

# 3

## UNIT 3: CONCEPTUALIZING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

You have been exposed to the terrain of qualitative research and you have started applying these ideas to discover a research interest that could be explored through qualitative inquiry. In this unit, we will learn more about subjectivities and the structure of the qualitative research.

### Intentions of This Unit

In this unit, learners will be introduced to the notion of subjectivities and the role subjectivities play in one's qualitative study. Learners will also be exposed to a general structure of dissertation informed by qualitative inquiry in the U.S.

### Subjectivities

One article that I have recommended that students read early on in their exploration of qualitative research is Peshkin's (1988) article titled "In Search of Subjectivity: One's Own." Subjectivity has been discussed in a myriad ways in qualitative research reflecting interpretive, critical, and deconstructivist perspectives.

While there are many definitions of subjectivities out there, what has helped me think about subjectivities is the concept of subject positions. As human beings, we occupy various subject positions. For example, as a student, you might occupy the subject positions of being a daughter, a student, a mother, a sister, a wife, a career woman, etc. Each of these positions is connected to specific discourses of what it means for you to be connected to those labels, or subject positions. Perhaps there are ways in which you understand what it means to be a student, what is expected of you, and you either align with those expectations, modify those expectations, or resist some of those expectations and dismiss them. This would be termed as negotiating your position within the discourse of what it means to be a student.

In qualitative research, it is important to discuss these assumptions, beliefs, and values that inform the way you make meaning of your research topic. Claiming value neutrality would be intellectually dishonest because as human beings we have values, and if we became truly neutral and had no values, beliefs, or assumptions, we could argue that we would be quite robotic. And if a robot conducts an interview, it is unlikely that rich, detailed data would be gathered. Thus, qualitative researchers tend to be transparent about the values, beliefs, and assumptions with which they operate and how such things interact and inform their studies.

Often students confuse subjectivities with bias and equate them as synonymous terms. The former is a term associated with qualitative research and the latter with quantitative research. Because quantitative researchers work on measuring, capturing, and predicting truth well beyond coincidence levels, it is important in that kind of inquiry to ensure that they minimize errors and anything that would distort the path of measuring and capturing the truth. Therefore, they are careful about sample selection and instrument selection, and measure the accuracy of these selections through pre-established agreed upon rules. Any distortions in application of these rules could lead to skewing of the data and could reflect a bias, which would prevent the research from accomplishing its purpose. However, since qualitative researchers are in the business of understanding, interrogating, or deconstructing multiple truths, they are constantly thriving for gaining deep, rich, thick understanding buried within contextual details, social structures, discourses with which the participants identify and negotiate their experiences. How well a qualitative researcher can achieve depth of understanding is contingent on the relationship the researcher makes with the participants, the quality of data collection, and the researcher's analytical skills, informed by his or her positionality. All of these characteristics rely on the researcher's talents and skills, which are part and parcel of the researcher and cannot be situated within claims of value neutrality.

Therefore, in qualitative research, subjectivities are not used or understood the same way biases are used and understood in quantitative research. Since we cannot ever divorce ourselves from all the subject positions that shape us, qualitative research does not view subjectivities as negative influences on data. However, qualitative research calls for the researcher to become increasingly vigilant in order to reflect and address the role of subjectivities in research with academic rigor and trustworthiness.

## The Subjective Self: Interactive Exercise



The first exercise is adapted from one that Jeff Rose<sup>1</sup> uses in his classes for students to understand epistemology and positionalities.

1. Draw a picture of something that is of great importance to you, or something that is a symbolic representation of what is of great importance to you. Do not worry about your artistic skills. You can draw stick figures, doodle, or anything that you please. If you find drawing to be not your cup of tea, create a collage with pictures, words, or objects. If you are more comfortable with digital form, then you could think of tools like Pinterest to clip images, words, anything that is of significance to you.
2. What is the story of this picture? What kinds of stories can be told about this picture or collection of pictures, words, objects?
3. Exchange your art with another student. Do not explain your art to your partner.
4. Ask your partner to tell you what they see in the picture, the meanings they make of your artwork.
5. Switch roles and tell your partner your perspective on their artwork.
6. Discuss with each other how your meaning making was aligned with what the intention was in the artwork.
7. Respond to the following prompts. You can use your researcher journal to respond to the prompts too, if there is not enough space underneath each prompt.

