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Doing Qualitative Research for Beginners: Basic Underlying Steps and Related Issues

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Abstract: Aim: This article guides novice researchers in preparing a basic qualitative research proposal. It covers the underlying reasons for conducting qualitative research, key concepts, and the basic process flow in preparing a doable qualitative proposal**:** research problem, central research question, research questions, and corresponding interview questions. **Methodology:** Several key steps in preparing the proposal are explained and supported with tables or illustrations. Qualitative research was selected because, as Creswell and Poth (2018) and Tracy (2020) noted, it effectively examines complex social phenomena. Qualitative approaches capture the complexity and diversity of human experiences, especially when discussing complex motivations, beliefs, and processes that are difficult to measure. **Findings:** The paper focuses on important methodological considerations like research problem formulation, research questions, and interview question design, giving new researchers a basic understanding of how Creswell and Poth (2018) and Tracy (2020) noted to create a rigorous qualitative proposal. **Conclusions:** Rather than presenting an empirical study, this paper serves as a methodological guide, offering a structured framework for conducting qualitative research and ensuring methodological rigor in generating meaningful insights. **Recommendations:** It aims to equip early-stage researchers with the necessary skills to navigate qualitative inquiry effectively through interview-based approaches.

Keywords: Qualitative Proposal, Novice Qualitative Researchers, Central Question, Research Questions, Interview Questions.

إجراء البحث النوعي للمبتدئين: الخطوات الأساسية والقضايا ذات الصلة

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الملخص: الهدف: يقدم هذا البحث دليلًا إرشاديًا للباحثين المبتدئين في صياغة مقترح بحث نوعي أساسي. يستعرض الأسباب الجوهرية لإجراء البحوث النوعية، والمفاهيم المحورية، والمسار الأساسي لإعداد مقترح بحثي قابل للتطبيق، متضمنًا: المشكلة البحثية، والسؤال البحثي الرئيسي، والأسئلة البحثية الفرعية، وما يقابلها من أسئلة مقابلة. **المنهجية:** تم توضيح الخطوات الأساسية لإعداد المقترح البحثي مدعومةً بجداول ورسوم بيانية. وتم اختيار المنهج النوعي - وفقاً لكريسويل وبوث (2018) وتراسي (2020) - نظراً لفاعليته في تحليل الظواهر الاجتماعية المعقدة. حيث تمكن المناهج النوعية من استيعاب تعقيدات وتنوع التجارب الإنسانية، خاصة عند دراسة الدوافع، والمعتقدات، والعمليات المعقدة التي يصعب قياسها كمياً. **النتائج:** ركزت الدراسة على الجوانب المنهجية الحاسمة مثل: صياغة المشكلة البحثية، وصياغة الأسئلة البحثية، وتصميم أسئلة المقابلات، مما وفر للباحثين المبتدئين إطاراً واضحاً لإعداد مقترح بحثي نوعي دقيق. **الاستنتاجات:** بدلاً من أن تكون دراسة ميدانية، قدمت هذه الورقة البحثية دليلاً منهجياً شاملاً يتضمن إطاراً منظماً لإجراء البحوث النوعية مع ضمان الدقة المنهجية في توليد نتائج ذات دلالة علمية. **التوصيات:** تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تمكين الباحثين الناشئين من المهارات الضرورية للتعامل مع المنهج النوعي بكفاءة، مع التركيز على أدوات جمع البيانات القائمة على المقابلات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مقترح بحث نوعي، باحثون مبتدئون، السؤال المحوري، الأسئلة البحثية، أسئلة المقابلة.

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Introduction

Qualitative research methods have gained popularity in all broad fields and not exclusively in the academic world. Researchers have shown a growing interest in exploring and understanding many human issues through a qualitative lens. Thus, fundamental qualitative research skills are seen as critical in preparing novice qualitative researchers with the necessary know-how in collecting and handling qualitative field data. Among the known issues for novice researchers is their readiness to conduct the field study and the need for basic fundamental knowledge, guides and skills in executing the fieldwork rigorously. This article, lies in its simplicity of sharing basic qualitative concepts and skills. Such skills are critical, thus requiring proper guidance in producing trustworthy findings. The article intends to discuss the basic fundamental concepts and skills or how qualitative works in practice by focusing on interviews to explore the views, experiences, beliefs, and motivations of individual participants.In recent years, qualitative research has been increasingly recognized as a powerful approach for investigating complex social, cultural, and behavioral phenomena, providing rich, in-depth insights that quantitative methods may not capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Unlike numerical data-driven approaches, qualitative research allows the exploration of meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences within their natural contexts, making it particularly valuable in fields such as education, psychology, sociology, and healthcare (Tracy, 2024). However, novice researchers often struggle with methodological challenges, including developing research questions, selecting appropriate data collection techniques, and ensuring the credibility and rigor of their findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Addressing these challenges requires a strong foundation in qualitative methodologies and an understanding of key research skills, such as reflexivity, ethical considerations, and data interpretation (Patton, 2015). This article, therefore, aims to bridge this gap by offering a structured and accessible guide for beginners in qualitative research, focusing specifically on interview-based inquiry. By providing a clear framework for designing and conducting qualitative studies, this work seeks to equip novice researchers with the necessary tools to produce methodologically sound and meaningful research contribution.

