teachers' concerns about meeting the needs of children with disabilities in their classrooms. The study's potential contribution, then, would be improvement in teachers' classroom practice. Shaddock-Hernandez's (1997) proposal for her dissertation research about immigrant and refugee college students' sense of ethnic identity summarized the incidence data on enrollment and the paucity of culturally relevant experiences for these students in the college curriculum. This set up her assertions of the study's potential contributions to pedagogical practice in university classrooms.

Significance for Action

Finally, a study may be significant for its detailed description of life circumstances that express particular social issues. Such a study may not influence policy, contribute to scholarly literature, or improve practice; it may instead illuminate the lived experiences of interest by providing rich description and thus foster taking action. Action research and participatory action research genres stipulate taking action as central to their work. In these cases, researchers should argue that the proposed inquiry and its attendant action will likely be valuable to those who participate, as well as to others committed to the issue. The challenge here is to identify how and in what ways it will be valuable.

Maguire's (2000) study with battered women was a participatory action research project. Her study's primary contributions were not intended for scholarly traditions, policy, or practice per se; rather, they were meant for the women involved in the work and for others committed to alleviating the abuse of women. The work was important because it focused on a major social issue. In contrast, Browne's (1987) study of battered women who kill their assailants made a different kind of significant contribution: It provided a critique of the legal system, which does little to protect women under threat, and then led to increased activism for women in these circumstances. Lather and Smithies's (1997) study collaborating with HIV-positive women invited the reader to enter into these women's lives so as to create new connections and open possibilities for action.

Through a discussion of relevant scholarship and the concerns of practice, the significance section articulates the topic to be studied and argues that further investigation of this problem has the potential to contribute to scholarship, policy, practice, or a better understanding of recurring social issues. This section defines who is likely to have an interest in the topic and therefore how and in what ways the study may contribute.

Of course, researchers preparing proposals for funding should adjust their statements about significance to the needs and priorities of the funding agencies. The foundation that takes pride in funding action projects or interventions will want to see statements about how the proposed research will directly help people or change a problematic situation. On the other hand, when seeking funds from an agency whose goals include expanding knowledge and theory (e.g., the National Science Foundation), to demonstrate the significance of the research, the researcher should emphasize the undeveloped or unsolved theoretical puzzles to be addressed.

The Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Qualitative approaches to inquiry are uniquely suited to uncovering the unexpected and exploring new avenues. This demands flexibility in the proposal so that data gathering can respond to increasingly refined research questions. Herein lies a dilemma, however. The proposal should be sufficiently clear, both in research questions and design, so that the reader can evaluate its do-ability; on the other hand, the proposal should reserve the flexibility that is the hallmark of qualitative methods. This suggests that the research questions should be general enough to permit exploration but focused enough to delimit the study—not an easy task.

Focusing the study and posing general research questions are best addressed in a developmental manner, relying on discussions of related literature to help frame and refine the specific topic. Often, the primary research goal is to discover those very questions that are most probing and insightful. Most likely, the relevant concepts will be developed during the research process, but the research proposal must suggest themes based on one's knowledge of the literature.

Initial questions should be linked to the problem and its significance and should forecast the literature to be reviewed. Questions may be theoretical ones, which can be studied in a number of different sites or with different samples. They may focus on a population or class of individuals; these, too, can be studied in various places. Finally, the questions may be site specific because of the uniqueness of a certain program or organization. The study of refugee and immigrant college experiences (Shaddock-Hernandez, 1997, 2005) could have been conducted in any setting that had newcomer students; the theoretical interest driving the research was not linked to a particular organization. A study of an exemplary sex education program, however, can be conducted only at that site because the problem identified is one of practice. Thus, the questions posed are shaped by the identified problem and, in turn, constrain the design of the study.

Examples of *theoretical questions* include the following:

- How does play affect reading readiness? Through what cognitive and affective process? Do children who take certain roles—for example, leadership roles—learn faster? If so, what makes the difference?
- How does the sponsor–protégé socialization process function in professional careers? Does it work differently for women? For minorities? What processes are operating?
- What are the assumptions of medical staff and laypeople about how “positive thinking” affects coping with cancer?

Questions focused on *particular populations* could include the following:

- How do neurosurgeons cope with the reality that they hold people's lives in their hands? That many of their patients die?
- What happens to women who enter elite MBA programs? What are their career paths?
- What is the life of the long-distance truck driver like?
- How do school superintendents manage relations with school board members? What influence processes do they use?
- What happens to change-agent teachers during their careers? Do organizational socialization processes change or eliminate them? Do they burn out early in their careers?
- What are the life and career experiences of women PhDs who come from very poor families of origin?