What were the most salient ways you tried to understand your partner's artwork? What stood out to you and why?

What were some clues that were present in the artwork that allowed you to construct a narrative or make meanings out of your partner's artwork?

What were some clues that were not present in the artwork, but still were useful to you (perhaps a prior experience, a similar shared event, etc.) in terms of framing a narrative or making meaning of your partner's artwork?



What can you say about the ways in which you processed the meanings/narrative(s) of the artwork?

What views, beliefs, assumptions rose to the surface for you as a result of doing this activity?

## The Eyes Are Watching: Interactive Exercise



Alan Peshkin (1988) presents various ways of understanding subjectivities in “In Search of Subjectivity—One’s Own.” Although he describes his category of subjective “I”s as discrete categories, I would argue that there are overlaps between those categories. I invite you to read the article to further your understanding of your subjectivities.

Think of three topics of research interest that appeal to you. You do not have to know all the empirical details of your interests. Just focus on the topics that appeal to you, and think of the reasons why you are drawn to these topics. Focus on which subjective Is match up best with each of your chosen topics. You can select the same Is multiple times or as many different Is as they appeal to you. There are no right or wrong answers, but what feels most correct to you. There are some cells that are left empty for you to fill in with other forms of subjective Is that are not listed in Peshkin’s article but are present in your understanding of self.

**TABLE 3.1**

	<i>Research Topic 1</i> <i>(list topic below)</i>	<i>Research Topic 2</i> <i>(list topic below)</i>	<i>Research Topic 3</i> <i>(list topic below)</i>
The Ethnic Maintenance I			
The Community Maintenance I			
The E Pluribus Unum I			
The Justice Seeking I			
The Pedagogical Meliorist I			
The Nonresearch Human I			

After reflecting on the various Is that you have selected, which research topic are you drawn to most? What helps you make the decisions? (The number of Is you have selected for the topic or the intensity of one kind of I that overwhelms the others, or something else?)



**Instructor Note:** If using this activity in class, you can also ask the students to reflect on theoretical framing of the research topics that are most connected to their subjectivities. Are the students operating from interpretive, critical, or deconstructive paradigms?

**Student Note:** If you are conducting this exercise on your own outside of class activities, reflect on whether your work is in the interpretive, critical, or deconstructive column. Does your research interest blur boundaries between the columns? Does your research interest distinctively fall into one column more than any other? What theoretical perspectives do you think align well with your research topic? Use your research journal to reflect on these questions.

## Change Your Language, Change Your Paradigm

Often when people meet qualitative research for the first time, they try to understand concepts in qualitative research using terminologies from quantitative research. This usually causes confusion, and students have a hard time shifting their thinking. One of the best ways to shift your thinking is to immerse yourself in the language of qualitative inquiry and not try to understand it in terms of quantitative inquiry. In other words, you cannot try to understand how good a swimmer is if you continue to see the swimmer’s performance in terms of a batting average. Sounds crazy, right? That is exactly what happens when you try to explain qualitative research using terminologies from quantitative research. It simply does not make any good sense.

Therefore, certain words used in quantitative research are not used in qualitative research in the same way or at all or used currently even if they were used in the past. I encourage you to incorporate a new vocabulary when doing qualitative research by not using the questionable words listed in Table 3.2. Although the terms appear side by side, they are not meant to be replacements for each other. Instead, the words on the right-hand side are commonly used words in qualitative research. I would advise getting a copy of Thomas Schwandt’s (2007) *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* for annotated definitions of the terms in the right-hand column. During the course of your qualitative studies, feel free to add more terms to the list below.

**TABLE 3.2** Questionable and Acceptable Words/Phrases in Qualitative Inquiry

<i>Questionable</i>	<i>Acceptable</i>
Objective	Constructivist
Validity	Subjectivities
Reliability	Academic Rigor
Neutral	Trustworthiness
Generalizability	Transferability
Bias	Multiple Realities
Absolute Reality	Multiple Truths
Absolute Truth	Triangulation
Absolute Fact	Reflexivity
Completely True	Assumptions
Completely False	Beliefs

Insert your own words/phrases in the space below or in your journal as you continue learning about qualitative research.

