

Research Proposals for Qualitative Social Science

Clare Hinrichs

PSU Graduate School Workshop

14 October 2009

The Problem with Research Proposals....

Many are often little more than “Potemkin villages”....



Special Perils for Qualitative Researchers

- **Own belief:** Research design & planning inimical to “free-spirited, naturalistic” qualitative research
- **Reviewers:** More conversant and comfortable with quantitative approaches
- **Models:** What conventions & standards for qualitative research proposals?

Workshop Objectives

To improve your understanding of:

1. The proposal as an “argument” for your qualitative research design
2. How to approach selected elements of the qualitative research proposal
3. How to anticipate questions about proposal quality and merit
4. Where to find further resources to support proposal development and writing

Overview of the Workshop

- Introduction
- Why research proposal \neq research design
- Qualitative research goals & questions
- Strategic use of “the literature”
- Detail & justification regarding methods
- “Validity” issues
- Q & A

Investigating Opportunities for Qualitative Proposals

- Dig around for background information on prospective funding agencies
 - History of funding qualitative projects?
 - Who is on the selection committee?
- Contact program officer to discuss your idea and approach
- Note specific proposal requirements (sections, format, length, appendices, etc.)

What Does a Research Proposal Need to Do?

It should explain and justify your proposed study to an audience of non-experts on your topic.

The Proposal as an Argument for Your Study

- Logic and rationale for the research are key
- Describing and summarizing all the research steps are not enough!
- Coherence matters— that sections flow logically and reference one another; that it makes sense to a smart, non-expert reader

Yes, Qualitative Research Proposals Have Specific Issues

- Proposal as guide, not blueprint for research (given reactivity and contingency of qualitative approach)
- As the research “instrument,” researcher must then demonstrate their own competence and experience
- Constructive accounting vs confessional excess regarding research relationships

What Any Proposal Reviewer Will Ask About Your Proposal

1. What will we learn as a result of the proposed project that we don't know now?
2. Why is it worth knowing?
3. How will we know that conclusions are valid? (or trustworthy? or plausible?)

Research Design ≠ Research Proposal

Research Design

Research questions as core, connecting to research goals, conceptual framework, methods, and validity. Interactive and evolving. Mostly for you.

Research Proposal

Careful, deliberate sometimes strategic presentation of your research design, including its justification. For instrumentally significant others.