Finally, *site-specific* and *policy-focused* research questions might take the following form:

- Why is the sex education program working well in this school but not in the others? What is special about the people, the plan, the support, and the context?
- How do the school–parent community relations of an elite private school differ from those in the neighboring public school? How are the differences connected with differences in educational philosophies and outcomes?
- What are the ways lobbying groups influence pollution control policy in the Massachusetts legislature?
- Why is there a discrepancy in perceptions of the efficacy of affirmative action policy between university officials and groups of students of color at the University of North Carolina? What explains the discrepancy?

These are typical examples of initial questions developed in the proposal. They serve as boundaries around the study without unduly constraining it. The questions focus on interactions and processes in sociocultural systems and in organizations and thus link to important research literature and theory, but they are also grounded in everyday realities. The goal of this section of the proposal is to explicate the questions, thereby further focusing the study, and to forecast the literature to be discussed in the next section. Vignette 6 shows early development of an introductory statement for a pilot-study proposal.

* * * *

Vignette 6 An Initial Statement

A doctoral student from China, Fan Yihong (2000), became deeply concerned about the fundamental purposes of education, especially as enacted in universities. Her experiences in universities in China and the United States led her to see that much of the organizational practice—procedures, norms, disciplinary boundaries—on both continents was deadening human spirit and creativity. She immersed herself in organizational theory, science and technology, and the development of the “new sciences” and complex systems theory in relation to Eastern philosophy. During this journey, she came on the emerging theories of

the holographic universe and the holotropic mind (Capra, 1975, 1982, 1996; Senge, 1990; Wilber, 1996) that stress the wholeness of people, events, nature, and the world, and the innate capacity of the mind to comprehend reality in a holistic manner. Based on these interests, she posed four overarching research questions that would allow her to integrate the various complex intellectual traditions that framed her study:

1. What serves as triggers and preconditions for individuals to change their worldviews?
2. What processes have they undertaken to enable them to transform their changed ways of knowing to their changed ways of doing and then to their changed ways of being, finally becoming transformed human beings?
3. What characterizes these change processes?
4. How does individual awakening, recognizing the need for change, help bring about collective and organizational transformational change?

The potential significance of the study was described in terms of its contributions to understanding how personal and organizational transformation is possible, through rich descriptions of people and organizations that were radically different from traditional ones. Thus, the study would potentially contribute theory and practice, building a thoughtful and detailed analysis of the processes of transformation.

* * * * *

Fan Yihong (2000) has introduced the topic—the persistent problem of confining versus liberating educational environments—posed the preliminary general research questions, and forecast the study’s potential significance. While this approach is not at all typical, it represents congruence with her theoretical framework and personal epistemology and cosmology. Following are two examples of other introductory paragraphs. Each states the topic, discusses the purpose, stipulates the unit of analysis, and forecasts the study’s significance:

Children with physical handicaps have unique perceptions about their “bodiedness.” Grounded in phenomenological inquiry, this study will explore and describe the deep inner meaning of bodiedness for five children. The study will result in rich description through stories of these children’s relationships with sports. The central concept of bodiedness will be explicated through the children’s words. Those working with children with physical handicaps, as well as policymakers framing programs that affect them, will find the study of interest. (Adapted from Rossman & Rallis, 2003)

The Neighborhood Arts Center in Orange, Massachusetts, is an award-winning program that serves all members of its community. The purpose of this study is to explain the success of this program in bringing arts to members of this low-income community. The study will use an ethnographic design, seeking detailed explanations of the program’s success. The study will help decision makers and funders design similar programs that involve groups historically underrepresented in the arts. (Adapted from Rossman & Rallis, 2003)

Delimiting the Limitations of the Study

All proposed research projects have limitations; none is perfectly designed. As Patton (2002) notes, “There are no perfect research designs. There are always trade-offs” (p. 223). A discussion of the study’s limitations demonstrates that the researcher understands this reality—that he will make no overweening claims about generalizability or conclusiveness about what he has learned.

Limitations derive from the conceptual framework and the study’s design. A discussion of these limitations early on in the proposal reminds the reader of what the study is and is not—its boundaries—and how its results can and cannot contribute to understanding. Framing the study in specific research and scholarly traditions places limits on the research. A study of land use in Indonesia, for example, could be situated in development economics; reminding the reader that the study is framed this way helps allay criticism. The overall design, however, indicates how broadly applicable the study may be. Although no qualitative studies are generalizable in the probabilistic sense, their findings may be transferable. A discussion of these considerations reminds the reader that the study is bounded and situated in a specific context. The reader, then, can make decisions about its usefulness for other settings.

