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A REVIEW OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTION(S)' RELEVANCE

Violeta Janusheva

"St. Kliment Ohridski" University – Bitola
Faculty of Education - Bitola- Bitola
violetajanuseva@gmail.com

Abstract

Given that worldwide the research academic community is largely concentrated on the quantitative and qualitative methodological paradigm, and that the quantitative research is seen as dominant, primarily, due to the hypothesis and various statistical procedures used for data analysis, this paper promotes the qualitative inquiry which largely depends on the research question quality and formulation and aims to draw the researchers' attention to this very significant qualitative research aspect. Thus, the current article is, in fact, a review which indicates the latest qualitative search related to the research question's diverse aspects. At the same time, the present study offers several techniques for effective research question choice and formulation, in order to increase the researchers' awareness that the research question moulds all the qualitative research features and that it should be approached very carefully.

Key words: *qualitative research question(s), significance, techniques*.

1. Introduction

The scientific research is a systematic quest for new and useful information that will enlighten a particular phenomenon, question or problem, thus it is a way of thinking which evolves from the humans' impulse to understand the complexity of the world that surrounds us. In fact, the scientific search is an organized process, which produces knowledge and contributes to the development of the science and society and to the practice improvement as well. Hence, the examination has to make knowledge which will be implementable outside the research context and will have implications on the educational politics' creators.

Opposite to the quantitative research, the qualitative researchers accept that there are many interpretation of the reality, meaning that there are countless truths for this reality, since each person has its own understanding of it. They search for the research question answers, inspecting different natural, multidimensional, and complex environments, and individuals or groups who live in them, accentuating the immense number of different angles to approach a problem. They, also, stress the role of the context, along with the researcher's interpretation of the explored phenomenon. The qualitative groundwork enables the researcher's freedom in each research aspect and its essential feature is the inductive thinking which does not operates with hypothesis, but rather answers a research question through finding patterns and schemes. Each research feature emerges during the course of the research itself and not in advance. It is of a great significance to mention that qualitative researcher collects data through interviews, surveys, observations, documents, textual, audio materials and video materials etc. which means that he does not limit himself to one source of data which is mostly the case in the quantitative research. What is more important, the collected data does not necessarily include

statistic processing (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Nunan, 1992; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Sandelowski, 2000; Berg, 2001; Creswell, 2002; Patton, 2002; Mason, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Dörnyei, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Bryman, 2012; Griffee, 2012). Yet, the qualitative researcher conceptualizes and hypothesizes as well, but these activities occur while he collects and analyzes the data (Gubrium & Holstein, 2014).

As suggested by Janusheva & Pejchinovska (2009), the questions are a powerful tool concerning the researcher's intellectual capacity which motivate and lead to higher thinking processes activation. They state that the questions develop and stimulate the curiosity because those who asked questions are indeed learning. Further, they argue that the future academic citizen should implement the system of lifelong learning as a part of his philosophy of life, constantly asking and self-evaluating, and searching for the answers of his questions, because that leads to success. Furthermore, according to them, posing questions is not a simple activity since a great amount of skills is necessary, and it requires capability and creativity. Thus, questions are undoubtedly related to the thinking process itself.

A meaningful research question which should be answered is the starting point for each research. If there is no question, there is no research as well. This research question largely shapes the whole research. With respect to the qualitative scrutiny which is an iterative process in which the researcher constantly moves back and forward among the data in the whole research process, most of the research qualitative aspects can be changed for one or another reason. For example, the researcher may formulate his research question, but as he continuously collects the data which suppose to answer the research question, he may better comprehend his research question multifaceted nature and perceived that he has a lot to do in order to develop appropriate research question that addresses all his thoughts and ideas. Thus, the initially created research question may also be altered or modified (Hood, 2009; Janusheva, 2017). Regardless of the qualitative research type (ethnography, case study, action research, grounded theory etc.) there is always at least one research question that should be answered (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998; Berg, 2001; Yin, 2003; Burns, 2009).

