

2022  
Capstone Summer Assignment  
Murphy

### Assignment

Please read the attached book chapter and use it to complete the following activities. Come to school in the fall prepared to share 1.) your research topic statement, 2.) your problem statement, and 3.) an annotated bibliography of **10 peer-reviewed sources** related to your problem. 1 and 2 are clearly defined in the enclosed Merriam book chapter. We will reflect on these three products in writing and in discussion at the beginning of the coming academic year. Our discussions will shape the direction(s) your research will take.

- 1.) Prepare your topic statement & problem statement
  - Read: Selecting a topic (Merriam, pp. 55-58)
  - Read: The research problem (Merriam, pp. 58-64)
  - Complete: Exhibit 4.3 (Merriam, p. 65)
- 2.) Annotated bibliography
  - Read: Reviewing the literature (Merriam, pp. 71-76)
  - Use EBSCOhost to find and download 10 peer-reviewed sources
  - Annotations should include at least:
    - i. Complete APA citation
    - ii. Indicative annotation (3-5 sentences; instructions at UW-M site)
    - iii. Informative annotation (3-5 sentences; instructions at UW-M site)
    - iv. University of Wisconsin – Madison :: [Annotated Bibliographies](#)

### Purpose & Goals

The purpose of this assignment is to help you *reflect* on your interests. We can only plan out a worthwhile project after you have reflected deeply and methodically about your topic.

First, reflection is active. This means you are to use your responses to Exhibit 4.3 to examine real-world problems you would like to contribute towards alleviating. This endeavor is about honesty with yourself. What real-world problems truly surprise, perplex and/or disturb you?

Second, reflection is persistent. You are encouraged to begin completing Exhibit 4.3, put the Merriam chapter down for a while, and then come back to it days later when you're bored or trying to ignore a sibling.

Lastly, reflection is careful thought. This means that you should look beyond the titles of articles, and between the lines of what you read for your bibliography. Look for the subtle (and not so subtle) assumptions researchers make about your problem. What aspect(s) of your problem are they all missing?

# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A Guide to Design and  
Implementation

Revised and Expanded from  
*Qualitative Research and  
Case Study Applications in  
Education*

Sharan B. Merriam

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(p. 224). However, citing single cases, experiments, and experiences of Galileo, Newton, Einstein, Bohr, Darwin, Marx, and Freud, Flyvbjerg makes the point that both human and natural sciences can be advanced by a single case. He also argues that formal generalizations based on large samples are overrated in their contribution to scientific progress (for a discussion comparing sampling, representativeness, and generalizability in both quantitative and qualitative research, see Gobo, 2004).

## SUMMARY

Although most educators have encountered case studies in their professional studies or their professional work, the term *case study* is not used precisely; it has become a catch-all category for studies that are clearly not experimental, survey, or historical. And to a large extent, the term has been used interchangeably with other qualitative research terms.

In this chapter, I delineated the nature of qualitative case studies. Case studies can be defined in terms of the process of conducting the inquiry (that is, as case study research), the bounded system or unit of analysis selected for study (that is, the case), or the product, the end report of a case investigation. Case studies are case studies because the unit of analysis is a single bounded system. Because qualitative case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic, a researcher might choose this approach to illuminate a phenomenon. Various writers also differentiate among historical, organizational, observational, instrumental, and collective or multisite case studies. I concluded this chapter with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this form of qualitative research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# DESIGNING YOUR STUDY AND SELECTING A SAMPLE

Rarely would anyone starting out on a trip just walk out the door with no thought of where to go or how to get there. The same is true when beginning a research study. You need some idea of what you want to know and a plan for carrying it out. This map or research design, is “*a logical plan for getting from here to there, where here may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and there is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions*” (Yin, 2008, p. 26, emphasis in original).

This chapter begins with how you select a topic for a research study, followed by how to focus this topic and shape it into a research problem. The research problem reflects your theoretical framework. I explain what a theoretical framework is and what the role of a literature review is in establishing this framework and forming the problem statement. Although defining the research problem, identifying the theoretical framework, and reviewing the literature are explained in sequence here, in reality they are very much interactive processes, as I hope to make clear. Once the research problem is defined, your next task is to select the sample to be studied—a process also covered in this chapter.

## SELECTING A TOPIC

How do you select a topic for a qualitative research study? The first place to look is your daily life—your work, family, friends, community. What are you curious about? What is or has happened at work that puzzles you? Why are things the way they are?

What happens when something changes at work, in your family, in your neighborhood? Look around. What is interesting to you that you do not quite understand? What puzzles you? What are you curious about? For example, you might observe that all your efforts to include certain students in classroom discussions have failed. You might wonder about any number of factors related to this situation. Is there something about these students that makes them reluctant to participate? Is it the methods you use to include them? Is there something about the classroom atmosphere? Your feelings about these students? Thus out of personal, practical experience can come research questions. Following are several examples of how our daily lives can generate a topic for research:

- Paul, a Hospice counselor, wondered how the grieving experience of older adults could also be a significant learning experience, one that is transformative (Moon, 2008).
- Dena participated for years in a week-long bicycle ride across Georgia. She became interested in the informal learning and self-development of women who participated in this leisure activity (Pruitt, 2004).
- Nikki taught English to Mexican immigrants at the local learning center. She wanted to investigate how participating in adult education, both in classes and informally, enabled them to adapt to the United States (Ashcraft, 2004).
- Liz had experience in training in business and was especially adept at technological support. She wondered how a company's internal intranet promoted the culture of the workplace (Bennett, 2006).
- Robin had worked as a museum educator. She observed that some docents were quite good at their jobs. She wondered how volunteer docents, often with a minimum of training, became experts (Grenier, 2005).

In applied fields of practice such as education, management, social work, health professions, and so on, the vast majority of research topics come from one's personal interest in the field and from the work setting itself. A research topic can also come from other sources. Current social and political issues offer numerous

possibilities. For example, an educator might be interested in the unintended outcomes of the No Child Left Behind legislation; or issues related to the current health care crises might be shaped into a qualitative study, as Valente (2005) did in her study of how older adults learn to self-direct their own health care.