Statement of the Problem

Qualitative research is an evolving field that continuously adapts to new methodological advancements and interpretative approaches (Silverman, 2020). While theoretical frameworks provide a foundation, novice researchers often struggle with effectively implementing these frameworks due to a lack of practical experience and methodological training (Smith, 2021). Recent studies emphasize that qualitative research is not merely theoretical but an iterative process requiring hands-on experience and critical reflection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, contemporary discussions highlight the challenges faced by novice researchers in translating methodologies such as phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography into practice during data collection and analysis (Tracy, 2020). Reflexivity and bias management remain central concerns in qualitative research, as limited exposure to these concepts can lead to unintentional biases and flawed data interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 2019).

The analytical phase of qualitative research necessitates critical thinking, methodological rigor, and the application of technological tools such as NVivo and MAXQDA, which facilitate systematic data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and informed consent, remain crucial aspects, and recent discussions highlight that inadequate training can compromise research integrity (Flick, 2022). The skills gap among novice qualitative researchers continues to be a pressing issue, necessitating targeted interventions to enhance methodological competence and ensure the quality of qualitative contributions (Given, 2020). By integrating these updated references, we have addressed the reviewer's concern and ensured that our discussion reflects the latest academic discourse in qualitative research methodology.

Decision Matters: Why Embark on a Qualitative Research Project?

The decision to conduct qualitative research, bearing in mind that methodologically neither the qualitative nor the quantitative method is intrinsically better or superior, depends on how the research problem is being posed. It requires fundamental knowledge, especially upon the notion of what works in finding answers to the what, how, and why questions of a selected phenomenon. A researcher must justify and decide as to why a qualitative perspective is needed in light of the issue and the research questions. As an example, a case study may be seen as an appropriate research strategy for providing the best qualitative information in explaining the issue. According to Yin (1994, 9), a case study should ask how or why certain questions come up in the context of a current event that the researcher has little to no control over. According to a previous qualitative study by the author, determining the reasoning and methods behind a group of students' responses to different comprehension questions can be challenging and often requires significant time. Thus, for the study, the students were immediately interviewed after completing a comprehension test. The author believed the interview was the best method for understanding the reasoning processes used by the students in answering the comprehension questions, with the assumption that the how and why the information was still fresh in the informants' minds. All of the interviews were cautiously done, thus avoiding the likelihood of assisting the informants with their reasoning processes and maintaining the need to gather quality information. In light of the above situation, basic training in handling a fruitful interview is essential. To guarantee that the informants provide high-quality information, it would be necessary to comprehend flexible and adaptive interviewing techniques. The technique employed for the authors above case is reflective of the approach described by Robson (1993), Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011), and Yin (2014) and is deemed as anticipative of any nonverbal cues that may provide information on the informants' thoughts and perceptions relatable to each individual's personality. Essentially, an interview session must allow the collection of essential information in a friendly and non-intimidating atmosphere (Robson,1993).

In this context, the author has observed novice researchers "putting the cart before the horse" in the planning of the research method. It is not the choice of whether to conduct the research quantitatively or qualitatively but rather the perspective of the researchers in viewing the selected issue or phenomenon and later selecting the best data-collecting method for each research question. In some cases, a mixed-method research design would seem appropriate to understand the phenomenon. If the quantified survey data provides answers to the "what" aspect or the extent of the phenomenon, then the qualitative aspect provides a deeper understanding of the intricate and deeper questions of how and why a group of teenagers is involved in drug abuse, their experiences, and the challenges they faced. The background of the issue(s), later reflected in several research questions and the kind of data needed to provide information to best explain the issue(s), would certainly colour the research methodology.

In many cases, the author would recommend researchers first clear the air and identify whether the phenomenon is seen as rather new or less known in the literature review. If the related theories of the phenomenon are lacking – or, in other words, less is known of the phenomenon – researchers would need to do an initial literature review about the selected phenomenon, and as more inputs are gathered

from the collected qualitative data, the researchers need to update the literature relevant to the inputs. More often than not, it is observed that the researchers changed or adjusted the research questions due to new findings in the literature that have shaped the perspectives of the researchers in viewing the phenomenon. Significantly, researchers need to immerse themselves as much as possible by collecting preliminary information on the informants' experiences, beliefs, behaviours, and attitudes towards the phenomenon through field observations such as interviews and engaging themselves with the informants in the field.

This dual concurrent preliminary data collecting activities of the contextualized reality of the phenomenon and the corresponding new development in the literature would allow better perspectives in shaping the research questions. Thus, the iterative nature of the qualitative research process would allow more meaningful findings in explaining the phenomenon under study (see Figure 1)