With this in mind, this review gives prominence to this very essential research aspect and reminds the researchers to pay attention when conducting a qualitative research. At the same time, it proposes particular techniques which will help researchers to choose and formulate an adequate and superior research question. Hopefully, it will intensify researchers' interest and contribute to the preferable competencies evolution in organizing and conveying a complete qualitative research.

2. Aspects of the research question

A great amount of research worldwide stress the research question choice and formulation as an extremely meaningful aspect of the research, primarily, because the research question determines the effective qualitative inquiry and directs the research (Lewis & Pamela, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Cormac & Benton, 2000; Morrison, 2002; Mason, 2002; Sandelowski, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Charmaz, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007; Klopper, 2008; Freeman, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Agee, 2009; White, 2009; Sunderland, 2010; Kumar, 2014; Nerri de Souza et al., 2016; Janusheva & Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, 2017). According to them, the research results, and the conclusions are in fact the answer to the research question. They also point out that each question that the researcher is willing to answer may become a research question. Further, they stress the iterative character of the qualitative research, meaning that the research question may be altered, changed, or modified. Furthermore, they comprehend that these research question changes or modifications are a result of the increased understanding of the problem being elaborated and notable of the inductive way of

thinking which is essential to the qualitative scrutiny (Kummar, 2014). As long as the researcher examines the data, he keeps on modifying the research question. Therefore, if the research question is not defined or formulated good enough, even considering the words it contains, this may lead to problems which further affect the next research aspects (Janusheva, 2022).

As stated by Mackey & Gass (2005) and confirmed by Freeman (2009) as well, the research question formulation is a dynamic process of permanent (self) questioning. Hence, if the researcher is not sure that he has posed the right research question, he should not think of the collected data as possible sources that would answer it. Surely, the successful research question choice and formulation are not simple and easy and they are connected to the researcher's knowledge of the subject matter and the research methodology, in the first place. White (2009) argues that when the researcher thinks about the research question choice and formulation, he should concentrate on his interest in the research topic and on the potential answers that could answer the question. Further, according to White (2009), the researcher should not be discouraged by the previous research in that particular area. Nerri de Souza et al. (2016) claim that the research question distinguishes among other questions with greater depth, abstraction, and cognitive complexity. They further highlight the research question importance in the research area and its specificity. In fact, this means that up to that time, there is no answer to the posed research question. Furthermore, they declare that if the answer of the research question is known in advance, then the whole research is faked. In addition, they indicate that the time which is spend for the research question choice and formulation is never a waste, since, in this process, the researcher explores countless angles of the question until he is convinced that the wording is related with the whole research. Although the noun phrase research question assumes a question, according to them, the research question may not be formulated as a question, which is in accordance with Cormack & Benton (2000) and Holloway & Wheeler (2002) who claim that the research question may have a form of a simple statement.

Given that the research question is inevitably related to the research goal, the research question should not be formulated until the research goal is obvious and understandable as suggested by Maxwell (2005). Further, he explains that a great amount of the research should be done before the research question becomes transparent and comprehensible. The researcher should distinguish the research question and the research goal, which are two separate aspects of the research although in the practice they are not differentiated explicitly, as confirmed by Agee (2004). In this vein, considering that the research question and the research goal are mutually related, and that the practice demonstrates their synonymously usage, there is a need for more examples which will clarify the specific features of these two hugely remarkable research aspects.

Furthermore, Mason (2002) highlights the very significant insight that the researcher should ask himself if other will understand his research question. Conversely, if the research question cannot be understood by others, the problem may lay in its formulation and choice of words. The research question should not be ambiguous, multidimensional, and too general and the researcher has to be mindful that the topic differs from the research question (Sunderland, 2010). She also differentiates between main and contributing questions.