Equally important, though, is that statements about limitations, while acknowledging limits to generalizability, should reemphasize the qualitative study’s very different purposes and strengths. As we discussed in earlier chapters, one chooses a qualitative approach to understand phenomena from the participants’ perspectives and to explore and discover, in depth and in context, what may have been missed when studies were done with predetermined assumptions. So qualitative researchers must assert that traditional “gold standards” such as generalizability, replicability, control groups, and the like are not the right criteria to aim for. We will return to this point in Chapter 9. Still, in conceptualizing and framing the design, sites, sampling, and management of data, we do aim to maximize the value of our research by anticipating questions and challenges. When, for example, we want to explore and discover the range of responses of men diagnosed with prostate cancer, we will face questions such as the following: What is lost by limiting the study to easily accessible and articulate middle-class males? Or to males in Austin, Texas? Or to patients but not spouses and doctors? For another example, when our purpose is to uncover the crucial elements in “successful” programs for pregnant and parenting teens, we will face the following questions: Must my sample include programs with comparable budgets to maximize comparability? But if I study many programs, how can I get the in-depth participant observation and interviewing I need, with my limited budget? Have I focused too narrowly by accepting others’ definitions of “successful”? These are difficult questions, which will be revisited in Chapter 6 and later chapters. Early on, we may have only best guesses and hopes about what can be done. Later, these guesses and hopes will be refined in the research design, then again in planning the time and budget for the study, and probably again in the field.

Write the introduction in draft or even outline. As you proceed through the literature review, many of the details of the introduction will become evident. You will redo it, ultimately, when all other parts of the proposal are complete; then and only then can you actually write an introduction. Keep it short and engaging. In the end, it should be the “warm-up” to situate the reader for the full proposal. The time-constrained (or lazy) reader should be able to learn, generally, what is being proposed just by reading the introduction.

■ Literature Review and Critique of Related Research

A thoughtful and insightful discussion of related literature builds a logical framework for the research and locates it within a tradition of inquiry and a context of related studies. The literature review serves four broad functions. First, it demonstrates the underlying assumptions behind the general research questions. If possible, it should display the research paradigm that undergirds the study and describe the assumptions and values the researcher brings to the research enterprise. Second, it demonstrates that he is knowledgeable about related research and the scholarly traditions that surround and support the study. Third, it shows that he has identified some gaps in previous research and that the proposed study will fill a demonstrated need. Finally, the review refines and redefines the research questions by embedding them in larger traditions of inquiry. We describe the literature review as a *conversation* between the researcher and the related literature.

Theoretical Traditions for Framing the Questions

As the researcher conceptualizes the research problem, he locates it in a tradition of theory and related research. Initially, this may be an intuitive locating, chosen because of the underlying assumptions, such as how the researcher sees the world and how he sees the research questions fitting in. As he explores the literature, however, he should identify and state those assumptions in a framework of theory. This could be child development theory, organizational theory, adult socialization theory, critical race theory, or whatever theory is appropriate. This section of the literature review provides the framework for the research and identifies the area of knowledge the study is intended to expand.

Related Research, Reviewed and Critiqued

The next portion of the review of literature should, quite literally, review and critique previous research and scholarly writing that relates to the general research question. This critical review should lead to a more precise problem statement or refined questions, because it demonstrates a specific area that has not yet been adequately explored or shows that a different design would be more appropriate. If a major aspect of the significance of the study arises from a reconceptualization of the topic, it should be developed fully here. Cooper (1988) provides a discussion of the focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organization, and audience for a literature review.

Essays and Opinions of Experts

In this section of the literature review, the researcher presents the practitioner's, or even the journalist's and policymaker's, words. It is an opportunity to show that, in addition to academic scholars and authors of journal articles, people outside the academy have spoken about the need to find answers, to explore reasons why, and to find new ways to look at a problem. Government reports, lobbyists' assertions, newspaper articles, and even person-on-the-street accounts can be included. The reader understands that the sources for this section may be less credible to scholarly readers than are peer-reviewed sources; however, these sources often have the credibility that comes from direct personal experience and an insider's

knowledge about a situation. Thus, quotes from state legislators and from the machinist union trade paper's editorials on the health problems of unemployed machinists can be cited to enhance or deepen insights regarding unemployment that were reviewed earlier from the scholarly research viewpoint.