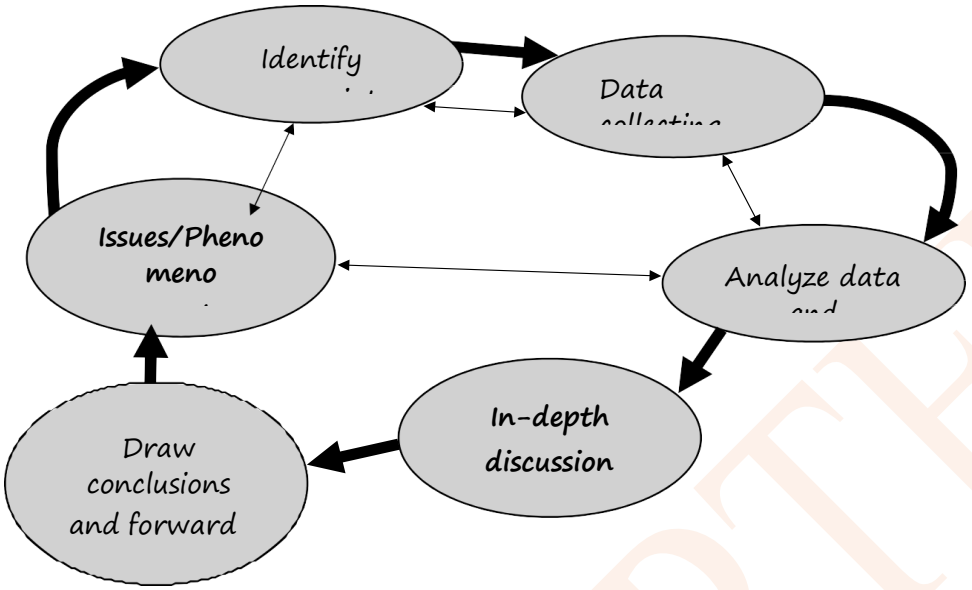

Figure (1): The Process Flow of Qualitative Research.

Figure 1 simplifies the basic cyclic nature of conducting qualitative research in an academic setting. The researchers need to identify and understand the topic to be studied and its underlying issues and problems. Once a draft of the phenomenon is converted into a simplified central research question (CRQ), the relevant research questions (RQs), and the types of data to be gathered for each RQ, the researchers may pilot them in the field. More often than not, there will be modifications to the issues,

CRQ, RQs, and the data-collecting tools are based on the inputs from the piloting activities. In some cases, as shown by the thin arrows, there would be several piloting activities to ensure the robustness of the data-collecting instrument, such as the interview questions, participant observation procedures, and the number of informants or respondents to be sampled. There could be several drafts before a decision is made as to the best research design for the phenomenon to be studied.

At the crux of the process flow in Table 1.2 is the notion of finding the best research design or good fit of each RQ with the type of data that can provide the richest possible source of information in explaining the phenomenon as stated by the RQs. This would entail, for example, a purposive or snowball sampling technique that would influence the best settings possible, such as events and related activities in the quest to ensure the best and richest data possible in explaining the phenomenon. Qualitative research entails a detailed examination of non-numerical data, which requires researchers to engage in careful reflection when selecting an appropriate research design. This entails understanding the basic fundamental qualitative research design. McCaslin and Scott (2003) suggested the basic five-question method in framing the intended qualitative inquiry, as explained in table 1:

Table (1): Fundamental Differences between Qualitative and Quantitative Research.

Fundamental Characteristics	Quantitative Research	Qualitative Research
Scope of study	Narrow and specific inquiry or hypothesis	Generalized and broadly observed phenomenon
Data category	Data-orientated towards quantification and numeric	Narration based reports leading towards in depth comprehension of the issue
Data collection techniques	Pre formulated and rigidly structured as seen in questionnaires	Adaptive inquiry tools such as in-depth interviews, group discussions, and documents
Interpretation paradigm	Descriptive and inferential statistical- based perspectives	Discovering underlying concepts or themes to be weaved into comprehensible concepts/models
Primary strength	Large sampling lead towards statistical validity that is reflective of the population	Saturated and in-depth narration describing the notions of the informants
Main weakness	The possibility of being superficial in generalizing the thoughts of the respondents to the population	Too specific to the case studied that it is not generalizable to the population

Source: Mark L. McCaslin and Karen Wilson Scott (2003).

Table 1 serves as a guide in building the skills to reflect upon the key fundamental questions out of the research problems aimed for the research and the corresponding qualitative research traditions.

In short, a research question could be seen from any of the five traditions as long as it is justified as the best suitable perspective in light of the issues and background of the research problems. Thus, an issue can be investigated using a combination of the five traditions. In the table below, Ledgerwood and White (2006) provided a convincing comparison of the key distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research instruments. The unique approaches that each method takes to data analysis and interpretation are highlighted in this comparison.

Table (2): Key Distinctions Between Qualitative and Quantitative Research Tools.

Method Matrix	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
Objective	To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and behaviors of consumers.	To quantify the extent and magnitude of the attitudes
Confidence level	Investigative and anecdotal.	Conclusive, with a specific level of certainty
Techniques	Semi-organized or unstructured	Structured
Tools	Mystery shoppers, focus groups, and in-depth interviews	Includes both simple and complex surveys, as well as database analysis techniques such as cross-tabulation.
Participants	Small and homogeneous groups	Samples that accurately reflect the population statistically
Results	Descriptions and words	Results that were coded and assembled into statistics
Training and preparation	Recognizing the study's goals	Ensures consistency and precision in question design, often utilizing computer-based analysis.
Strengths	Thorough investigation of the issues. improved comprehension of the underlying behaviors. Usually, staff can implement	Conclusively; the general public can be expected to benefit from its findings. Better for expensive investments since it gauges the intensity and regularity of behaviors
Weaknesses	Subjective; research cannot be extrapolated to the population; bias may be introduced in the execution and analysis of results;	Questionnaire design may introduce bias, and the process can be both costly and time-consuming. It is typically conducted by external marketing research firms.