Additionally, as stated by Janusheva (2017; 2018), the main precondition for productive and effective research question is its preciseness. If the research question is too broad, narrow, or localized, it may not lead to generation of other questions that may be relevant for the research. The same applies if the research question is too focused. Let us take an example: Do teachers working with disabled students suffer from stress? As Maxwell (2005) puts it, for a

similar question, the main disadvantage in this question is that the word order suggests that it may be answered with yes or no and there is no indication that the study will be a qualitative one. The research question, in fact, has a developmental and directing nature (Agee, 2009; Creswell, 2009). In Creswell's (2009) words, the good research question evokes examining and revealing, and the preferable research question format begins with "How" although an appropriate, suitable, comprehensible, and transparent research question may begin with "What", for example: What strategies do students use to exchange compliments? (Janusheva, 2022). Let us take another example: How do compliments affect people? This question is wide ranged and it is also ambiguous and not precise because it does not indicate the nature of the influence. One better version of this research question is: How do compliments affect women and men's behavior?

Finally, as Janusheva (2017) states, the researcher has to concentrate on the overly relevant issue, i.e. the research question should not imply the answer. For example, the research question: Why do teachers use so many foreign words in the teaching, suggests that the researcher knows in advance that teacher are indeed using such words. However, this may not be the case.

3. Sources for the research question

There are various sources from which the research question may emerge, such as books, published articles, researcher's personal experience in the research area, discussion with colleagues and experts in the research field, different research theories in the research area, TV news and programs, events etc. and from countless combinations of these distinct sources. Researcher's curiosity has also a vital role (Janesick, 2000). In fact, it could be said that everything that surrounds us may be used as a potential source for the research question (Dörney, 2007; Nerri de Souza et al., 2016; Janusheva & Kostadinovska, 2017). The theory as a source is hugely critical and if the research lacks the theory that supports and directs it, then it is difficult to understand the collected data (Luis & Pamela, 1987; Baker, 2002). The theory and the research question are inseparably related, because, as Yin (2003) and Agee (2004) say, it shapes the questions or suggests the need of further questions in the research course, and directs to one or more theoretical approaches which are the research frame. This is further confirmed in the research of Maxwell (2005) and Merriam (2006). The immense body of previous research may be a productive source as well (Andrews, 2003; Sunderland, 2010). In this sense, the research may consider to address a research question that has not been articulated yet or to repeat a previous research that has been conducted using dissimilar type of analysis on the same collected data which may help him to perceive that some research question details are still not examined. The collected data may serve as sources for the research question choice and formulation.

4. Techniques to write a research question

There are countless techniques to write a successful research question and, as it may be assumed, they are all associated with questions. However, these posed questions prior to the main research question are of a great importance given that the whole research is driven by questions.

a) Self-questioning

According to Janesick (2000), self-questioning is a powerful tool which may help the researcher to find out exactly the phenomenon/problem he is eager to explore, for example: What I really want to reveal with this particular research question? Charmaz (2006) proposes the question: What is going on here (in the data)? These firstly generated questions which may produce an immense number of specific questions and at the end lead to the creation of the main research question is stressed out by Maxwell (2005) who believes that they frame the whole research, affect the methods' choice, and serve as a foundation of new question and by Janusheva & Kostadinovska-Stojchevska (2017). According to Richards (2005), the researcher has to ask himself three questions: What does he ask?, How does he ask?, and What type of answers will he need to provide an acceptable answer? These questions help the researcher to create the question focus. Sunderland (2010) comes up with the research question: What is my goal?

b) Brain storming

A good way to write an effective research question is the well known brain storming (Nerri de Souza et al., 2016; Janusheva & Kostadinovska, 2017). In fact, the researcher should write several key words for the phenomenon/problem he wants to explore. Each key word should be accompanied by several questions. The researcher should ask himself – What is the most important thing in these key words that I intend to investigate? Surely, all the questions which may be answered with "yes" or "no" should be avoided (Creswell, 2009), because they do not provide a critical perspective along with the questions that seem to be too ambitious. The researcher has to consider the available time and the tools to manage the research. He has to be conscious of the fact that he may not have access to some information which in his belief is crucial for the whole research.