**TABLE 3.3** Questionable and Acceptable Words/Phrases in Qualitative Inquiry (Blank)

<i>Questionable</i>	<i>Acceptable</i>

## Thinking about Research Purpose

Your research purpose can get a bit wordy and can possibly sound like a bit of a run-on sentence. Some things to keep in mind when considering a **research purpose** that is aligned with qualitative inquiry are:

Frame the research purpose in a way that **invites multiple possibilities** as a potential answer to the research purpose as opposed to one possible answer. For example, if you write a qualitative research purpose as, “The purpose of this study is to explore whether using iPads in the college classroom affects learning experiences,” you have limited yourself to a finite possibility of answers. A research purpose such as this one would invite only two possible answers at the end of the study. Those answers would be limited to either iPads in the college classroom affect learning experiences or they do not affect learning experiences. This kind of framing is not conducive to in-depth inquiry.

Instead, consider a research purpose on the same topic as something like, “The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which college students describe their learning experiences while using iPads in the classroom.” This research purpose could also use further work such as adding how many participants, location of the study, etc. However, purely focusing on the structure of the purpose statement, this type of framing invites multiple possibilities as potential answers to the research purpose instead of limiting the research purpose to two finite answers. One of the ways in which you can frame the research purpose is by **reflecting on your intent** for the inquiry. Some verbs that can assist in this process are, but are not limited to:

- Explore
- Understand
- Investigate
- Identify
- Evaluate
- Describe
- Interrogate
- Deconstruct
- Negotiate

Once you have figured out the verb to use, you will have to **add contextual details**. Contextual details involve thinking about the context of the study, which includes you answering the following questions:

- How many participants?
- Where (use pseudonyms)?
- What will you explore? **Be specific** in identifying this, as your focus will sharpen here. For example, if you are interested in exploring the experiences of discrimination among Black female students at a predominantly White university, then say so instead of saying female students of color. If

exploring experience or perception, then the experience or perception of what exactly? **Be sharply focused.**

**Avoid jargon as much as possible**, and if you use jargon, then provide some definition about what might be your indicators for identifying what you are trying to explore. This is not to state that you have to have a way of counting or measuring some abstract concept. However, you have to draw some parameter around the scope of your study and what it is that you would be actually exploring and what might you use as potential indicators that align with what you are trying to explore. Even if you are critical or deconstructive in your approach, you still have to be able to discuss what it is that you would put at the other end of your gaze to explore, investigate, interrogate, or deconstruct.

## Sorting Out Your Study: Interactive Exercise<sup>2</sup>



You have been exposed to various aspects of conceptualizing qualitative research. It is time to put all the ideas presented before in the context of your work. Use the following prompts to reflect on your research interest.

List three areas of inquiry (topics of research) surrounding your potential research interest:

1.

2.

3.

What do we know about these topics? List three key findings (broad, salient points of conversation in the relevant literature).

1.

2.

3.

List 1–3 areas/topics/issues that could use further research.

1.

2.

3.

Hence, the study that can contribute to the literature could be:

## Writing a Research Purpose: Interactive Exercise



Using the information presented in the previous section, start conceptualizing a research purpose.

What is the topic of your study?

Who would you talk to as participants in this study? How many participants will be part of your study?

What is the appropriate verb that reflects the intent of your inquiry and why? Which theoretical perspective are you aligning with when using that verb?

What is the context of this study—as in, where will the research take place? Is this an educational environment, a social environment, a digital environment, a familial environment?

Therefore, the purpose of your study is:



After you have completed writing a research purpose above, check the following:

- Is the research purpose open-ended to invite multiple possibilities as potential answers to the research purpose?
- Have you identified who the participants will be for your study?
- Have you stated the number of participants?
- Have you identified the site where the study will take place if appropriate?
- Have you used the verb that reflects most accurately your intent and theoretical perspective for this study?
- Have you used jargon sparingly?
- Have you used sharp, focused language to demonstrate accurately what it is that you want to study in an in-depth manner?

## Thinking about Research Questions

Once you have completed writing your research purpose, you are then ready to conceptualize two to three research questions that align with your research purpose. Research questions are generally questions that break apart your research purpose more specifically to your focal points of inquiry. They give you a direction of what it is that you are going to study and keep you focused during data collection, analysis, and representation stages of your qualitative inquiry.

