

Research Problem

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The research problem addresses what researchers perceive is wrong, missing, or puzzling, or what requires changing, in the world. Presentations of the research problem typically set the stage for the study that will be, or that was, conducted by offering evidence that the problem exists and for whom and by establishing the significance of the problem and why it requires formal inquiry. The research problem, the details of which are fleshed out in a literature review that critically addresses what is known and yet to be known about the problem and how it has been conceptualized and studied to date, leads directly to the research purpose(s) and research question(s).

The research problem may be a clinical/practice, theoretical/disciplinary, or methodological problem. An example of a clinical/practice problem is that virtually perfect medication adherence—as conventionally defined in the health sciences literature—is required to prevent the transmission, and development of resistant strains, of HIV. Although numerous studies have indicated that adherence is sporadic, few of them offer explanations for this state of affairs that are useful in practice. The research purpose, therefore, is to study adherence practices in a group of HIV-positive patients to explain the circumstances for taking or refusing medication. An example of a theoretical/disciplinary problem is that medication adherence has typically been treated in empirical health sciences research as a behavior characterizing individuals whereby they either take or do not take medications as physicians prescribe them. Because of this narrow view of adherence, the findings of empirical studies of medication adherence have been inconsistent, contradictory, and inconclusive. The research purpose, therefore, is to study medication adherence as located in a larger arena of patient work as this is conceived in the sociology of work. An example of a methodological problem is that researchers in the health sciences are increasingly calling for the incorporation of qualitative methods into systematic reviews, yet few methods have been developed or tested to accomplish this. The research purpose, therefore, is to develop methods to synthesize qualitative and quantitative research findings in targeted domains of health sciences research.

Because of the fluid and emergent nature of qualitative research design, the research problem that set the stage for a study might not be the one, or might not be conceived in the same way, as the problem researchers come to see as the study proceeds. For example, the clinical problem initially conceived to be imperfect medication adherence may be reconceptualized as a theoretical problem as researchers question the validity of understanding adherence as located in the individual. Accordingly, one kind of problem may become another kind of problem, and the research problem may both set the beginning stage for and become a finding of a study. Like research purposes and questions, research problems in qualitative research are both the stimulus to and the outcomes of inquiry.

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See also

- [Literature Review](#)
- [Research Question](#)

Further Readings

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