A topic might come from the literature, especially previous research or theory in an area. Something you read in your association newsletter, a paper you write for a course assignment, or even leisure reading may be the source of a question that can evolve into a research study. Completed research studies are a good source because nearly every research study has a section with suggestions for future research, many of which could be approached qualitatively. Theory might also suggest topics. Much of the theoretical literature in adult education, for example, states that adults are self-directed and therefore prefer to participate in planning, implementing, and evaluating their own learning. However, data-based studies of adult learners have revealed that some do not want or know how to take control of their own learning. Since these two notions are inconsistent, a problem arises. Is self-direction a precondition of adult learning, or is it one of the goals of an adult learning activity? What differentiates self-directed learners from those who are not? What about the context of learning that may or may not promote self-direction? Is self-directed learning as opposed to say, collaborative learning, desirable?

Although not as common in qualitative research, a research problem can be derived from a theory by questioning whether a particular theory can be sustained in practice. Even architects of grounded theory (see Chapter Two) concede that qualitative research can be used to elaborate and modify existing theory by the rigorous "matching of theory against data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). For example, Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice posits that learning is a social activity in which we collectively make meaning as we mutually engage in some activity. Further, that learning changes who we are, our identity. To see whether this theory holds up in practice, you could select a community of practice to study, as did Corvey (2003) in her study of an online community of practice of clinical nurses.

So research topics most often come from observing and asking questions about your everyday activities. They can also come

from social and political issues, from the literature on a topic, or from theory. These areas of course intersect, as for example there are always social and political issues embedded in one's work setting. So, too, you are likely to encounter theories in reading the literature in your field. A crucial factor in deciding what topic you would like to research is to be *genuinely* curious and interested in finding the answers to your questions. This interest, even passion, will carry you through the process more than any other single factor. Once you have a topic, the next step is to shape it into a research problem.

## THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

It would be a fruitless undertaking to embark on a research journey without first identifying a research problem. Most people understand what it means to have a "problem." A problem in the conventional sense is a matter involving doubt, uncertainty, or difficulty. A person with a problem usually seeks a solution, some clarification, or a decision. So, too, with a research problem. For Dewey (1933), a problem is anything that "perplexes and challenges the mind so that it makes belief . . . uncertain" (p. 13).

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The first task, then, in conducting a qualitative study is to raise a question about something that perplexes and challenges the mind. It has often been said that research is more art than science. In comparing qualitative research to the art form of dance, Janesick (1994) says of this important first step, "All dances make a statement and begin with the question, What do I want to say in this dance? In much the same way, the qualitative researcher begins with a similar question: What do I want to know in this study? This is a critical beginning point. Regardless of point of view, and quite often because of our point of view, we construct and frame a question for inquiry" (p. 210).

The thing you are curious about, then, forms the core of the research problem, or the problem statement. It reflects your particular theoretical framework; more precisely, it represents a gap in the knowledge base. As Kilbourn (2006) points out:

Statements such as "I want to explore . . ." and "This study will examine . . ." do not tell a reader what the problem of the study is;

rather, they say what the study will do, and although what the study will do is equally critical, a reader first wants to know the problem that will be the focus of the research. (p. 538)

In crafting the research problem, you move from general interest, curiosity, or doubt about a situation to a specific statement of the research problem. In effect, you have to translate your general curiosity into a problem that can be addressed through research.

The structure of a problem statement, which essentially lays out the logic of the study, can be compared to a funnel shape—broad at the top and narrow at the bottom. At the "top" you identify the general area of interest. Is it students who are the first in their family to attend college? Dealing with diversity in the workplace? Math anxiety? Online learning? You acquaint the reader with what this topic is all about; you introduce key concepts, what has already been studied with regard to this topic, and why it is an important topic, that is, why anyone should care about it.

Moving along, you then narrow the topic, directing the reader toward the specific question you have. At this juncture you also point out the lack of information—the *knowledge gap*—with regard to this particular aspect of the topic. Perhaps nothing in the literature addresses your question, or there may be some research, but for reasons you make clear, it is inadequate or flawed in some important way. You have just led your reader down the funnel to the point where the need for the study is obvious. What needs to be done becomes the precise purpose of your study. Problem statements often conclude with the statement, "The purpose of this study is to. . ." The purpose statement is a restatement of the "gap" in the knowledge base. Once you've talked about the topic and perhaps what we do know, you point out what we don't know—for example, "Despite the amount of research on the performance measures related to the No Child Left Behind legislation, little is known about how NCLB has influenced teacher morale." This gap in our knowledge is what will be addressed in this particular research study and the purpose statement would read, "The purpose of this study is to understand the influence of NCLB on teacher morale."

3 The purpose statement is often followed by a set of research questions. These questions reflect the researcher's thinking on the most significant factors to study. They guide the inquiry in that they "explain specifically what your study will attempt to learn or understand" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 67); they also determine how data are to be collected. In qualitative research they often identify areas of inquiry for what to observe in a field observation, or what topics to ask about in an interview. Research questions are *not* interview questions; research questions are broader, identifying areas to ask questions about. Research questions that guide a qualitative inquiry should not be confused with the question, curiosity, or puzzlement that gave rise to the study in the first place (and that is reflected in the problem statement and purpose of the study). For example, in Bierema's (1996) study of executive women, her overall question or purpose was to understand how these women learned enough about the culture to break through the glass ceiling. Questions that guided the study were, "What formal and informal learning do women experience to develop their understanding of organizational culture? What barriers do women encounter in their climb up the corporate ladder? What are executive women's strategies for coping and excelling in corporate environments?" (p. 149).

