

Research Question

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Research questions designate what researchers want to understand about the research problem that led to their study. Research questions further specify the stated purpose of the study, which in turn addresses the stated research problem.

In contrast to quantitative studies, in which research questions are always specified prior to study, in qualitative research they may be the result of having entered the field of study and, thereby, arriving at the relevant questions to ask. Whereas research questions in quantitative research restrict, and commit researchers to, the variables that will be addressed, research questions in qualitative research are broad enough to permit the discovery of the specific experiences, events, artifacts, concepts, or other empirical and/or analytic subjects that will ultimately be the focus of study. In keeping with the interactive and emergent nature of qualitative research design, and the cyclic and data-derived nature of qualitative analysis, research questions are ultimately the outcomes of the concerns, curiosities, and fascinations that first led investigators to enter a field of study and that they later developed while in the field.

Qualitative research questions often signal initial theoretical orientations toward a target experience or event even when such orientations are never explicitly stated. The very way in which research questions are posed reveals researchers' preconceptions and proclivities toward the target of study. For example, to ask why one group of people does not use hospice care is often to assume that the group should, and it is also not to ask why other groups of people do use hospice care and why they should not. Qualitative research questions also tend to signal initial methodological orientations toward the study of a target phenomenon even when they are not explicitly stated. When research questions are asked about the nature of experiences and events, how and why things came to be, and how sense or meaning is made of an event, a desire is being communicated phenomenologically, theoretically, narratively, or otherwise interpretively to describe or explain that event or experience. For example, phenomenological research questions tend to address what it is like to be, to have, or to live questions in the interest of developing feeling understandings of experiences, whereas grounded theory questions tend to address social (inter)action in the interest of theoretically modeling social processes.

Research questions are usually distinguished from the questions researchers actually ask participants in interviews or in the course of field observations or ask of data in the course of analyzing them. Although the questions participants answer and the constant questioning process that defines qualitative data collection and analysis are in the service of answering research questions, they are not equivalent to them. For example, the interview question asked

of participants, “Tell me about your routine day,” is in the service of the research question, “How do people with chronic illnesses manage their lives?”

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See also

- [Research Problem](#)

Further Readings

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