Table 2 summarizes the fundamental methodological differences between qualitative and quantitative research viewed from the objective, confidence level, techniques, tools, participants, results, training and planning, strengths, and weaknesses. In the case of results, quantitative research expresses its results in terms of statistical inputs rather than thick descriptions of findings in qualitative dimension. In terms of sampling the respondents or participants, quantitative research seeks statistical representation as opposed to specified targeted small numbers of informants through non-probability purposive or snowball.

Sampling techniques. In qualitative research, researchers are essential in both gathering and interpreting data provided by informants. This notion is known as “researcher as research instrument” and if not addressed properly, it can be a threat to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research Itself, such as researcher biases in preparing and defending the quality and integrity of the instrument and thus risking the quality of the research project. Biases can be in the form of the state of mind of the researcher, data-collecting skills and proper preparation, as well as the degree of the researcher’s affinity with the targeted group under study (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 368; Marshall and Rossman 1995, 59–65).

Let The Journey Begin:

Step 1: Identifying a Research Problem

The first step in identifying a research problem requires the researcher to reflect on the phenomenon to be studied. A problem could be based on personal experiences, experiences shared by others or previous studies highlighting the need to investigate further the results or findings from the qualitative perspective. In a way, if little is known of a phenomenon, for example, its underlying characteristics, even after a rigorous literature search or review of the published or unpublished databases was done, then it is a good start for an exploration of the underlying characteristics of a phenomenon. Significantly, if the intent is to understand and probe deeper into the perspectives of the informants and explore the related meaning given to the phenomenon, then qualitative design is seen as appropriate.

A researcher may begin reflecting on a phenomenon of interest by finding the answers to several basic questions, such as:

– What is the issue to be addressed? That would essentially help the researcher to look into the phenomenon more objectively.

– What are the situational catalysts that would require the study to be done? That would assist the researcher in identifying the occurrence of the phenomenon in a real-life scenario either in individuals or society.

– What is the underlying concern to be addressed through the study? That would require the researcher to identify the impact of the phenomenon and its investigation.

– What solutions could the study offer? That would outline the possible findings, implications, and significance of the study.

Hence, as an example, in an issue involving the growing numbers of adolescent girls participating in cigarette smoking activities in an urban school, the reflection could be observed as follows.

– The issue to be addressed is the growing number of adolescent girls participating in cigarette smoking.

– The situational catalyst would be statistical data that indicates the growing number of smokers amongst adolescent girls.

– If the phenomenon is not investigated, it may reflect or influence society’s overall health outlook, or it may affect social and cultural harmony as well as be perceived as a behavior that may be against certain religious tenets.

– The study may help develop an understanding of why adolescent girls were involved in the activity, thus allowing for a list of mitigating and controlling actions to be done to curb the situation.

Thus, upon reflection, the researcher would have gained a powerful foundation of the research problem, which in turn would be a guiding principle of all the actions taken in the course of the investigation.

Remember, a research problem should not be confused with a research topic. Throughout the authors’ involvement with budding qualitative researchers, they often perceive that the two – the research problem and the research topic – are interchangeably used, but this is not the case. A research topic is the general subject matter addressed in a study. Using the above scenario, the research *topic* may be adolescent girls’ health, but the research *problem* is a more specified issue being addressed by the study. In this case, it is the smoking habits of the adolescent girls.

Step 2: Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Once the fundamental basis of the need to conduct qualitative research is justified, a purpose statement, written as an open-ended statement capturing information about the phenomenon, is required. A good purpose statement should state the major focus of the research

study, while a good qualitative purpose statement should include the intent of the study, a central phenomenon to be investigated, the participants or informants involved, and the research site.

For example, relevant to the case above, the purpose statement could be written as "The aim of this study is to investigate teachers' views on smoking amongst female students in three selected secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur".

Writing good qualitative research questions requires proper guidelines. A researcher would like to capture rich information from the participants or informants (termed *emic,* or data from participants' words), as well as data from previous research studies or literature (or *etic*, outside the perspective of the observer).

Let us say that a selected topic has little theoretical and conceptual content attached to it, which requires the researcher to focus on the generated themes or categories of ideas from the participants. A researcher would want to capture as much information as possible throughout the investigation, and a "backbone" question – also known as a central research question (CRQ) – is needed to steer the course of the research question. A reasonable CRQ requires key information such as the key phenomenon to be investigated, the targeted research site, and participants or informants. Once a CRQ is established, it will act as a canopy or an umbrella from which several research questions (RQs) will emanate, providing specific questions to be studied in light of the research problem. In a nutshell, the research questions should address several questions that, once executed, would provide rich data for the CRQ.

Figure 2(see below) illustrates the connection between the CRQ and RQs. The good fit between the CRQ and RQs reflects the idea that the RQs are written and should be able to generate the necessary information or data in explaining the CRQ, which in turn should be able to explain the issue out of the observed phenomenon as outlined in the research problem. In a nutshell, the concisely written and adequate RQs act as the middle agent in representing the research problems. The RQs must be adequate, credible, and reasonable enough to generate valid accounts of the phenomenon. Additionally, the RQs should capture the essence of the phenomenon as represented in the CRQ.