Summarizing the Literature Review in a Conceptual Framework

Researchers develop an argument, throughout the literature review, by identifying the literatures that are useful and demonstrating how some are dated, limited, or leave questions unanswered. The argument buttresses the conceptual framework to be used and the questions to be asked. Figure 4.4 was derived from a literature review of organization theory, leadership theory, literature on the realities of school administrators' careers, and also government and professional associations' laments over administrator burnout and shortage (Marshall, 2008). The framework was created to buttress the proposal's argument—in this case, that research is needed to discover what organizational experiences support and entice healthy, engaged, and creative school administrators.

Model for Envisioning a Multiresearcher, Multifocal Study

The framework was used to graphically display the argument that had been developed in the literature review. It also was used to identify ways that seven related questions could be individual studies constructed to coordinate with one another, point to possible sites and foci, and clarify their significance for policymakers wringing their hands over administrator shortages and burnout. Finally, it showed the potential of the large project to take policymakers' worries and expand them, to address how the relevant policy issues should include the health, creativity, and engagement of administrators.

Some researchers find it useful to draw a **pictorial model** that identifies domains and relationships (as in concept mapping). Such pictures are not meant to predict one's findings but, rather, to present the researchers' current, proposal-stage thoughts about how things work. Figure 4.5 is one example of a simple conceptual model that can help a researcher envision his study's questions about the factors that affect patients' access to treatment.

Example of a Simple Conceptual Model

An extended example of integrating and dovetailing the significance of the review sections is provided in Vignette 7. Look for the ways the literature review led Marshall (1979, 1981, 1985b) to find new possibilities for pursuing the research questions.

* * * *

Vignette 7 Building Significance Through the Literature

When Marshall (1979) was researching the general problem of women's unequal representation in school administration careers, she first reviewed the work of previous researchers. Many researchers before her had conducted surveys to identify the attributes, positions,

and percentages of women in school administration. A few researchers had identified patterns of discrimination.

In a significant departure from this tradition, Marshall reconceptualized the problem. She viewed it as a problem in the area of adult socialization and looked to career socialization theory, finding useful concepts such as role strain, sponsorship, aspiration formation, and more. From a review of this body of theory and related empirical research on the school administrative career, including recruitment, training, and selection processes, and on women in jobs and careers, Marshall framed a new question. She asked, “What is the career socialization process for women in school administration? What is the process through which women make career decisions, acquire training and supports, overcome obstacles, and move up in the hierarchy?”