Some things to keep in mind when considering a **research question** that is aligned with qualitative inquiry are:

- i. Make sure they **are aligned with the research purpose** that you created. It is common to write research questions that may be related to the research purpose but not fully aligned with the research purpose.
- ii. One question can be the **conversion of the purpose statement into a question** if appropriate. For example, if the research purpose is specific about exploring experiences of X, your research question could be “What are the experiences of X?”
- iii. Keep your **research questions simple**. Do not try to solve everything within the topic of your interest with complicated research questions. Pursue **one point of inquiry** in one question. If conducted with adequate depth, you will have complex, multilayered, sophisticated, and nuanced answers to the simplest of questions. It is your positionality (alignment of epistemology, ontology, theoretical, and methodological perspectives) that will bring you the depth and clarity you need to answer questions.
- iv. **Limit the number of questions** you ask. The more questions you ask, the more you will have to answer. So, think carefully as to the number of questions you want to use for your study.
- v. Ask questions that have **open-ended possibilities** for answers, such as:
  - a. What are the experiences of . . .
  - b. How does a participant describe X . . .
  - c. In what ways does X play a role in Y?
  - d. How does the participant identify X . . .
- vi. Do not ask **closed-ended research** questions. Those are generally quantitative questions such as:
  - a. Does this program benefit learning experiences of students?
  - b. Do the participants like X more than Y?
  - c. Does X cause Y?
- vii. Research questions are topical **and should not contain the word “you,”** as in, “What are your experiences of X?” The mention of the word “you” makes

it a direct question that is asked of a participant, which then becomes an interview question and not a research question exploring a topic of inquiry.

Here are some sample research purposes and questions:

### ***Sample One***

The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of two graduates who credit their transition into alternative education from a traditional education setting in playing a role in their completion of high school in South Texas.

There are two research questions that this study will address:

1. In what ways do the participants describe their experiences in a traditional education setting prior to enrollment into an alternative education program?
2. In what ways do the participants describe their experiences in alternative education contributing to their graduation?

### ***Sample Two***

The purpose of this study is to conduct a Foucauldian power/knowledge analysis constructed from the perceptions of 15 teachers at an intermediate school in South Texas regarding the role of the teacher evaluation process and its influence on instructional practices.

Research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are the cultural, political, and strategic conditions encompassing the teacher evaluation process?
2. What relations and practices are enabled by the cultural, political, and strategic conditions of the teacher evaluation process?
3. What are the possibilities in the participants' behavioral changes in terms of the relationship between the evaluation process and pedagogy?

## Writing Research Questions: Interactive Exercise



Copy your research purpose from the previous exercise in the space provided below.

What two or three areas can your topic be further broken down into for deeper and sharper inquiry?

What kinds of perspectives can the participant(s) in your study share about these subtopical areas?

Therefore, two research questions informing this study are:

1.

2.

After you have completed writing your research questions above, check the following:



1. Make sure that your research questions are aligned with your research purpose.
2. Make sure that your research questions are open-ended.
3. Make sure that your research questions are aligned with your theoretical perspective(s).
4. Make sure you have asked research questions and not interview questions.
5. Make sure that the questions reflect a realistic scope of what participants can provide if there are participants involved in your study.
6. Is the number of questions appropriate for your study?
7. Are the questions kept simple as they are worded, yet sharp in their focus?
8. Does each question pursue one line of inquiry, or could questions be split into two questions if two or more lines of inquiry are present in one question?

## Data Sources in Qualitative Research

Almost anything can be considered data in qualitative research. Sources of information that after systematic (linear and nonlinear) review and analysis provide you with insights that answer your research purpose and questions and become evidence in your study. Data sources can be tangible sources of information that you can collect through active measures, such as interviews or observations, or through gathering relevant documents and archived materials. Data sources can also be intangible sources, such as memories, inspirations, insights, anything that helps you understand your study better. If you want to learn more about data sources that are not always tangible, I recommend reading Bettie St. Pierre's (1997) work on transgressive data. Also, if you are interested in thinking about the sites where you can collect data that are tangible and not so tangible, I recommend reading my work (Bhattacharya, 2009b) on this topic. You will find various ways of thinking of research sites from where you can gather information and how those sites are also connected to your theoretical and methodological perspective(s). For the purpose of this book, we will be focusing on tangible data sources. As you move forward in your understanding of qualitative research, I invite you to consider the possible sources of information that can be either tangible or tacit. Here is a list of tangible data sources for your reference, which is not exhaustive by any means.