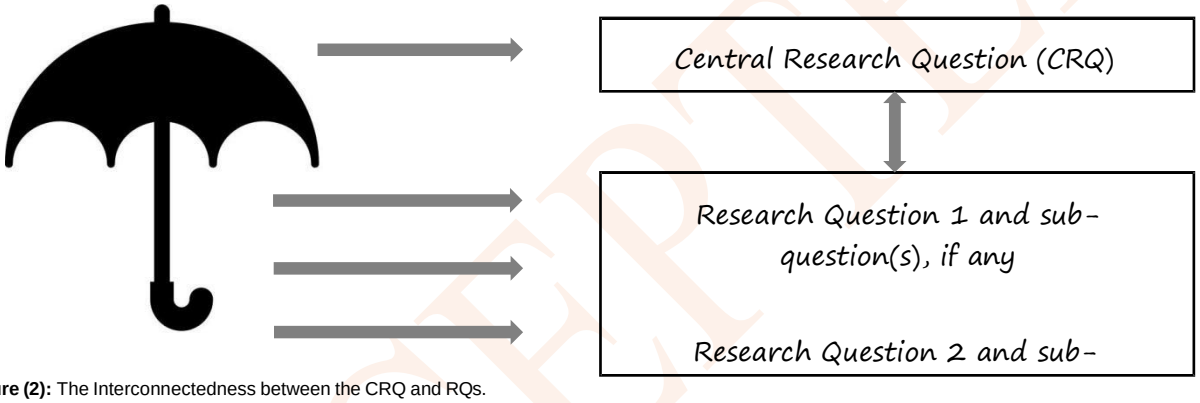

Figure (2): The Interconnectedness between the CRQ and RQs.

Step 3: Generating Interview Questions

The process of generating the interview questions is recursive. Each research question must be represented by adequate interview questions. More often than not, novice researchers are clueless as to how many interview questions would be enough for each research question. For example, in light of conducting research using semi-structured interview questions, they should be able to trigger the conversation and capture the information about the phenomenon. It is important to remember that the semi-structured interview questions are the main guiding questions, and subsequent probing questions would depend on the oral responses of the informants and the probing skills of the researchers in conducting the interview.

As a rule of thumb, when the researcher has reached a saturation point for an interview question, whereby no more information can be gathered or the informant has no more information to be shared, the researcher should proceed to the next question. The flow of asking the interview questions may not be as orderly as desired by the researcher.

The researcher must know and be aware of what kind of information is shared and the adequacy of the information, and he or she should adjust the ordering of the interview questions based on the context and flow of the interview. Bear in mind that an interview is a conversation with a purpose, and it should be in a natural yet relaxed setting. Interviewing in a stressful setting may make the informant uneasy, thus making it more difficult to elicit information.

There is no precise rule as to the number of interview questions for each of the research questions. It is generally between three and five questions, and the number must be judged adequate to generate the information needed to explain the phenomenon.

Interview questions can be categorised into four basic dimensions; **f**acts, **a**ttitudes, **b**eliefs, and **b**ehaviours (FABB). FABB questions serve as a guide in generating the interview questions. In many cases, the Interview Questions (IQs) or even the RQs were modified after piloting the interview questions. These inevitable changes in constructing valuable qualitative work are part and parcel of the recursive nature of qualitative research and are very much related to the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. It is crucial at this juncture to understand the notion of behaviours. It should also be thought of as processes thus related to the "how" dimension of the phenomenon.

The following are examples of the FABB types of IQs.

Table (3): Types of FABB and Corresponding Interview Questions.

Types of Question	Examples of Interview Questions
Facts	– How many cigarettes do you smoke a day? – Are you involved in the activity? How and why?
Attitudes	– How do you handle mistakes? – How do you handle negative comments by your superior?

	– When faced with a difficult task, how do you react to it?
Beliefs	– How do you define justice in your organization? – Is trustworthiness importance in your organization? Why?
Behaviours	– How do you handle stress? – What obstacles did you face, and how did you overcome them? – How did you find the tasks assigned to you?
	– How do you manage your time?

Table 4 (below) shows an example of the interconnectednesscum-good fit amongst the CRQ, RQs, and IQs. The IQs have yet to be piloted, and changes may occur to some of the RQs, IQs, or even the CRQ. In some cases, the researchers may change his or her minds on the topic after the piloting activities due to feedback received from the field. Again, adjusting and refining the CRQ, RQs, and IQs are important activities that would add rigour to the data.

Table (4): Central Research Question, Research Questions, and Interview Questions.

Central Research Question (CRQ)	Research Questions/ Subquestions (RQs/SQs)	Interview Questions (IQs)
What does smoking cigarettes means to addicted female smokers in three selected secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur?	How do the addicted female students define smoking?	– How long have you been smoking cigarettes? – Do you remember why you started smoking? – How often do you smoke? Any specific brand? Why? – How do you feel about your addiction/smoking habit? – How do you feel if you have not had a cigarette for a period of time? Why? – What is smoking to you, then?
	1. What are contributing factors leading to the addictive smoking activities? 2.1 What kind of settings lead to the smoking activities?	– What are the reasons that have triggered you to smoke and later become addicted to it? – Are you smoking alone or socially? Why? – What sort of circumstances trigger you to smoke? – Are there any foods and beverages consumed while smoke? Why? – Are you able to smoke at home? Why or why not? – Are your parents aware of your smoking?
	2. To what extent have the smoking activities affected their health? 2.1Have there been attempts to quit smoking?	– How is your health in relation to this addictive activity? – Do you ever plan to quit smoking?