In summary, the problem statement is a carefully crafted essay that lays out the logic of the research study. In a thesis or dissertation, the problem statement comes after a section usually titled "Introduction to the Problem," or "Background of the Problem." This introductory section can be any length but usually runs five to ten pages. It is where you can give us the details about the topic, what we know, what research has been done, what concepts and theories are important, and so on. You basically take the reader's hand and lead him or her through the topic to get to the place *you* want to land, that is, the particular question that you have about the phenomenon. The problem statement is kind of a summary of this introductory section and can be as short as a half page—one or two pages being quite common. In a journal article, the problem statement, introduction to the problem, and sometimes the literature review are often interwoven together. Nevertheless, the important components of any problem statement should be present.

There are three important components to the problem statement. First is the *context* of the study, that is, what is the area or topic you are interested in and about which you have a particular question? This is the easy part of the problem statement because writing anything about some topic identifies the context of the study. A second component is the identification of the *gap* in the knowledge base—what we don't know that your research will address. The third component is making it clear, either implicitly or explicitly, that this is a *significant* problem to address. There is some urgency about addressing this problem. Why is it important to know the answer to your question? Why is it important to fill in the knowledge gap? The problem statement ends with the purpose statement and research questions. Var  
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Exhibit 4.1 is an example of a problem statement on a study of outdoor adventure-based training programs. Brendan wanted to understand how participants transferred the learning in these programs back to their workplace (Leahy, 2002). The first paragraph establishes the context of the study—training in business and industry and in particular outdoor adventure-based training. The first paragraph and the opening sentence of the second paragraph allude to the importance of investigating this: huge sums of money are spent annually in this form of training. In the second paragraph we learn what we *do* know about learning transfer, and then what we *don't know*: "There are very few examples of transfer research efforts involving adults attempting to transfer the learning from an outdoor, adventure-based training program to their professional practice environment." What we don't know is the *gap* in our knowledge, which this study will address. Addressing this gap thus becomes the purpose of the study. This purpose statement is followed by three research questions.

In Exhibit 4.2 Janet sets up the problem statement regarding older adults' self-directed learning and their health care. The first paragraph establishes the context of the study—health care needs of older adults in a managed care system. In both the first and second paragraphs there are references to the significance of the problem: health educators recommend a more "active role for the patient in their own health care" and older adults are particularly at risk in this system. The *gap* in

### *The Transfer of Learning Process: From Outdoor Adventure-Based Programs to the Practice Setting*

In 1990, forty-six billion dollars were spent on training in the United States of America. Of the forty-six billion, two hundred thirty million dollars were spent directly on outdoor adventure-based experiential programming (Noe, 1999). By 1998, these figures had jumped to a staggering one hundred billion spent on training, with five hundred million going directly to outdoor adventure-based experiential programming (Noe, 1999). There is currently every indication that these figures will continue to grow (Noe, 2000).

Context

Significance

Despite these huge sums of money, however, little is known about the process through which employees take learning from outdoor adventure-based programs and apply it within their workplace environments. In short, there are few insights into the transfer of training process as it relates directly to this particular type of program. The current transfer literature does identify certain variables thought to impact the transfer process. Much of this literature, however, is based upon research involving a wide range of populations attempting to transfer learning from specific experimental activities to other controlled experimental situations. The current body of literature, though informative, reveals certain variables in isolation as they affect the transfer efforts of varying populations within controlled experimental situations. In addition, these variables have been applied mostly to traditional forms of training programs. There are very few examples of transfer research efforts involving adults attempting to transfer the learning from outdoor, adventure-based training programs to their professional practice environment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how adult learners transfer adventure-based experiential learning to their workplace environments. The following questions guided this study:

Significance

Gap

Purpose

1. What do participants learn during this type of program?
2. Through what process do adult learners, individually and collectively, transfer this learning to the workplace?
3. What learner, instructor, program design, and workplace factors influence this transfer process?

Source: Leahy (2002). Reprinted with permission.

### *The Role of Self-Directed Learning in Older Adults' Health Care*

Growing numbers of older adults are placing increasing demands on medical services systems and, subsequently, will affect the future direction of health care policy. In response to the increasing numbers, costs, and health care needs of older adults, the medical establishment has changed patient-care policies. For example, managed care provider reimbursement policies have created incentives to move patients quickly through the health care system and have pressured physicians to limit office visit time for dialogue and health education. In response to these changes, health educators have been promoting an active role for patients in their own health care (Berman & Iris, 1998; Keller & Fleury, 2000; National Centers for Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion, 2002).

Context

Significance

The importance of understanding factors contributing to health maintenance is especially relevant for older adults, as it is this segment to the populations who are most at risk. Those older adults who have taken control of their health care are self-directing their own learning. However, little is known about how older adults are using self-directed learning to gain access to health information and how this information is affecting their health care.

Significance

Gap

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of self-directed learning in older adults' health care. The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

Purpose

1. What motivates older adults to take control of their learning regarding health care?
2. What health care behaviors are controlled by self-directed learners?
3. What contextual factors are controlled by self-directed learners?
4. What is the process of self-directed learning of one's health care?
5. How does self-directed learning affect one's health care?

Source: Valente (2005). Reprinted with permission.

our knowledge is that we know little about how older adults are using self-directed learning for their health care. This gap then becomes the purpose of the study followed by five research questions exploring different aspects of the overall (and more general) purpose.

Finally, Exhibit 4.3 is a worksheet that you might find helpful in setting up your research problem. As with all problem statements, you first identify the topic that you are interested in. This is the broad top of the funnel structure. As you move on in explaining what this topic is about and what *is* known about your topic, and then what is not known, you move to the narrow end of the funnel. Somewhere in this movement you indicate why this is an important problem to be researched. Finally, at the narrowest end of the funnel structure, you write a purpose statement followed by research questions.

## THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A colleague of mine once commented that if she could have figured out what a theoretical framework was early on, she could have cut a year off of her graduate studies! Indeed, the theoretical or conceptual framework (terms used interchangeably by most writers) of a study and where theory fits into a research study continue to mystify and frustrate many a novice (and sometimes experienced) researcher. Yet it is often the lack of a clearly articulated theoretical framework—or weak theorizing in general—that results in a study proposal or report being rejected by selection committees and publication outlets. Unfortunately, although it is relatively easy to spot the lack of a theoretical framework, it is considerably more difficult to explain what it is and how to go about incorporating it into your study.