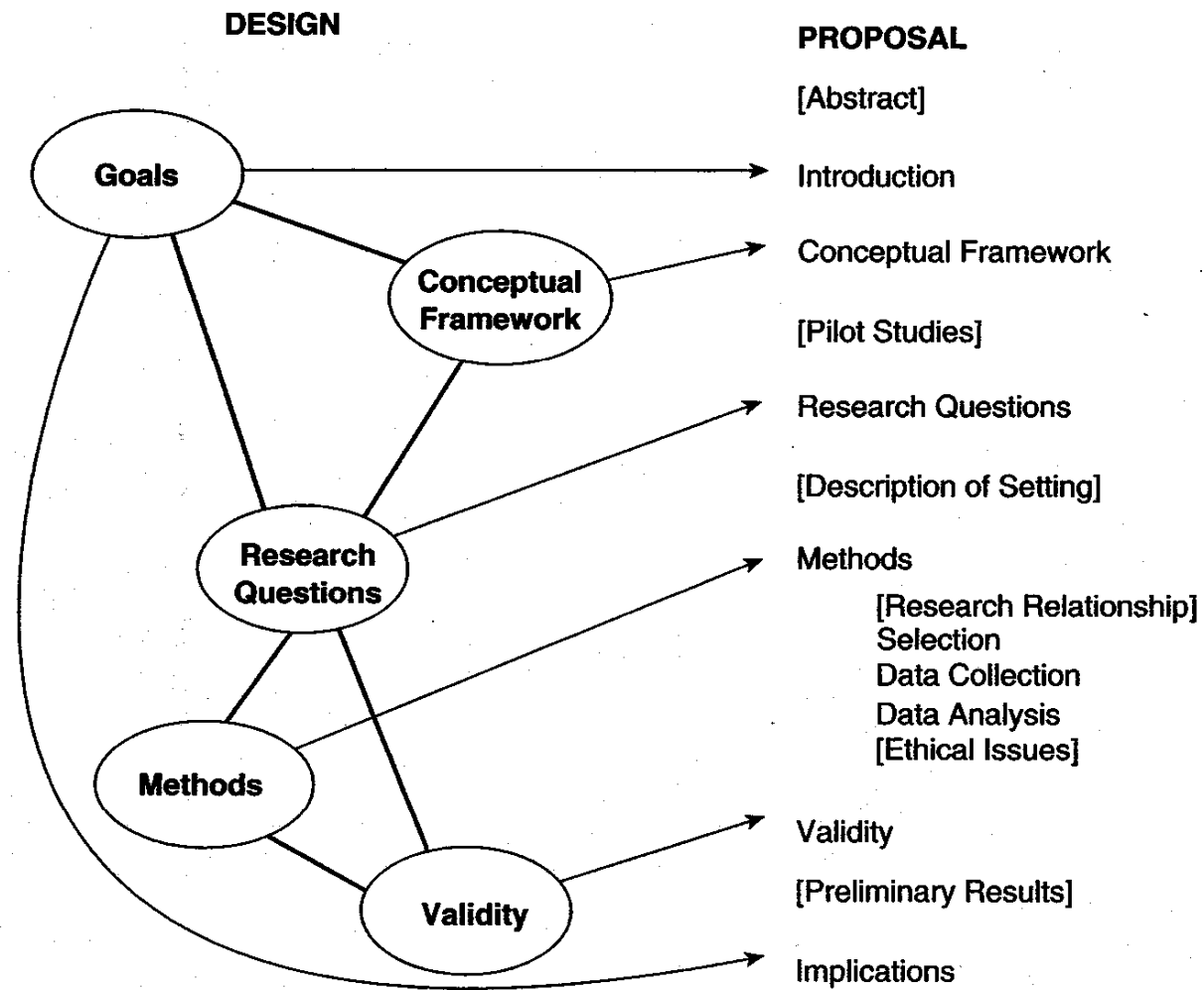


Figure 7.2 Relationship Between Research Design and Proposal Structure

Source: J.A. Maxwell. 2005. Qualitative Research Design. London: Sage. (p.122).

Research Goals

- Include your motives, desires and purposes in doing the study
- May be personal, intellectual, practical
- Can ensure study is non-trivial, worth doing
- May help justify study, suggest possible implications of the research

Qualitative Research Questions

- Explain what study seeks to learn, understand
- Anchor and focus study (especially through links to goals and conceptual framework)
- Drive methodological choices (how you conduct the study, specific techniques and procedures)



Qualitative Research Questions Probe....

- The meaning of events and activities to the people involved in them
- The influence of context on these events and activities
- The detailed process by which events and activities and their outcomes unfold