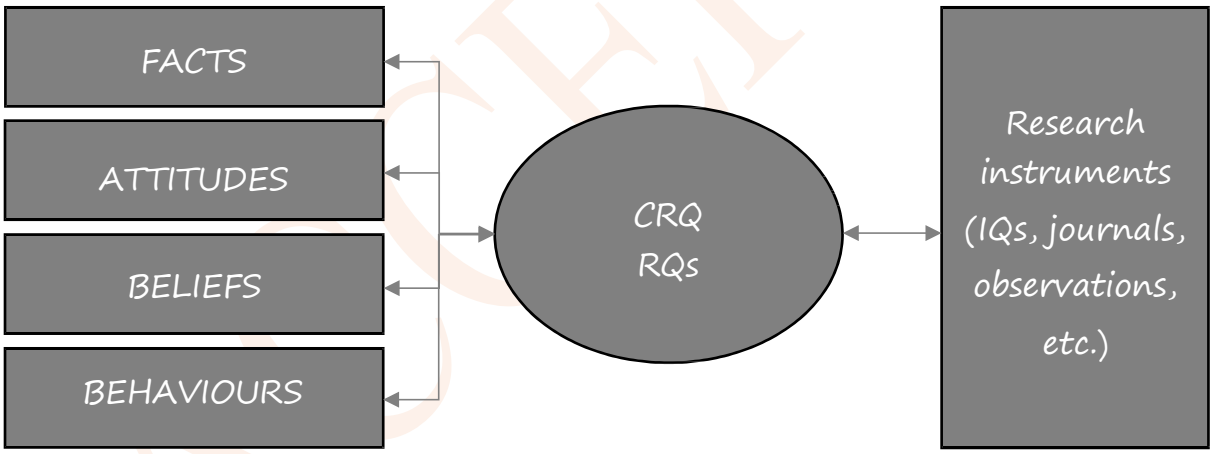

Figure (3): An Overview of Facts, Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviours (FABB) in Guiding the Formation of CRQs and RQs.

In a nutshell, researchers must prepare the right kind of instrument for each of the research questions and conduct a pilot study to test the rigour of the IQs in generating rich information that would explain the RQs and the CRQ. The FABB, as in Figure 3, is a guiding tool to trigger more ideas as well as evaluate the quality of the interview questions in eliciting in-depth information in explaining the phenomenon. In this context, there is an element of iteration from drafting, piloting, and redrafting to finalising the research tools or instruments.

Summary of All Steps

The need to see the good fit factor across the five constructs (see Figure 4 below) is paramount in ensuring credible findings. The students must be able to see a helicopter view (see Figure 3 above) of the entire research. This would avoid being carried away or derailed in the process of understanding the objectives of the research and collecting the necessary data seen fit for the phenomenon. It is common amongst novice researchers to change the research topics and purposes after piloting activities or preliminary engagement with the informants in the course of building the instruments in the field. Again, it must be remembered that the purpose is to explore, realize, and explain a central process and not just report a consensus of the phenomenon. Thus, changing the topic or issue would still require them to maintain the good fit of the five basic constructs, as illustrated in the figure 4:

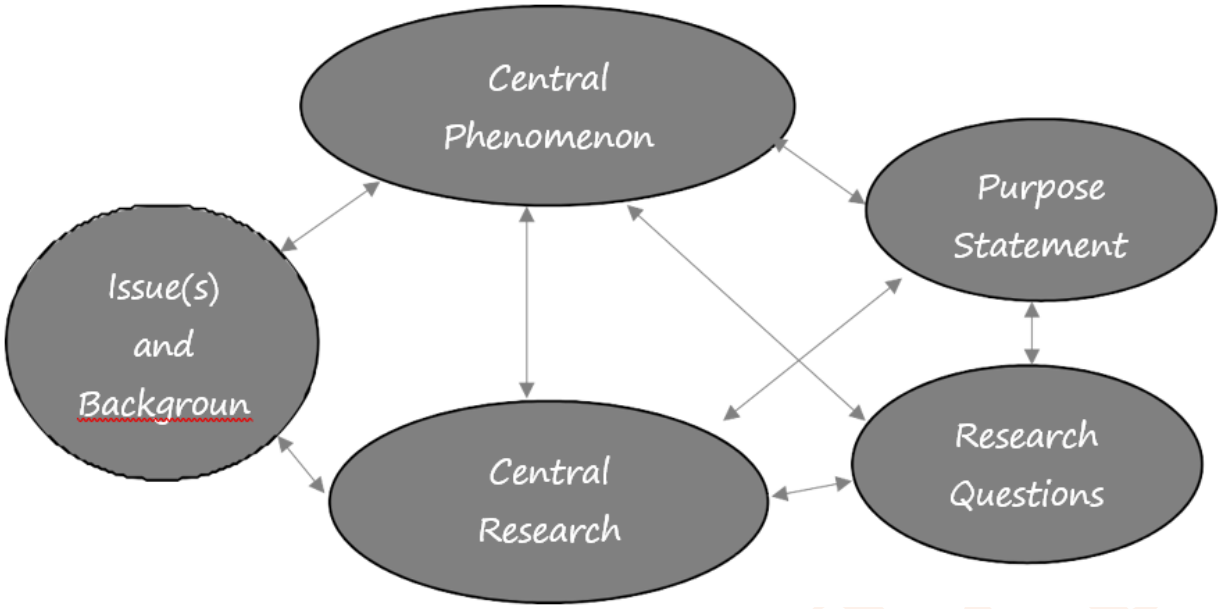

Figure (4): Maintaining the Good Fit of Five Fundamental Constructs in Qualitative Research.