### WHAT IS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK?

Part of the struggle in identifying the theoretical framework in a qualitative study is that qualitative research is designed to inductively build rather than to test concepts, hypotheses, and theories. Because of this characteristic, many mistakenly believe that theory has no place in a qualitative study. Further, some who write

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In your field, what topic is of interest to you that you could shape into a research study?

What are some of the things we DO know about this problem/topic from the literature?

What is the GAP in our knowledge/understanding of this phenomenon? That is, what is missing from the literature on this topic? This is the PROBLEM of your study. (Although we know x, y, z about this phenomenon, we DO NOT KNOW . . .)

Take the “gap” in our knowledge and turn it into a purpose statement. Complete this sentence:

The purpose of this study is to

What are the specific research questions that elaborate your research purpose?

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about qualitative research speak of theory as it relates to the particular methodology one uses and that methodology's epistemological underpinnings (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Although it is good to explore your ideas about the nature of knowledge and its construction (epistemology) and the logical links to how you conduct research (methodology), this is not how I and others think about the theoretical framework of a particular study.

I concur with Schwandt's (1993, p. 7) statement that "Atheoretical research is impossible." A theoretical framework underlies all research. Theory is present in all qualitative studies because no study could be designed without some question being asked (explicitly or implicitly). How that question is phrased and how it is worked into a problem statement reflect a theoretical orientation.

Just what is a theoretical framework? A theoretical framework is the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame of your study. Maxwell (2005, p. 33) defines it as "the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research." The theoretical framework is derived from the orientation or stance that you bring to your study, and every study has one. As Anfara and Mertz (2006, p. xxvii) observe, theoretical frameworks "originate in the many different fields of study and disciplines in the social and natural sciences. Thus, the well-read qualitative researcher is alert to theoretical frameworks in economics, sociology, political science, psychology, biology, physics, and anthropology, to name but a few. . . . It is, indeed, this diversity and richness of theoretical frameworks that allow us to see in new and different ways what seems to be ordinary and familiar." In Anfara and Mertz's edited book titled *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*, chapter authors discuss their use of theoretical frameworks in their qualitative research. Frameworks range from transformational learning theory to chaos and complexity theory to Kubler-Ross's grief model to liminality theory from anthropology.

## IDENTIFYING YOUR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are several ways to identify what your theoretical framework is. First, what is your disciplinary orientation? Each of us

has been socialized into a discipline with its own vocabulary, concepts, and theories. This disciplinary orientation is the lens through which you view the world. It determines what you are curious about, what puzzles you, and hence, what questions you ask that, in turn, begin to give form to your investigation. Looking at the same classroom, for example, different researchers might ask different questions about it. An educator might ask questions about the curriculum, the instructional strategies, or the learning activities. A psychologist might be curious about the self-esteem or motivation of certain students, a sociologist about the social interaction patterns or roles that different participants assume, an anthropologist about the culture of the classroom—its rites and rituals.

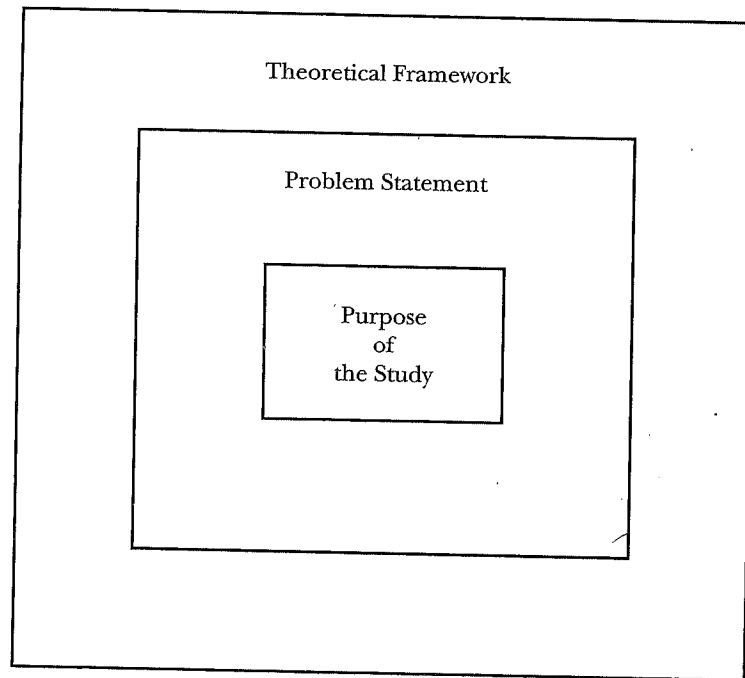
One of the clearest ways to identify your theoretical framework is to attend to the literature you are reading that is related to your topic of interest. What are the titles of journals? What key words do you use to search databases for information? At the very least, you will be looking into the literature to see whether the study you are thinking of doing has already been done. In your search, what are the recurring concepts, models, and theories? Who are the major writers, theorists, and researchers in this area? (See the following section on reviewing the literature for a fuller discussion of this process.)

The framework of your study will draw upon the concepts, terms, definitions, models, and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation. This framework in turn will generate the "problem" of the study, specific research questions, data collection and analysis techniques, and how you will interpret your findings. Schultz (1988), writing about vocational education research, observes that "any research problem may be approached from more than one theoretical perspective. . . . The choice of a theoretical model/conceptual framework . . . will guide the research process in terms of the identification of relevant concepts/constructs, definition of key variables, specific questions to be investigated, selection of a research design, choice of a sample and sampling procedures, data collection strategies . . . data analysis techniques, and interpretation of findings" (p. 34).

