

The Proposal in Qualitative Research¹

by
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The purpose of "qualitative" or "naturalistic" research varies according to the research paradigm, methods, and assumptions. Generally speaking, qualitative researchers attempt to describe and interpret some human phenomenon, often in the words of selected individuals (the informants). These researchers try to be clear about their biases, presuppositions, and interpretations so that others (the stakeholders) can decide what they think about it all.

Unlike conventional, positivist research, there is no single accepted outline for a qualitative research proposal or report (Morse, 1991). The generic outline that follows is suggested as a point of departure for qualitative research proposals, and it applies specifically to the research paradigm and methods that seem most applicable to the study of families and family therapy (e.g., post-positivist, phenomenological clinical observation and long interviews). The outline is intended to serve as a point of departure for researchers, who must decide how to organize their proposals (a) to best communicate their ideas to their intended audiences and (b) to satisfy the demands of the context.

I. Introduction

- A. Begin with something interesting, e.g., a quote or story, to capture the reader's interest.
- B. Introduce your question or curiosity. What is it that you want to know or understand? How did you get interested in the topic? If your question has evolved since you have begun, describe the process.
- C. Tell why there's a need for the study. Cite relevant literature that calls for the need for the research in this area, or demonstrates the lack of attention to the topic. In your own words, describe how you think this study will be useful.
- D. Describe the intended audience for your research (e.g., the public, family therapists).
- E. Describe your research product. What form will the report take (e.g., scholarly manuscript, magazine article for the public, script for a documentary video)?
- F. Conclude the introduction with an overview of your proposal.

II. Research Paradigm

This section should be included in your proposal when you expect to have readers who are not familiar with the naturalistic research paradigm. It may not be necessary in contexts where qualitative research is an accepted form of inquiry.

- A. Use specific language to name and describe your research paradigm (e.g., naturalistic, post-positivist). The term "paradigm" is used here to represent the epistemological, conceptual foundation for qualitative research. See [Guba](#) (1990).
- B. Describe the philosophical correlates of your research paradigm (e.g., phenomenology, hermeneutics).
- C. Cite authors who have defined your research paradigm in the social sciences and suggested its application to your field of study and/or your specific topic of study. See [Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle](#) (1990).
- D. Explain the assumptions of your research paradigm.
 - 1. Broadly speaking, describe what you intend to accomplish through this research (e.g., expanding a knowledge base, generating hypotheses for quantitative research, developing a grounded theory, emancipating informants, establishing the trustworthiness of a theory). See Atkinson and Heath ([1990a](#), [1990b](#)); [Lincoln and Guba](#) (1985).
 - 2. Explain the assumptions about the nature of knowledge and reality that underlie your research paradigm. Discuss how a formal literature review will be used.
 - 3. Describe the major tasks of the researcher in this paradigm of research. Comment on how the tasks differ in conventional social science research.
 - 4. Explain the type of relationship that the researcher has with the informants (e.g., unobtrusive observer, participant observer, collaborator, emancipation).
- E. Suggest the appropriate criteria for evaluating the research findings, research process, and the research report. The criteria should be consistent with your research paradigm and well documented. See [Atkinson, Heath, and Chenail](#) (1991).

III. Research Method

- A. Identify and generally describe your research method (e.g., ethnographic field study, single case study), and your research procedures (e.g., long interviews, observation).
- B. Cite the major authors who have described your research method. See [Lincoln and Guba](#) (1985); [Glaser and Strauss](#) (1967), etc.
- C. Describe what you intend to do in detail, as you begin your study.
 - 1. Explain how you will select informants and gain entry into the research context (if relevant).
 - 2. Describe the procedures you will take to protect the rights of your informants (e.g., informed consent, human subjects' approval, and debriefing).
 - 3. Describe the kind of relationship you intend to have with the informants. Will you be neutral, collaborative, objective?
 - 4. Describe the kind of data you will collect (e.g., field notes from memory, audio tapes, video tapes, transcripts of conversations, examination of existing documents, etc.).
 - 5. Describe your intended data collection procedures. If interviews are to be used, list your question(s) or attach as an appendix. Describe any equipment to be used.

6. Describe the procedures you will use to keep track of the research process. This will become part of your audit trail.
 - a. Process notes: Day to day activities, methodological notes, decision making procedures.
 - b. Materials relating to intentions and reactions: personal notes about motivations, experiences with informants, etc.
 - c. Instrument development information: revisions of interview questions, etc.
 7. Describe your intended data analysis procedures (coding, sorting, etc.)?
 - a. Data reduction: Write-ups of field notes, transcription procedures and conventions, computer programs used, etc.
 - b. Data reconstruction: development of categories, findings, conclusions, connections to existing literature, integration of concepts.
 8. Describe how the research design may evolve as the process unfolds.
 9. Describe how you will organize, format and present your data, interpretations, and conclusions.
 - D. Describe how you will consider and protect "reliability" and "validity." Will you use systematic methods and procedures, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, auditing?
- IV. Preliminary Biases, Suppositions and Hypotheses
- A. Summarize and reference all of the relevant literature that you have reviewed to date.
 - B. Describe how your review of the literature has influenced the way you are approaching the research.
 - C. Discuss how your previous experience with your topic has influenced the way you have conceptualized this research. Summarize relevant personal and professional experiences, if you have not done so in the Introduction.
 - D. Disclose the anticipated findings, your hypotheses and your hunches.
 - E. Describe the procedures you will use to remain "open" to unexpected information (e.g., peer debriefing).
 - F. Discuss the limitations of your study in the context of the limitations of all similar studies.
- V. References and Mini-Bibliography

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¹This proposal was produced in collaboration with Brent J. Atkinson, Ph.D.

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