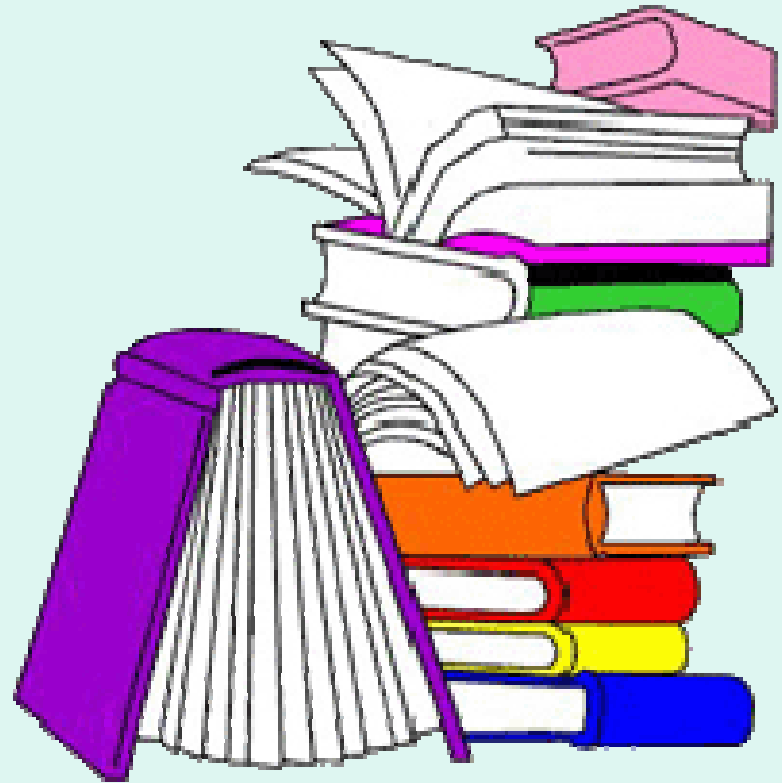
Exercise 1:

Research Goals vs Research Questions

- Write out your responses to **a**, **b**, and **c**.
- Discuss with your neighbor
 - What most distinguishes your research goals and your one research question?
 - How would you use information about your goals and research question to set up the argument in your research proposal?

Getting a Grip on “The Literature”

- Avoid “everything but kitchen sink” approach
- Locate your research in context of existing work on this or similar phenomena
- Scrutinize: How does this support the argument my proposal is making?



Detail and Justification of Methods

- Clarify qualitative terms, but don't be defensive
- Explain particular methodological choices (case study vs comparative historical)
- If certain parts of methods can't be specified yet, explain basis on which you'll make decisions
- Make clear that lack of controls in qualitative research does not mean absence of methods

Methods Section Could Include...

- Description of setting or social context for study
- Evidence of feasibility (access, approval)
- Types of data, how and when collected, how managed
- Specific plans for data analysis (links back to research questions)
- Research relationships and ethical concerns

Exercise 2: Research Methods Section

- Read the Silbey NSF proposal extract.
- Write out your responses to **a** and **b**



Include Attention to “Validity” Concerns

- “All fieldwork done by a single fieldworker invites the question, ‘Why should we believe it?’” (Bosk 1979)
- Boilerplate about “triangulation” or “member checks” is likely insufficient
- Articulate how you will rule out specific plausible alternatives and threats to your interpretations

Plausibility passage (example)

“Although there is never a single, correct account of qualitative data, some accounts are more plausible than others (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). I will adopt three strategies to ensure that my account is plausible. First, I will clearly specify the documents that make up my archive and the persons I interview. This will enable other scholars to challenge my account by finding other documents and interviewing other persons. Second, I will justify each claim that I make by quoting or citing texts and interview transcripts. This will enable other scholars to challenge my specific interpretations by reading the texts and transcripts themselves. Finally, I will develop several alternative accounts of my data and explain why my account is more plausible than the others. I will also justify why I chose a particular group of alternative accounts to compare. These three strategies help ensure the plausibility of my account.”

--from PhD research proposal examining how environmental law frames the controversy over corporate hog production

Some Final Advice

- Start your proposal early
- Show it to colleagues and collect comments
- Present it in a seminar or similar group
- Revise for substance and argument
- Edit and tighten
- Revisit your opening paragraphs to make sure they pack the punch your proposal deserves

As you develop, rework and revise your proposal...

Consider these directions for assembling a new wheelbarrow:

“Make sure all parts are properly in place before tightening.”



How to Create an Appetizing Qualitative Research Proposal

- Leave breadcrumbs.
- Hand out the recipe.
- Allow taste testing.

~Thank you~

Bon Appétit!