All aspects of the study are affected by its theoretical framework. The theoretical framework in relation to the specific

research problem to be investigated can be pictured as a set of interlocking frames. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, the outermost frame—the theoretical framework—is the body of literature, the disciplinary orientation that you draw upon to situate your study. This framework indicates to the reader the topic you are interested in. The theoretical framework for Leahy's study above is learning transfer; for Valente's study it is self-directed learning. Drawing from the literature wherein the theoretical framework is lodged you identify what is known about the topic (citing appropriate literature), what aspect of the topic you are going to focus on, what is not known (the "gap" in the knowledge base), why it is important to know it, and the precise purpose of the study. All of this information is pulled from the larger frame of the study in order to construct the problem statement itself (see the section on problem statement above). Thus the problem statement is represented by a second frame that is firmly lodged within

FIGURE 4.1. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.



the overall framework. Finally, the exact purpose of the study is within the problem statement and can be pictured as the third, innermost frame in this set of interlocking frames.

The theoretical framework, problem statement, and purpose can be illustrated in a study of reentry black women (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). The authors begin by stating, "Racism and sexism as societal forces negatively impact the lives of Black women (Amott & Matthaei, 1991; Hacker, 1992) and are directly visible in Black women's lives as evidenced by their economic standing, their high mortality rate, and their low rate of educational attainment" (p. 142). We are introduced to the general topic and then more specifically to the academic setting: "Since academia does not exist in a vacuum, it is only logical to assume that the same forces are ever present within the classroom. So it is imperative that when the lives of Black women in college are studied that these concerns be addressed, particularly when, in the last twenty years, American colleges have experienced a dramatic influx of non-traditional students, many of whom are Black women" (p. 143). The research problem within the theoretical framework is then identified, as is the precise purpose of the study. "The problem, then, is that Black women as a group go unnoticed and unresearched, and their specific and individual needs remain unaddressed by academia. This study was designed to examine the educational narratives of reentry Black women in an effort to determine the ways that the dynamics of the larger society, which often negatively impact their lives, are played out in higher education" (p. 144). The problem and purpose are clearly embedded within the "theoretical framework" of "Black feminist thought and its resulting epistemology, whose theories and literature helped establish parameters for this research study" (p. 144).

In addition to determining how the problem and purpose are shaped, "our observations as researchers are framed in some ways rather than others, which makes perception itself theory-laden. Theory allows seeing what we would otherwise miss; it helps us anticipate and make sense of events" (Thornton, 1993, p. 68). That is to say that the things we observe in the field, the questions we ask of our participants, and the documents we attend to are determined by the theoretical framework of the study. It also determines what we do not see, do not ask, and do not attend to.

Mertz and Anfara (2006, p. 193) point out that one's theoretical framework both reveals and conceals meaning and understanding and that researchers should "give serious thought to what is being concealed," as "the choice of a theoretical framework clearly delimits a study."

The sense we make of the data we collect is equally influenced by the theoretical framework. That is, our analysis and interpretation—our study's findings—will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place. As Wolcott (2005, p. 180) observes, there is a "need for every researcher to be able to place his or her work within some broader context" and one's theoretical framework is that broader context. In the study of reentry black women cited above, for example, the findings are presented in terms of concepts of race, gender, class, and color from Black feminist thought.

As I noted at the beginning of this section on the theoretical framework, confusion arises about the place of theory in qualitative research because qualitative research is inductive, leading to interpretive or analytical constructs, even to "theory." The argument could be made, however, that most qualitative research inherently shapes or modifies existing theory in that (1) data are analyzed and interpreted in light of the concepts of a particular theoretical orientation, and (2) a study's findings are almost always discussed in relation to existing knowledge (some of which is theory) with an eye to demonstrating how the present study has contributed to expanding the knowledge base. For example, I discuss how a qualitative study of HIV-positive young adults implicitly tested Erikson's eight-stage model of lifespan development (Merriam, 2006). We asked how the threat of death affected movement through stages of development and we found that the movement was not as linear or sequential as Erikson's theory implies. Even those who set out to develop a grounded theory (see Chapter Two) do not enter the study with a blank mind, with no notion of what to think about or look for. For example, Qin and Lykes's (2006) grounded theory study of Chinese women students in the United States is framed by the literature on critical feminist theory and in particular the "intersections of culture, class, race, power and gender" (p. 180).

This section presents a case for theory permeating the entire process of qualitative research. The very questions you raise derive from your view of the world. In research, this view is lodged in a disciplinary base and can be identified through attending to the literature you review in preparation for the study. A discussion of how and why you review the literature follows.

## REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

It should be obvious that one way to identify and establish the theoretical framework of a qualitative study is to review the relevant literature. By literature I mean the theoretical or conceptual writing in an area (the "think" pieces) and the empirical data-based research studies in which someone has gone out and collected and analyzed data. In practice, designing a study is not a linear process of reading the literature, identifying the theoretical framework, and then writing the problem statement. Rather, the process is highly interactive. Your question takes you to some of the literature, which sends you back to looking anew at the phenomenon of interest. In trying to shape the problem, you go back again to the literature, and so on. In essence, you carry on a dialogue with previous studies and work in the area.

Typically, the first question you ask in this dialogue is whether there is any literature on the topic. If so, does it confirm that you are onto a problem that needs researching, or has your idea already been researched to death? In a chapter aptly titled, "Terrorized by the Literature," Becker (2007) speaks to everyone's fear of discovering that a "carefully nurtured idea was in print before they thought of it (maybe before they were born) and in a place they should have looked" (p. 136). Claiming that there is no literature on a topic can only mean that no one thinks the topic is worth studying, there is no way to study it, or, more than likely, you have searched too narrowly. In my experience there is always some related literature. An investigator who ignores prior research and theory risks pursuing a trivial problem, duplicating a study already done, or repeating others' mistakes. The goal of research—contributing to the knowledge base of the field—may then never be realized. According to Cooper (1984, p. 9), "the value of any single study is derived as much from how it fits with

and expands on previous work as from the study's intrinsic properties." And if some studies seem more significant than others, it is "because the piece of the puzzle they solve (or the puzzle they introduce) is extremely important."