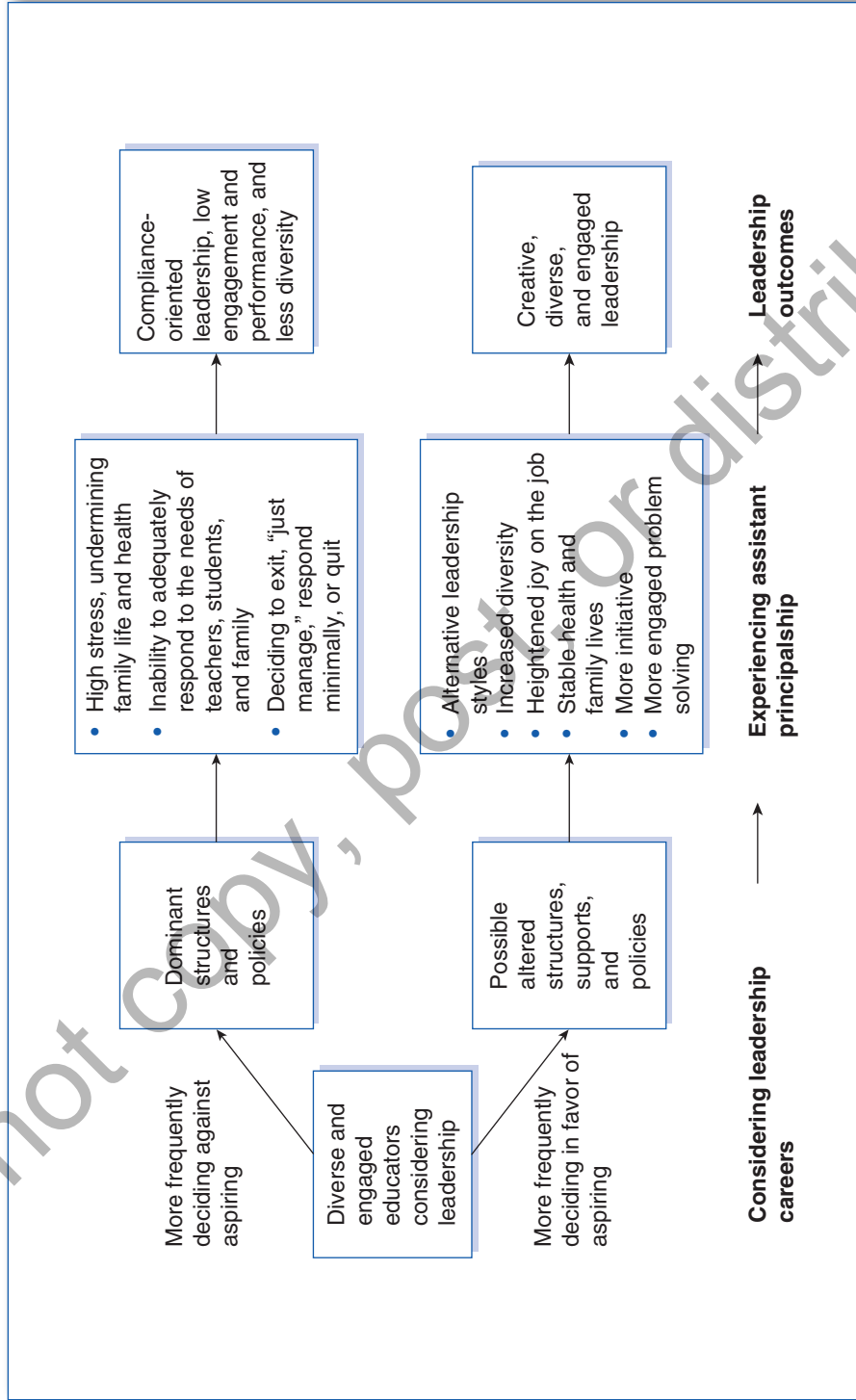
This reconceptualization came from asking the significance question: Who cares about this research? The question encouraged a review of previous research that demonstrated how other research had already answered many questions. It showed that women were as competent as men in school administration. But a critical review of this literature argued that this previous research had asked different questions. Marshall could assert that her study would be significant because it would focus on describing a process about which previous research had only an inkling. The new research would add to theory by exploring career socialization of women in a profession generally dominated by men. It would also identify the relevant social, psychological, and organizational variables that are part of women’s career socialization. This established the significance of the research by showing how it would add to knowledge.

The literature review also established the significance of the research for practice and policy, with an overview of the issues of affirmative action and equity concerns. Thus, the research question, literature review, and research design were all tied in with the significance question. Responding to this question demanded a demonstration that this was an area of knowledge and practice that needed exploration. To ensure exploration, qualitative methods were the most appropriate for the conduct of the study.

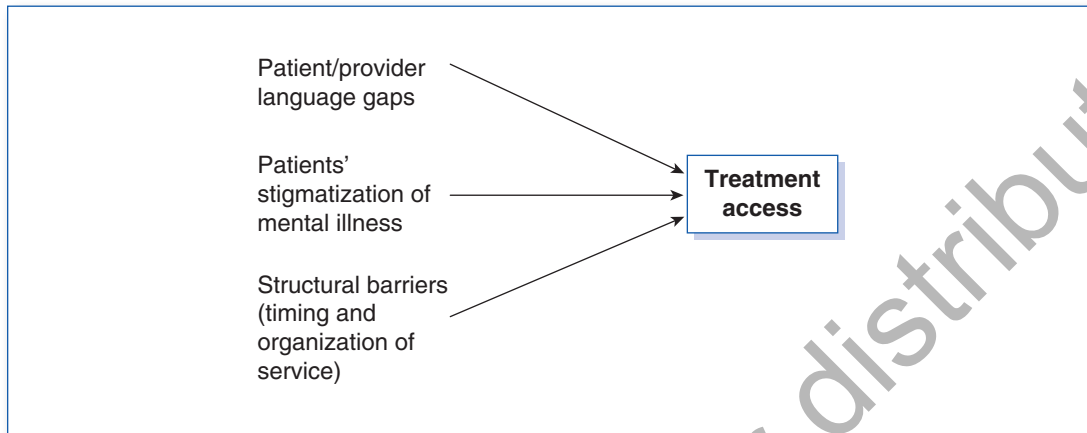
* * * * *

As Vignette 7 shows, the literature review can identify established knowledge and, more important, develop significance and new questions and often turn old questions around. This “initiating function” (Rossman & Wilson, 1994) of the literature review can be quite creative. It helps to try out “if-then propositions” and “thought experiments” (Schram, 2006, p. 67), where the researcher playfully generates possible linkages and relationships that can be made between theory and what might be discovered in data collection. For example, in a thought experiment in the research described in Vignette 7, Marshall (1979) posed a guiding hypothesis that if women anticipate the role strain to be incurred by the piling on of mothering roles, administrative tasks, as well as doubts that women can be “tough” leaders, they will repress any aspirations to school leadership positions. Thus, such a thought experiment yields **guiding hypotheses** and some clues about how to ask questions and how to be sensitized to themes in her data, and she has more confidence that she can move from the dryness of literature review to the liveliness of real people and real lives in her data collection.