In Figure 4, the central phenomenon comprises the statement of purpose and its corresponding background of the problem, purpose statement, CRQ and RQs. The arrows show the interconnectedness of the contents of the four blue ovals. In a sense, the central phenomenon must be represented clearly under the heading of "Background of the Problem" and should be written in the form of the Central Research Question (CRQ). A CRQ must be represented by the purpose statement of the entire study and translated into several RQs seen as crucial in seeking the proper information to explain the phenomenon. In general, there should be a good fit across the five blue ovals before embarking on the research activities. Here are some examples of the central phenomenon:

– cultural shock amongst international students at IIUM (concept); and
– the process of understanding and using the Malay language amongst new international undergraduate students (process),

What is the purpose of research? It is a statement of an overall focus and direction of the concept, such as to explore the experiences of cigarette smoking amongst female students in a private secondary school in Kuala Lumpur.

The central question (CQ), or central research question (CRQ), as used by the author intends to open the corridors for the informants to share their perspectives and not focus purely on the researchers' perspectives. So, it is always written as generally as possible to capture the essence of conducting the study. Writing a good CQ would require three basic elements: the central phenomenon, the participants/informants, and the research site (Creswell, 2012).

The CQ/CRQ may be supported by several issues and procedural sub-questions. Normally, the subquestions would focus on specific issues and procedural matters. As an example of a CQ/ CRQ and its subquestions on a particular issue:

What is the examination for primary school pupils in a private tuition centre in Kuala Lumpur? (CQ/CRQ)

– What is private tuition to the pupils? (subquestion)
– How do the pupils relate tuition to academic success? (subquestion)
– How do the pupils cope with the private tutors? (subquestion)
– What is the examination for the pupils' family? (subquestion)

Thus, the guiding principle of conducting qualitative research should take into account the fundamental interconnectedness or good fit of the above five basic constructs (figure 4).

The following table 5 transforms the constructs in Figure 4 into practical application, which is based on a proposed qualitative project by one of the postgraduate students supervised by the author many years ago.

Table (5): An Example of a Summary Flow Process from Issue to IQs.

Teachers' Perceptions on Attitudes and Motivation toward Learning the English Language among Students from Islamic Education System Background					
ISSUE	**Central Phenomenon**	**Purpose Statement**	**Central Research Question (CRQ)**	**Research Questions (Subquestions)**	**Interview Questions (IQS)**
Attitudes and Motivation	The attitudes and motivation of students from Islamic education system background toward learning English as a second language.	The purpose of this qualitative study will be to explore the attitudes and motivation of students from Islamic background from the perspectives of 3 English language teachers at a tertiary institution.	What are the perceptions of English teachers toward attitudes and motivation in learning English as a second language among students from Islamic education background?	1. What are the teachers' understandings of 'attitude' in learning English as a second language among students from Islamic education background? 2. What are the teachers' understandings of 'motivation' in learning English as a second language among students from Islamic background? 3. How do the teachers	1. What does 'attitude' in the context of learning an L2 mean to you? 2. Generally, what are your students' attitudes toward learning English? 3. Do you think that your students like English lessons? Why? 4. Do they work hard in English lessons? 5. How do they view the English language? 6. What does 'motivation' in the context of learning

				manage students' attitudes and motivation?	an L2 mean to you? 7. Do you think that your students are motivated to learn English? Why? 8. What motivates students to learn English? 9. How do you manage / handle students' attitudes and motivation?

Source: Project Report by Hazlina Abdullah for Advanced Qualitative Research Methods Course (EDF 7810), Kulliyyah of Education, IIUM).

Table 5 consists of six columns comprising the five constructs discussed and the relevant corresponding interview questions (IQ) for each of the RQs. The order of the six columns is from the general issue on the far left to the specific IQ on the far right. The table would allow the researchers to plot and evaluate whether there is a good fit between the five major constructs and the relevant IQs. This simple flow-process table acts as a summary of the research proposal. An additional column on Methods of Collecting Qualitative Data can be inserted to the right of the RQs column. Again, each RQ may need one or more methods of qualitative data collection such as individual interviews, focus groups, or observations. Yet the researchers must always be critical as to what types of data seem suitable enough to explain to each of the RQs.

In the case of table 5, constructing IQs (Interview Questions) for each RQ (Research Question) should consider the following three guidelines:

– The IQs should be central questions that effectively extract the information needed to explain the phenomenon.

– The IQs must be formulated to ensure they are easily understood by informants or respondents.

– The IQs should be appropriately aligned with each RQ to ensure relevance and coherence.

At this juncture all of the IQs are the major guiding questions posed to all of the identified informants. All of the IQs must be asked, and in certain circumstances the researchers may conduct probing questions to elicit further clarification. It is not necessary to write additional probing IQs for each IQ.