### WHY REVIEW THE LITERATURE?

Investigators who do not take the time to find out what has already been thought or researched may be missing an opportunity to make a significant contribution to their field. Indeed, one function of the literature review is to provide the foundation for contributing to the knowledge base. No problem in one field exists in isolation from other areas of human behavior. Consequently, there is always some research study, some theory, some thinking related to the problem that can be reviewed to inform the study at hand.

Besides providing a foundation—a *theoretical framework*—for the problem to be investigated, the literature review can demonstrate how the present study advances, refines, or revises what is already known. It is important for the researcher to know how his or her study deviates from what has already been done. A literature review can do more than set the stage for a study, however. The process can contribute to formulating the problem and answering specific design questions. Knowing what hypotheses have been advanced and tested previously, how terms have been defined, and what assumptions have been dealt with by other investigators can simplify the researcher's task; knowing what research designs have been used before, and with what success, can save time and money. For qualitative studies, researchers can benefit from knowing how well certain data collection techniques used in previous related studies may or may not have yielded meaningful data.

Previous research is often cited in support of the way the study is framed, how concepts are defined, and so on. Previous literature can also be drawn upon to make the case that the present study is necessary, urgent, and important to undertake.

Finally, a commanding knowledge of previous studies and writing on a topic offers a point of reference for discussing the contribution the current study will make to advancing the knowledge base in this area. The researcher literally situates his

or her findings in the previous literature, pointing out the exact nature of the contribution.

In the typical research study, references to previous literature—sometimes even the same citation—may appear in three places. First, previous literature and writing are cited in the introduction, perhaps judiciously quoted from, to build the case for doing the present study. A quote from a well-known authority about the importance of a problem and the need for research in the area will shore up the researcher's position. Underscoring the paucity of research on a topic by citing the few existing studies is also persuasive.

The second place for a literature citation is in a section or chapter often called the "Literature Review," or "Previous Research." Here the literature is synthesized and critiqued; the work that has been done on the topic, its strengths, and its shortcomings are highlighted. In an article-length report of a study, previous literature is often integrated into the development of the problem for study.

Third, the discussion of the findings of a study, found at the end of a research report, *always* contains references to the literature. In the discussion the researcher points out what the study contributes to the knowledge base of the field by showing how the study's findings extend, modify, or contradict previous work. In this discussion the researcher situates the findings of the study into the literature base on the topic, pointing out what new insights have been found, what aspects of theory have been challenged, and so on.

Although there is little doubt that a literature review can strengthen a research study, determining the best time to conduct the review is a matter of some debate. Most writers would agree that the task of becoming familiar with the background of a topic is best undertaken early in the research process; a literature review's impact on problem formulation is an interactive process. At one end of a continuum is a researcher reviewing the literature to find a problem; at the other end is a researcher reviewing the literature to see whether the problem already found has ever been studied. Somewhere in the middle is the investigator who has some notion about what he or she wants to research and consults the literature for help in focusing the problem. Although

a literature review helps in problem formulation regardless of design, in grounded theory studies in particular, there is a range of opinion as to when the literature should be consulted. Glaser (1978) feels it is best to wait until after data have been collected. However, Glaser is clear that even in inductive, grounded theory studies, it is essential to read widely. He suggests reading in substantive areas somewhat different from the research area at first, then reading in the researcher's own area as the project gets under way. The activity is then highly relevant, for the researcher can "skip and dip, thereby gaining greater coverage, since he now has a clear purpose for covering his field, which is to integrate his generated theory with the other literature in the field" (Glaser, 1978, p. 32). However, given the trade-offs of being unduly influenced by previous work versus the way in which an early review of the literature can enhance even a grounded theory study, most qualitative researchers would consult the literature earlier rather than later in the process. In my personal experience, having a command of the literature early in the process greatly facilitates the shaping of the research problem and, simultaneously, decisions related to carrying out the study.

### CONDUCTING AND WRITING UP A LITERATURE REVIEW

How is a literature review conducted? This topic is covered in more depth in other sources (Galvan, 2006; Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Nevertheless, a summary of the process might be helpful. First, the scope of the search is determined by how well defined the research problem is, as well as the researcher's prior familiarity with the topic. If you as a prospective researcher have only a vague sense of a problem you want to investigate, a good way to start would be to conduct an overview of the topic. Major studies, theories, issues, and so on can be identified in this way. The next step is to check bibliographies, indexes, and abstracts that reference specific aspects of a topic.

Once a set of references and abstracts has been collected, you must decide which full-length resources should be obtained. This selection can be made on the basis of the following criteria:

- Is the author of the source an authority on the topic, one who has done much of the empirical work in the area, or one

who has offered seminal theory upon which subsequent and writing has been based? If so, that author's work will be quoted by others and listed in bibliographies on the topic.

- When was the article or book or report written? As a rule, the most recent work in an area should be included in a review.
- What exactly was written about or tested? If a particular resource or research study is highly relevant to your present research interest, it should be included even if the "who" and "when" criteria are not met.
- What is the quality of the source? A thoughtful analysis, a well-designed study, or an original way of viewing the topic is probably a significant piece of literature. In historical or documentary analysis, the quality of primary and secondary sources is a major criterion for inclusion into the data base.

Once you have decided which sources you want to look at more closely, you must obtain the full document. As you review a source, be scrupulously diligent about recording the full bibliographic reference. If you write down a particularly good quote or idea, record the page number. Many a researcher has spent hours looking for the first initial, volume number, date, or page number of a reference! Begin developing an annotated bibliography. This will be something you can add to and draw from as you begin putting together the rationale for your study.

Knowing when to stop reviewing the literature is as important as knowing where and how to locate sources. There are two ways you can determine whether you have done enough. One is to recognize that you have covered all of the relevant literature in the area. Your first glimpse of this end point happens when you turn to the reference list at the end of an article or report and discover that you are familiar with all of the references listed. You may even have read them all. When this happens two or three times, you can feel that you have accounted for most, if not all, the relevant literature. This is a saturation point. The second clue is a bit more subjective—you realize you know the literature. You can cite studies, people, dates, theories, historical trends, and so on. You have a command of the literature. It is time to quit.