Example: Key words: compliments, students, Macedonian language…
Compliments:
Question 1: As a speech acts, is the compliments usage examined worldwide?
Question 2: What does the previous research say about this issue?
Question 3: Are there any strategies for using the compliments?
Question 4: What are the most complimented personal issues?
Students:
Question 1: Do students exchange compliments?
Question 2: What words do they use as compliments?
Question 3: What do they compliment on the most?
Question 4: Is this topic examined so far?
Macedonian language:
Question 1: Are compliments as speech acts explored in the Macedonian language?
Question 2: Does the Macedonian language show similarities or differences with other world languages regarding this matter?
Question 3: Do the Macedonian students differ from their peers from other countries, regarding the compliments usage?
Question 4: What strategies do the Macedonian students use when complimenting each other?

(Note: The questions above are not the main research question, but examples of questions, which help in constructing or creating an effective research question, i.e. they are supporting or sub questions).

Another functional way to write a constructive research question is a modified version of the above mentioned brain storming. Here, the researcher writes one key word or general term, which serves as a broad description of what he chooses to explore. Given that this one expression is too wide, he has to narrow it, listing ideas related to this term. Each idea represents a base from which a lot of question may be produced, which, on the other hand, may be seen as a support in creating the main research question. This brain storming stimulates the thinking and engenders free associations (Janusheva & Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, 2017). As shown below, posing questions is a mighty tool which enables the right choice of words and the formulation of the main research question more effectually. These questions provide the straitening and sharpening of the key/general word (Janusheva & Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, 2017; Janusheva, 2017; Janusheva, 2018).

Example: The key word/general term: Compliments (too general and broad, demands shrinking)

Narrowing the key word (listing ideas): women, men, hair, car, wealth, appearance, situations, and choice of words…

Example: The key/general word: Compliments (too general and broad, requests narrowing)

Questions that constrict the general noun:

Question 1: How are the compliments defined?

Question 2: What does it mean to give a compliment?

Question 3: What words are used for complimenting?

Question 4: What are the most personal assets that the compliments concentrate on?