Figure 4.4 Model for Envisioning a Multiresearcher, Multifocal Study



SOURCE: Marshall (2008).

Figure 4.5 Example of a Simple Conceptual Model

SOURCE: Schensul (2008, p. 519). Reprinted with permission from SAGE Publications.

The review, moreover, provides intellectual glue for the entire proposal by demonstrating the sections' conceptual relatedness. The researcher cannot write about the study's significance without knowledge of the literature. He cannot describe the design without a discussion of the general research topic. A proposal is divided into sections because of tradition and convention, not because of a magical formula. To organize complex topics and address the three critical questions posed at the beginning, however, the structure we provided in Table 4.1 is recommended. Vignette 8 illustrates how the conceptualization of a study can be creative and exciting as the researcher forges links among historically disparate literatures.

Vignette 8 Creative Review of the Literature

When research questions explore new territory, a single line of previous literature and/or theory may be inadequate for constructing frameworks that usefully guide the study. A case in point is that of Shaddock-Hernandez (1997, 2005), a graduate student in international development education, who searched the literature for a way to frame her study of a community service learning initiative serving refugee and immigrant youth and undergraduate students at a major research university.

Shaddock-Hernandez's forays into the literature on community service learning and the relationships between institutions of higher education and the communities they serve identified a substantial gap. Previous studies described the demographics of participants in community service learning projects, noting that typical projects involved white, middle-class undergraduate students working with communities of color. However, few critiqued the hegemonic practice embodied in such projects or called into question the continuing Eurocentric values in university and community relations. It became clear that previous research had failed to conceptualize the problem in terms of a sustained critique

of the university from the perspectives of those often marginalized in mainstream university discourse—refugee and immigrant students of color.

Having established that the study was situated in scholarly writing and research on community service learning and university–community relations, Shaddock-Hernandez still felt as though something was missing. This literature helped establish the context for her study but did not provide theoretical concepts or propositions that would help illuminate students’ experiences. She turned to the literature on critical pedagogy to more fully frame the principles of the project. She also discussed situated learning theory, with its key notions of context, peer relations, and communities of practice, to provide analytic insights into the learning milieu of the project. Finally, she relied on the anthropological concept of funds of knowledge—“the strategic and cultural resources that racially and ethnically diverse and low-income students and communities possess” (Shaddock-Hernandez, 2005, pp. 115–116). Her discussion of these literatures was tested against their usefulness in understanding community service learning among similar and familiar ethnic groups and for developing a gentle but quite pointed critique of the university.

* * * * *

Vignette 8 shows a creative blending of several strands of literature for framing the research. The integration of literatures helped shape a research focus that was theoretically interesting, yet could help inform policy and practice in universities. Broad reading and knowledge of the history of institutions of higher education relative to their local communities—richly augmented by more **theoretical literature** on critical pedagogy, situated learning, and funds of knowledge—created a variegated and highly creative synthesis. Rather than narrowly constructing the study to focus on only one topic, the researcher searched widely for illuminating constructs from other disciplines. This work, although at times tedious, confusing, and ambiguous, enhances the research to follow and demonstrates that the researcher has engaged in significant intellectual work already.

The literature review serves many purposes for the research. It supports the importance of the study’s focus and may serve to validate the eventual findings in a narrowly descriptive study. It also guides the development of explanations during data collection and analysis in studies that seek to explain, evaluate, and suggest linkages between events. In grounded-theory development, the literature review provides theoretical constructs, categories, and their properties that can be used to organize the data and discover new connections between theory and phenomenon.

The sections of the proposal addressed thus far—introduction, discussion of the topic and purpose, significance, general research questions, and literature review—stand together as the conceptual body of the proposal. Here, the major (and minor) ideas for the proposal are developed, their intellectual roots are displayed and critiqued, and the writings and studies of other researchers are presented and critiqued. All this is intended to tell the reader (1) what the research is about (its subject), (2) who ought to care about it (its significance), and (3) what others have described and concluded about the subject (its intellectual roots). All three purposes are interwoven into these sections of the proposal.

