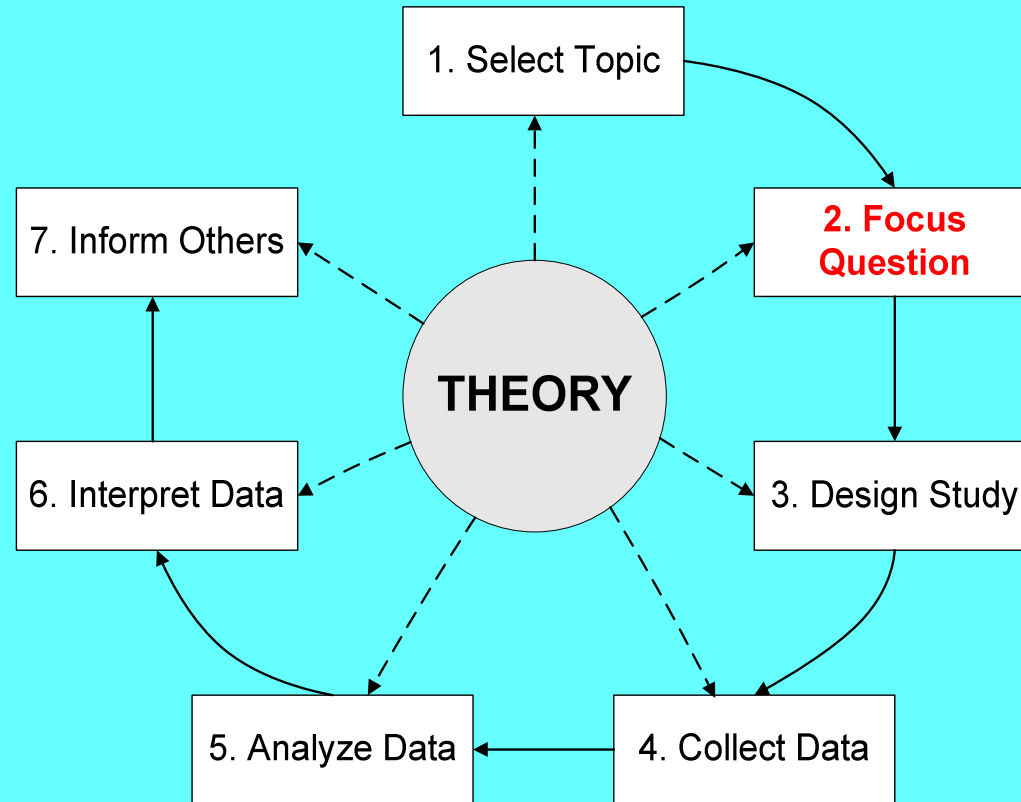


Developing a Research Question

Steps in the Research Process



From W. Lawrence Neuman, 2003
Social Research Methods

What is a Research Question?

A research question is the organizing principle for an individual study. It clarifies exactly what the researcher wants to understand, describe or explain. The methodological approach and design stem directly from the research question.

Characteristics of a Good Research Question

- (1) It elicits an explanation or description, not an answer
- (2) It links constructs and suggests associations or relationships
- (3) It can be addressed with empirical evidence
- (4) It is focused and feasible

Formulating a Research Question

- (1) A research question begins with the literature review
- (2) A creative research question addresses a new topic that is embedded within a body of existing literature
- (3) The question involves reframing the literature in order to establish a context for a study

Focusing a Research Question

Researchers narrow the scope of a research question by:

- (1) Having a clearly defined and specific goal for a study
- (2) Consulting with colleagues and getting feedback
- (3) Linking a question to specific hypotheses or working concepts

Varieties of Quantitative Research Questions

(1) Causal Questions

(2) Predictive Questions

(3) Descriptive Questions
(Identifying factors)

Varieties of Qualitative Research Questions

(1) Contextual Questions

(2) Confirmatory Questions

(3) Exploratory Questions

Examples of Poor Research Questions

Not Empirically Testable; Nonscientific

Should abortion be legal?

Is it right to have capital punishment?

General Topics; Not Research Questions

Treatment of alcohol and drug abuse

Sexuality and aging

Set of Variables; Not Questions

Capital punishment and racial discrimination

Urban decay and gangs

Examples of Poor Research Questions

Too Vague or Ambiguous

Do police affect delinquency?

What can be done to prevent child abuse?

Need to Be More Specific

Has the incidence of child abuse risen?

How does poverty affect children?

What problems do children who grow up in poverty experience that others do not?

Examples of Good Research Questions

Exploratory Questions

Has the incidence of new forms of child abuse appeared in Wisconsin in the past ten years?

Descriptive Questions

Is child abuse, violent or sexual, more common in families that have experienced a divorce than in intact, never-divorced families?

Are the children raised in poverty households more likely to have medical, learning, and social-emotional adjustment difficulties than non-poverty children?

Examples of Good Research Questions

Explanatory Questions

Does the emotional instability created by experiencing a divorce increase the chances that divorced parents will physically abuse their children?

Is a lack of sufficient funds for preventative treatment a major cause of more serious medical problems among children raised in families in poverty?