Step 4: Piloting the Interview Questions

Novice investigators may face some challenges in conducting an interview. Frequently, questioning may lead to uneasiness or nervous feelings. Probing questions may feel awkward and intrusive on private matters. Piloting the interview would be a good avenue to develop the researcher's confidence and experience with the interviewees or informants. Essentially, piloting the designed interview questions can be seen as a trial run in checking the feasibility of the IQs, as well as the RQs, and is considered crucial because it gives a valued perception for the researchers in improving the quality of the IQs. Besides that, conducting a pilot interview can provide invaluable information as to the behaviours, norms, and cultures of targeted informants.

Doing a pilot study may lead to the refinement of interview questions, an orientation towards facing informants, and the minimising of any discomfort or pain in conducting the interview. Piloting may also highlight certain threats to the data-collecting activities such as reluctance and discomfort towards the IQs, the suitability of the IQs language level, and the potential of the IQs in fulfilling the needs of the RQs.

After conducting a pilot interview, the researcher may remove, revise, or add interview items as needed to enhance the interview process and improve its effectiveness in gathering data.Difficult or ambiguous questions must be improved to ensure comprehensibility, whilst in some cases the researchers may need to re-pilot the IQs to ensure that they are credible enough before collecting the real data. Information from the piloting activity may also be valuable towards adjusting or improving the RQs. The progressive nature of qualitative research is open to the idea that the pilot data can be utilised to provide supportive information for the main study.

Methodology: Real-life application and relevance

1. This fundamental guide for novice researchers is based on many years on applied taught courses for PhD students in IIUM (EDF 8810 Advanced Qualitative Research Methodology) and MGT 7312, Doctorate Business Administration (Qualitative and Case Research Methodologies) in IIUM, at International Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) (PED 8103 Advanced Qualitative Research Methods) and series of applied workshops such as in Malaysia, Palestine, Uganda.
2. Many PhD and Masters students, local and international, have graduated using the given guide.
3. A book published 'Sheikh Ahmad, Ismail' Partridge Publishing, Singapore (2017). Doing Qualitative Research for Beginners: from Theory to Practice. ISBN: 9781543742046

Results

The article is written as a fundamental guide for qualitative novice researchers and many Masters and PhD theses have utilized the guide. Thus, it is more than 'academic' but applied in nature/ real-world research. Applying the guide in public research grants in Malaysia and training research officers in many government and private agencies in Malaysia.

Discussion

Iterative improvement of research instruments is crucial for novice qualitative researchers to prevent biases and ensure the validity and reliability of study findings.

1. Improving the Validity of the Instrument: Iterative refining guarantees that instruments reflect the richness and depth of participants' experiences while also closely aligning with study aims. Creswell (2013) highlighted that by reducing ambiguity and misinterpretation, well-designed instruments enhance the quality of data collected.
2. Recognizing and Minimizing Prejudice biases, such as confirmation bias or leading questions, might unintentionally impact replies. Braun and Clarke (2019) underlined that beginner researchers are particularly prone to introducing bias through poorly crafted questions. By identifying and eliminating such problems, iterative fine-tuning guarantees objectivity in data collection.
3. Improving Clarity and Cultural Sensitivity Instruments frequently need to be modified to accommodate a variety of participant groups. According to Finlay (2002), reflexivity—critical self-awareness of the researcher's role—can help identify and address culturally

insensitive or unclear questions during the refinement process.

4. Addressing Contextual Challenges Initial field tests or pilot studies often reveal unforeseen challenges, such as participants struggling with certain terminologies or concepts. Tracy (2020) argued that iterative adjustments allow researchers to adapt their instruments to real-world complexities, ensuring they remain contextually relevant and effective.
5. Minimizing Researcher Bias through Reflexivity According to Finlay (2002), reflexivity is essential to qualitative research. By iteratively refining instruments, novice researchers can critically examine how their positionality and assumptions might influence the research process, reducing personal bias.
6. Ensuring Ethical Soundness Ethical risks, such as discomfort caused by poorly phrased questions, can be mitigated through iterative fine-tuning. Creswell (2013) highlighted the importance of piloting instruments to ensure they are ethically appropriate and respectful of participants' experiences.
7. Achieving Richer, More Reliable Data Iterative refinement enhances the depth and quality of data collected. By continuously testing and improving instruments, researchers can ensure they elicit comprehensive and nuanced responses, as recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020).

In summary, this article explores the processes involved in preparing a fundamental qualitative research proposal beginning from a selected issue, central phenomenon, purpose statement, central question (CQ), research questions (RQs), and corresponding interview questions (IQs). The necessary steps are explained, and related examples are attached in the appendixes.

Disclosure data

- **Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate:** This study did not involve the collection of empirical data from human participants; therefore, ethical approval and participant consent were not required. However, all methodological guidelines discussed align with ethical standards in qualitative research recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Tracy (2020).
- **Availability of Data and Materials:** Not applicable. This article is conceptual and methodological, and it does not report or analyze original empirical data.
- **Author Contribution:** The author solely conceived the study, designed the structure, reviewed relevant literature, and wrote the manuscript. All aspects of the work, including conceptualization, analysis, and revision, were carried out by the author.
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