### *Conversations/Interviews*

Conversations/interviews occur in many forms in qualitative research. Conversations can be a form of interview that can range from informal chats to formal structured or semistructured open-ended interviews. The choice of data collection and the method of data collection should always be informed by your research purpose, questions, and theoretical perspective(s). For example, if your theoretical perspective was informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), then your formal or informal interview questions should reflect the tenets of CRT in a way that is relevant to your study.

### *Observations*

Observation stems out of conducting fieldwork in qualitative studies. Often fieldwork is associated with ethnographies, but observations are used as data sources for various types of qualitative studies that are not ethnographies. A common term, participant observation is used for not only discussing observation efforts in qualitative studies but also for discussing the level of participation in which the researcher engages. Various researchers have labeled the participatory roles a researcher might play ranging from minimally intrusive to being intensively engaged in the events one is attempting to observe. Regardless of whether a qualitative researcher is an active or passive participant in an event, the researcher

is a participant in the environment that s/he is observing by being present in the environment. Observations can be conducted in public places, in specific research sites such as a classroom, or even in digital environments such as chatrooms, online forums, and virtual worlds.

### ***Documents and Archived Materials***

It is common in qualitative research to collect various types of relevant documents and archived materials that will provide the researcher a better contextual understanding. Some examples of documents include but are not limited to:

- Journals/diaries
- Newspaper citations
- Court papers
- Brochures
- Letters
- Pictures

### ***Elicitations***

An alternate way of knowing in qualitative research is elicitation. Elicitations are ways to create a context where the participant speaks about her experiences elicited by some sort of external trigger. This trigger could be pictures, objects, tasks, videos, lyrics, websites, etc. Either the participant identifies objects or pictures or triggers that are meaningful to her, or the researcher provides such triggers to the participant to generate conversations. For example, in my dissertation where I explored the experiences of international students in their first year in graduate school in the U.S., I asked the participants to take pictures of places, objects, or anything that reflected their experiences as international graduate students in their first year. Then, based on the pictures they took, we ran a digital slideshow and the participants discussed the reasons why they took the pictures, the ways in which the pictures spoke to their experiences, the discourses they were aligning with, modifying, and resisting. Some examples of elicitation are:

1. Photo elicitation
2. Object elicitation
3. Video elicitation
4. Lyric elicitation
5. Task elicitation

## Find Your Data Sources: Interactive Exercise



Rewrite your research purpose once more so you can remind yourself of the specific details of the research purpose.

Would your study benefit from conversations? What kind of conversations would you like to have? Would they be formal, informal, structured, unstructured?

Would there be opportunities to observe any interactions that are occurring naturally? What kind of role would you play as a participant observer? What exactly would you observe and where?

What kinds of documents or archived materials would be relevant to provide further context for your study?

Would your study benefit from some participant-driven elicitation tasks? If so, what might they be? What would you like to know from those elicitations?



What kinds of questions do you have about your study at this point?

## Golden Nuggets: Interactive Exercise



In this unit you have been introduced to how to conceptualize your research topic, how to write your research purpose and questions, and what to consider for tangible data sources in your qualitative study. Next is a scenario that will further sharpen your understanding of the ideas presented in this unit.

### SCENARIO

I am interested in understanding how five ESL students in middle school in a midsouthern town in the U.S. make meaning of their experiences in ESL classrooms. Write a research purpose, two aligned research questions, and list possible sources of data collection informed by qualitative research methods.

**Instructor Note:** If you choose to conduct this nugget activity in class, then this could be a way to identify where there might be gaps in the students' understanding in conceptualizing a qualitative study and aligning the various parts of the study.

**Student Note:** If you choose to conduct this activity outside of your class assignment and find that you are struggling with certain areas, identify what those areas are, as that will help you identify the appropriate readings for you.

**Notes**

- 1 Exercise supplied by Jeff Rose, Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina. Used with permission from Jeff Rose.
- 2 Adapted from instructional handout authored by Kathleen deMarras (2004). Used with permission.