A literature review is a narrative essay that integrates, synthesizes, and critiques the important thinking and research on

organize by theme  
a particular topic. Having collected and reviewed the relevant sources, the researcher still faces the task of writing up the review into a coherent narrative essay. There are probably as many organizing possibilities as there are authors. Most literature reviews are organized according to particular themes found in the literature reviewed. A review of the literature on learning styles, for example, might contain sections on conceptualizations of learning style, instruments that measure learning style, populations that have been used in learning style research, and so on. Sometimes reviews are organized chronologically, and "some reviews may evolve into a combined thematic and chronological organization" (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 48). For example, "You might handle the early, though important, literature on the topic under a chronological heading . . . and then move on to relevant themes characteristic of the most recent work. Conversely, the bulk of the literature might be organized thematically with the most recent work under a heading such as 'recent developments'" (p. 48). Regardless of the organization, a crucial component of any literature review is the critical assessment of the research and literature included. The reader wants to know what you think of the literature, its strengths as well as its weaknesses, whether or not it constitutes a major breakthrough in the thinking on the topic, what it adds to the knowledge base, and so on.

In summary, a familiarity with previous research and theory in the area of study is necessary for situating your study in the knowledge base of the field. A review of the literature can also yield information that will be helpful when you make design decisions. Further, the literature is crucial to identifying the overall theoretical framework of your study, as well as shaping the problem statement.

## SAMPLE SELECTION

Once the general problem has been identified, the task becomes to select the unit of analysis, the sample. Within every study there exist numerous sites that could be visited, events or activities that could be observed, people who could be interviewed, documents that could be read. The researcher thus needs to choose what, where, when, and whom to observe or interview.

The two basic types of sampling are probability and nonprobability sampling. Probability sampling (of which simple random sampling is the most familiar example) allows the investigator to generalize results of the study from the sample to the population from which it was drawn. Since generalization in a statistical sense is not a goal of qualitative research, probabilistic sampling is not necessary or even justifiable in qualitative research (see Chapter Nine for more discussion on generalizability). Thus nonprobability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative research. Anthropologists, for example, have long maintained that nonprobability sampling methods "are logical as long as the fieldworker expects mainly to use his data not to answer questions like 'how much' and 'how often' but to solve qualitative problems, such as discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences" (Honigmann, 1982, p. 84). Thus the most appropriate sampling strategy is nonprobabilistic—the most common form of which is called purposive (Chein, 1981) or purposeful (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned. Chein (1981) explains, "The situation is analogous to one in which a number of expert consultants are called in on a difficult medical case. These consultants—also a purposive sample—are not called in to get an average opinion that would correspond to the average opinion of the entire medical profession. They are called in precisely because of their special experience and competence" (p. 440).

Patton (2002) argues that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term *purposeful* sampling" (p. 230, emphasis in original).

To begin purposive sampling, you must first determine what selection criteria are essential in choosing the people or sites to be studied. LeCompte and Preissle (1993, p. 69) prefer the term *criterion-based selection* to the terms *purposive* or *purposeful sampling*. In criterion-based selection you "create a list of the attributes essential" to your study and then "proceed to find or locate a unit matching the list" (p. 70). The criteria you establish for



purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases. You not only spell out the criteria you will use, but you also say why the criteria are important. For example, in Bierema's (1996) study of executive women in corporate settings, she decided that to ensure that the women were top-level executives, they would have to be from Fortune 500-type corporate environments (one criterion); they had to have achieved executive-level status, which meant that they would have responsibility for a business unit with supervisory, policy development, or organizational strategy responsibilities (a second criterion). Third, she reasoned that they had to have been with the same company for at least five years "to ensure that each participant understood the corporate culture" (p. 150).

### TYPES OF PURPOSEFUL SAMPLING

A number of writers have differentiated among different types of purposeful sampling (Cresswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Some of the more common types are typical, unique, maximum variation, convenience, and snowball or chain sampling. Using a population of high school graduates for illustration, a discussion and example of each of these types follows.

① Typical  
A typical sample would be one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest. "When the typical site sampling strategy is used," Patton (2002) writes, "the site is specifically selected because it is not in any major way atypical, extreme, deviant, or intensely unusual" (p. 236). Using a profile of the average or typical high school graduate, any who fit this profile could be included in a typical purposeful sample.

② Unique  
A unique sample is based on unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest. You would be interested in them because they are unique or atypical. With regard to high school graduates, you might select one who has become a professional athlete.

③ Max Variation  
Maximum variation sampling was first identified by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their book on grounded theory. A grounded theory, it was reasoned, would be more conceptually dense and potentially more useful if it had been "grounded" in

widely varying instances of the phenomenon. "Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 234). Sometimes this strategy involves "a deliberate hunt for negative" or disconfirming "instances or variations" of the phenomenon (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 29). Maximum variation sampling of high school graduates would involve identifying and seeking out those who represent the widest possible range of the characteristics of interest for the study.

④ Convenience  
Convenience sampling is just what is implied by the term—you select a sample based on time, money, location, availability of sites or respondents, and so on. Although some dimension of convenience almost always figures into sample selection, selection made on this basis alone is not very credible and is likely to produce "information-poor" rather than information-rich cases. A convenience sample of high school graduates might begin with your own teenagers and their friends.

⑤ Snowball  
Snowball, chain, or network sampling is perhaps the most common form of purposeful sampling. This strategy involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you have established for participation in the study. As you interview these early key participants you ask each one to refer you to other participants. "By asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 237). High school graduates would name other graduates who exemplify the characteristics of interest in the study.