The final major section—research design and methods—must flow conceptually and logically from all that has gone before; the aspects of this section are discussed in Chapters 5 through 7. In the design and methods section, the researcher makes a case, based on the conceptual portion of the proposal, for the particular sample, methods, data analysis techniques, and reporting format chosen for the study. Thus, the section on design and methods should build a rationale for the study’s design and data collection methods. Here, the researcher should develop a case for using qualitative methods. These topics are also discussed in Chapters 5 through 7.

Although there are parallels, proposals for qualitative research differ—sometimes substantially—from proposals for quantitative research. In the development of a qualitative proposal, the researcher first orients the proposal reader to the general topic to be explored. This will not involve a statement of specific research questions, propositions to be tested, or hypotheses to be examined; it can include a general discussion of the puzzle, the unexplored issue, or the group to be studied. Discussion becomes more focused through the literature review because, in exploratory studies, it is hard to predict which literature will be the most relevant; the focus of the study may best be served by an intersection of literatures.

In some cases, the literature review yields cogent and useful definitions, constructs, concepts, and even data collection strategies. These may fruitfully result in a set of preliminary guiding hypotheses. Using the term *guiding hypotheses* may assist readers accustomed to more traditional proposals. It is essential, however, that the researcher explain that guiding hypotheses are tools used to generate questions and search for patterns; they may be discarded when he gets into the field and finds other exciting patterns of phenomena. This approach retains the flexibility needed to permit the precise focus of the research to evolve. By avoiding precise hypotheses, the researcher retains his right to explore and *generate* questions. The guiding hypotheses illustrate for the reader some possible directions he may follow, but he is still free to discover and pursue other patterns.

Vignette 9 is an example of a very creative approach to a literature review, taken directly from an autoethnography written by Tassaporn (Pan) Sariyant (2002). Her literature review was extraordinarily creative and theoretically interesting. Although “performed” differently than most literature reviews, it holds true to the principles of a solid literature review and is engaging to read.

Vignette 9 Pan in (Academic) Wonderland: Discourse Review

Knowing requires a knower. Enter any great library, and one is surrounded by so much waste paper until the texts collected there are decoded. The “knowledge” of the library collection is underwritten by bodies of knowers, those who can interpret, evaluate, or, in a word, read (MacIntyre, 1981, quoted in Steedman, 1991, p. 53).

I don’t know how long I have been sitting here. I must have dozed off on that chair for a long time. My back aches. My eyes are burning. When I look around, I notice that the few people who sat reading not far from me are not there anymore. The early afternoon sunlight that was shining through the window near the table where I sat reading is already gone. The atmosphere of the room at this moment gives me a creepy, uneasy feeling. The room looks quite dim. Rows and rows of gigantic bookshelves look spooky, like the walls of a mysterious

dungeon. It makes me think that some unexpected things might be lurking behind any of them. However, I don't want to leave this library room before I finish reading a couple of books that I had taken from the shelves when I came in. I quickly brush those silly images out of my head.

After standing and stretching my weary body for a moment, I walk toward the light switch that I remember seeing on a wall at the opposite corner. As I walk toward the wall, out of the corner of my eye I suddenly notice several silhouette figures sitting quietly around a table in that very corner. Who are these people? Why do they sit talking in the dark? Ghosts of the library? A sudden cold fear runs down my spine. Goose bumps cover my whole body. I cannot decide whether I should run out of that room or go to the light switch and turn it on as quickly as possible. Before I can do anything, I hear a gentle voice from the table calling, "Are you coming to join us?" I stand frozen. Another figure waves a hand, beckoning me to the table and saying, "Please turn the light on and come and join us here." Although I am horrified by the thought that those figures will vanish as soon as the light is on, I quickly flick the light on.

To my relief, they do not disappear. Under the soft fluorescent light from the ceiling above them, those silhouette figures turn out to be seven scholarly looking women and men—precisely five women and two men—who sit smiling at me. They are not ghosts as I initially thought. Although their faces look familiar, I cannot recall where I have seen them.... A Caucasian man, sitting on the right of a white-bearded old man, urges me, "Come and join the dialogue with us." Dialogue with these people? Oh, my word! They look so scholarly, so knowledgeable. What am I going to say or discuss with them? "Come, sit next to me. There is a chair here." A kind, motherly woman, who sits on the left of the white-bearded old man, points at an empty chair beside her....