Question 5: Are women and men complimenting the same way, with the same words?
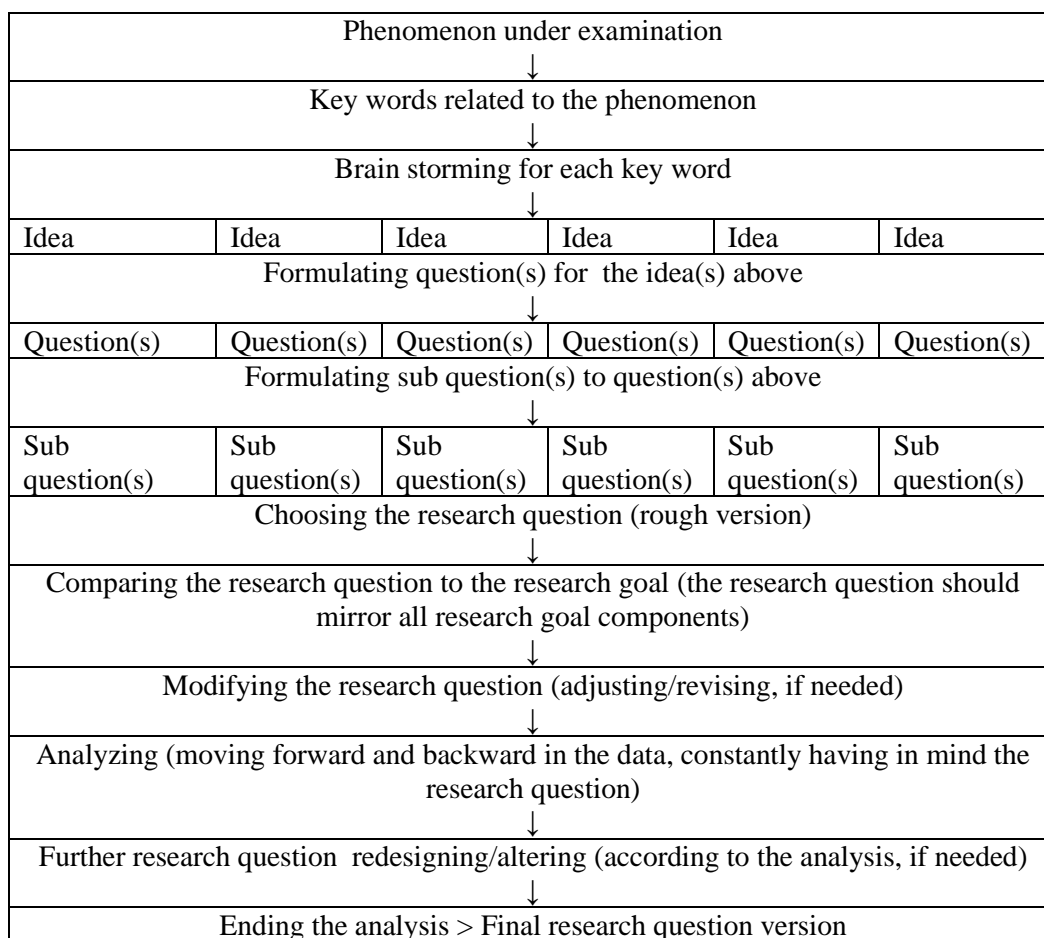
When the researcher decides and chooses one of these support questions, he has to examine various sources in order to get the wanted information. However, during this process, he may find information that supports another of the mentioned question and he may think of changing or modifying the aspect of his research.

c) Free writing

As indicated by Janusheva & Kostadinovska-Stojchevska (2017), the free writing is supposed to be an impressive technique which contributes to effective research question choice and formulation. Here, with the general notion in mind, the researcher writes down each idea and thought related to the general term for about 10 minutes without paying attention to the orthographic or punctuation marks or to the text's coherence and cohesion. He may even write: I do not know what word to use here. This way, the research may generate many ideas that have no value or significance regarding the phenomenon he wants to explore. Yet, this helps in revealing links that were not detected earlier.

The researcher may combine the already listed techniques. The idea is that as long as he produces questions related to the one or more general words, he is actively engaged in the quest for good research question that connects all further research aspects.

The complexity of the research question choice and formulation may be present in the following table:

Phenomenon under examination
↓
Key words related to the phenomenon
↓
Brain storming for each key word
↓

Idea	Idea	Idea	Idea	Idea	Idea

Formulating question(s) for the idea(s) above
↓

Question(s)	Question(s)	Question(s)	Question(s)	Question(s)	Question(s)

Formulating sub question(s) to question(s) above
↓

Sub question(s)	Sub question(s)	Sub question(s)	Sub question(s)	Sub question(s)	Sub question(s)

Choosing the research question (rough version)
↓
Comparing the research question to the research goal (the research question should mirror all research goal components)
↓
Modifying the research question (adjusting/revising, if needed)
↓
Analyzing (moving forward and backward in the data, constantly having in mind the research question)
↓
Further research question redesigning/altering (according to the analysis, if needed)
↓
Ending the analysis > Final research question version

Adapted and modified according to Janusheva (2022)

Conclusion

From the reviewed literature, it is obvious that the qualitative research question choice and formulation are crucial for the entire research and that they impact each research aspect. Therefore, it is of a great significance to pose a transparent, precise, and comprehensible question and bear in mind that this question may be revised, altered, or changed if the researcher feels that his research question lacks some aspects.

However, bearing in mind the inevitable connection between the research question(s) and research goal(s), there is a need for their more precise and non vague explanation and suitable examples.

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