⑥ Theoretical  
Finally, some qualitative research designs incorporate an ongoing sample selection process commonly referred to as theoretical sampling. This type of sampling begins the same way as purposeful sampling, but the total sample is not selected ahead of time. Put forward by Glaser and Strauss (1967), "theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges" (p. 45). The researcher begins with an initial sample chosen for its obvious relevance to the research problem. The data lead the investigator to the next

document to be read, the next person to be interviewed, and so on. It is an evolving process guided by the emerging theory—hence, “theoretical” sampling. Analysis occurs simultaneously with identifying the sample and collecting the data. As data are being collected and theoretical constructs begin to evolve, the researcher might also look for exceptions (negative-case selection) or variants (discrepant-case selection) to emerging findings.

### HOW MANY IN THE SAMPLE?

Invariably, the question of how many people to interview, how many sites to visit, or how many documents to read concerns—more likely haunts—the novice qualitative researcher. Unfortunately for those with a low tolerance for ambiguity, there is no answer. It always depends on the questions being asked, the data being gathered, the analysis in progress, the resources you have to support the study. What is needed is an adequate number of participants, sites, or activities to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study (in the form of the purpose statement). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend sampling until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached. “In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus *redundancy* is the primary criterion” (p. 202, emphasis in original).

If you are submitting a proposal to a funding agency, dissertation committee, or other oversight board for approval or support, you can offer a tentative, approximate number of units to be included (that is, people, sites, cases, activities, and so on), knowing full well that this will be adjusted in the course of the investigation. Patton (2002) recommends specifying a minimum sample size “based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study” (p. 246).

### THE SAMPLE IN CASE STUDIES

Unlike the other types of qualitative research presented in Chapter Two (basic qualitative study, phenomenology, ethnography,

grounded theory, narrative), two levels of sampling are usually necessary in qualitative case studies. First, you must select “the case” to be studied. Then, unless you plan to interview, observe, or analyze all the people, activities, or documents within the case, you will need to do some sampling within the case.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, a case is a single unit, a bounded system. As Stake (1995) points out, sometimes selecting a case turns out “to be no ‘choice’ at all. . . . It happens when a teacher decides to study a student having difficulty, when we get curious about a particular agency, or when we take the responsibility of evaluating a program. The case is given” (p. 3). Other times, we have a general question, an issue, a problem that we are interested in, and we feel that an in-depth study of a particular instance or case will illuminate that interest.

To find the best case to study, you would first establish the criteria that will guide case selection and then select a case that meets those criteria. For example, if your interest is in programs that are successful in addressing learning disabilities, you would establish criteria for what constitutes a successful program; then you would select a program that meets those criteria. This program would be the case. For multicase or comparative case studies you would select several “cases” based on relevant criteria. One of the criteria might be that you want as much variation as possible; hence, you would be employing a maximum variation sampling strategy in the selection of your cases. Using the successful learning disabilities program example, you might seek out programs that are successful in a wide range of socioeconomic neighborhoods or that address a wide range of disabilities or grade levels.

Thus the researcher first identifies the case—the bounded system, the unit of analysis—to be investigated. The case can be as varied as a second-grade classroom, the training department of a company, a systemwide model science program, or a patient education clinic at a local hospital. Within every case there exist numerous sites that could be visited (as in the model science program), events or activities that could be observed, people who could be interviewed, and documents that could be read. A sample within the case needs to be selected either before the data collection begins or while the data are being gathered (ongoing



or theoretical sampling). Random sampling can be used within the case, and indeed, this is one strategy that can be employed for addressing validity (see Chapter Nine). More commonly, however, purposeful sampling as outlined earlier is used to select the sample within the case, just as it is used to select the case itself. However, a second set of criteria is usually needed to purposefully select whom to interview, what to observe, and which documents to analyze.

Thus the questions, concerns, and purposes of qualitative studies lead to forms of nonprobability sampling in determining the sample of instances, locations, people, and times to be included. Purposeful or purposeful sampling usually occurs before the data are gathered, whereas theoretical sampling is done in conjunction with data collection. The size of the sample within the case is determined by a number of factors relevant to the study's purpose. In case studies, then, sample selection occurs first at the case level, followed by sample selection within the case. For both levels of sampling, criteria need to be established to guide the process. Using the successful learning disabilities program as an example, the criteria for selecting the program (the case) might be the following: the program will have been in existence for a minimum of five years; 60 percent of its students are able to join regular classes after one year in the program; the program deals with learning disabilities in reading and math only. Once the program has been selected, you will need to determine whom to interview (unless you plan to interview everyone) and what to observe. Criteria for selecting the interview sample might include all administrators, teachers who have been with the program at least five years, students representing various ages, length in the program, and particular learning disabilities.

## SUMMARY

I began this chapter by explaining how to select a topic for study. Once a topic has been selected, it needs to be shaped into a research *problem*. Defining the research problem is a key step in any type of research. You can examine your own practice, review the literature, or look to current social problems for questions that can be shaped into a research problem. The statement of

the problem presents the logic of the study and includes identifying the context of the study, the gap in our knowledge of the topic, and a rationale for the importance or significance of addressing this gap through research. The statement of the problem concludes with a very specific purpose statement followed by research questions.

Also discussed in this chapter is the theoretical framework of a study, that is, the underlying structure upon which all other aspects of the study rest. Previous literature plays an important role in the formation of a study's theoretical framework, and I reviewed the benefits of conducting a literature review, the steps in doing it, and the place of the review in the overall research process. Establishing the theoretical framework and reviewing the literature, which I discussed sequentially in the chapter, are, in reality, quite intertwined. From a review of the literature a researcher discovers what research exists on a topic and how theory and previous research may help frame the study at hand. Likewise, a researcher is guided to a specific body of literature by the emerging problem, by issues that arise during data collection and analysis, and by the need to interpret findings in light of previous research.

Selecting the sample is dependent upon the research problem. In qualitative research, the most appropriate sampling strategy is nonprobability sampling. Purposeful and theoretical sampling are well-known and widely used nonprobability sampling strategies in qualitative research. The chapter closes with a discussion of sample selection in case study research.

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