I quickly introduce myself as I sit down. "My name is Pan, a Thai doctoral student at the Center for International Education. I am at the stage of writing my dissertation. I work in the Department of Nonformal Education in Thailand. Generally, my work revolves around education for community development. I am interested in exploring the relationships among the discourses on development, nonformal education, and pedagogy for empowerment, especially for rural Thai women, and I want to ..."

"Wait." Before I finish my sentence, the white-bearded old man interrupts. "You are not going to do your dissertation research on all those subjects, are you?" I shake my head and say no. The short-haired woman asks the question that I am afraid to face. "What is really your focus?" I drop my eyes to the table and admit with a great shame, "I am not quite sure yet." When I look up, I see sympathetic looks on every face. I hear a quickly whispered phrase, "rookie academician," which makes my ears turn red with embarrassment. Before I can think of how to defend myself, the woman with dark hair on my right suggests, "Why don't we begin by asking her why she wants to know about those subjects, what she wants to get from those discourses, and how those discourses have anything to do with her dissertation topic. Then, we can give her some suggestions later." She turns to me and says, "Could you elaborate on that for us?" My face suddenly turns pale with intimidation as every pair of questioning eyes fixes on me.

We do not intend to suggest that proposal development proceeds in a linear fashion, as we have noted earlier. The example in Vignette 9 shows wonderful creativity that was present

even in Pan's proposal. Recall that in Chapter 1, we argued that conceptualizing a study and developing a design that is clear, flexible, and manageable is dialectic, messy, and just plain hard work. As the researcher plays with concepts and theoretical frames for the study, he often entertains alternative designs, assessing them for their power to address the emerging questions. Considering an ethnography, a case study, or an in-depth interview study as the overall design will, in turn, reshape the research questions. So the process continues as the conceptual framework and specific design features become more and more elegantly related. The challenge is to build the logical connections between the topic, the questions, and the design and methods.

Dialogue Between Authors

“ Gretchen: I find this conceptualizing “stuff” the most exciting of all! It’s just fascinating to see how different frames can alter research questions, design, and so on. I just love doing this with students on a chalkboard. I find that when the class has really “gelled” as a little community of practice, the students are incredibly helpful and supportive for each other. Most exciting is when there are students from a whole raft of departments together. They bring such intriguing questions and insights—make all of us think more deeply about conceptualizing a study.

Catherine: I think this conceptualizing process is scary and hard for people who want shortcuts. So many don’t realize that there is an intuitive framing early on that gets elaborated through the literature, then modified—maybe—as the analysis and interpretation unfold. ”

Dialogue Between Learners

“ Hi, Keren,

As I’m nearing the end of my process, I can’t help but think back to all the moments when I’ve doubted every step of the work I have done. This includes my research design, research questions, conceptual framework, and the significance of my topic. To illustrate my struggles, as well as the nonlinear nature of my own research, it was just recently that I began to feel as though I have a cogent argument! I finally feel that I can link together the different pieces of theory and concepts in a way that provides scaffolding for my own data. But, this said, I still feel as if I could have done it 10 other ways!

I don’t know about you, but often I have found that I had to create a space to rethink even the most basic underpinnings of my argument and approach. For me, this often involved stepping away—by going on a run, washing dishes, or even going to sleep. Somehow, that space allowed me to find what I needed to feel peace in the iterative process and to keep moving forward. I believe Catherine and Gretchen refer to these moments as “think time.” Luckily, my personal and professional interests in the subject matter also helped me maintain the much-needed “fire in the belly.”

I wonder if you've encountered any similar frustrations or bumps along your way.

Take care,
Karla

* * *

Dear Karla,

It's funny how, as I was reading your letter, I was thinking, "Me too, me too." I actually have a notebook and pen next to my bed because I often get bits and pieces of thoughts either right before I fall asleep or even in the middle of the night. Linkages that I was contemplating all day finally crystalize at odd moments.

I also remember coming back from a summer intensive course on research methods and feeling very insecure about what I am trying to accomplish with my research. Today I feel as though all the theoretical readings I have been doing have paid off—every new piece helps me in further narrowing my research parameters. I use the word *parameters* and not *questions* because I still feel that I can't quite formulate questions. I guess I am using research parameters as a bridge between having a research interest and having researchable research questions.

Well, I better return to a little bit more theory now!

Keren



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KEY CONCEPTS

conceptual framework
 conceptual funnel
 focusing
 guiding hypotheses
 personal biography
 personal theories

pictorial model
 problematic
 related research
 significance for knowledge
 significance for practice and policy
 theoretical literature