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An Interactive Approach

Second Edition

Joseph A. Maxwell

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Contents

design generally deal explicitly only with methods, and neither address the other components of design (in my model, goals, conceptual frameworks, research questions, and validity) nor clarify the actual functioning and interrelationship of the parts of a design. For a more detailed analysis of the strengths and limitations of typological approaches to design, see Maxwell and Loomis (2002).

2. This tacking back and forth is similar in some ways to the "hermeneutic circle" of textual interpretation (Geertz, 1974). However, I am advocating an interactive rather than a sequential model of research design primarily because I see design as pertaining to the actual relationships of the components of a research study, not because I take an "interpretive" or "humanistic" as opposed to a "scientific" view of research. The interactive model I present here is drawn to a significant extent from research practices in the natural sciences, particularly biology, and is applicable to quantitative as well as qualitative research (Maxwell & Loomis, 2002). In contrast, Janesick (1994), who saw qualitative research design as an interpretive art form analogous to dance, nevertheless stated that "qualitative research design begins with a question" (p. 210) and presented research design as a sequence of decisions that the researcher will need to make at each stage of the research.

3. For additional discussion and examples of what a memo involves, see Bogdan and Biklen (2003, pp. 114–116, 151–157), Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 72–75), and Mills (1959). More detailed information on memos can be found in Strauss (1987, chaps. 1, 5, and 6) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, chap. 12).

4. See Mills (1959) for advice on how to use memos in developing a research agenda and career.

2

Goals

Why Are You Doing This Study?

> *In planning, as well as in assessing, ethnographic research, we must consider its relevance as well as its validity.*
>
> —Hammersley, 1992, p. 85

Anyone can find an unanswered, empirically answerable question for which the answer isn't *worth* knowing; as Thoreau said, it is not worthwhile to go around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. In addition, it is easy to become captivated by the stories of your informants, or by what's going on in the setting you are studying, and lose sight of your *reasons* for studying these particular phenomena. Brendan Croskery (1995), reflecting on his dissertation research on four Newfoundland school principals, admitted that

> The study suffered from too many good intentions and too little focused thinking. . . . I painfully discovered that many of the data (though interesting) were not particularly relevant to the core category. (p. 348)

A clear understanding of the goals motivating your work will help you to avoid losing your way or spending time and effort doing things that don't advance these goals.

The goals of your study are an important part of your research design. (I am using "goal" in a broad sense to include motives, desires, and purposes—anything that leads you to do the study or that you want to accomplish by doing it.[1]) These goals serve two main functions for your research. First, they help to guide your other design decisions to ensure that your study is *worth* doing, that you get something of value out of it. Second, they are essential to *justifying* your study, a key task of a funding or dissertation proposal. In addition, as Hammersley (1992, p. 28) noted, your goals inevitably shape the descriptions, interpretations, and theories you create in your research. They

therefore constitute not only important *resources* that you can draw on in planning, conducting, and justifying the research, but also potential *validity threats,* or sources of bias for the research results, that you will need to deal with (see Chapter 6).

PERSONAL, PRACTICAL, AND INTELLECTUAL GOALS

It is useful to distinguish among three different kinds of goals for doing a study: personal goals, practical goals, and intellectual (or scholarly) goals. Personal goals are things that motivate *you* to do the study, but are not necessarily important for others. They can include the desire to change or improve some situation that you're involved in, curiosity about a specific topic or event, a preference for conducting a particular type of research, or simply the need to advance your career. These personal goals often overlap with your practical or research goals, but they may also include deeply rooted individual desires and needs that bear little relationship to your "official" reasons for doing the study (see Example 2.1).

Two major decisions are often profoundly influenced by the researcher's personal goals. One is the topic, issue, or question selected for study. Traditionally, students have been told to base this decision on either faculty advice or the literature on their topic. However, personal goals and experiences play an important role in many research studies. Strauss and Corbin (1990) argued that

> choosing a research problem through the professional or personal experience route may seem more hazardous than through the suggested [by faculty] or literature routes. This is not necessarily true. The touchstone of your own experience may be more valuable an indicator for you of a potentially successful research endeavor. (pp. 35–36)

A particularly important advantage of basing your research topic on your own experience is *motivation.* Lack of motivation causes many students to never finish their dissertations, and a strong personal interest in the topic and in answering your research questions can counteract the inevitable interference from work, family obligations, or just procrastination. Example 2.1 describes how one student made a substantial change in her dissertation topic as a result of her own life experiences and the goals and interests that these created.

EXAMPLE 2.1

Using Personal Experience to Choose a Dissertation Topic

Carol Kaffenberger, a doctoral student in a counseling program, had carefully planned her dissertation research on the development of conflict resolution skills in children, and was beginning work on her dissertation proposal. However, she found it hard to sustain her interest in this topic. Three years before she began her doctoral work, her youngest daughter, then 12, had been diagnosed with a particularly deadly form of leukemia, was hospitalized for 6 months and underwent a bone marrow transplant, went into remission and then relapsed, and required a second transplant before recovering 3 years later. This illness had initiated a family crisis, and caused major changes in the family's roles and responsibilities. Carol quit her job and moved into the hospital with her daughter. Her husband continued to work, maintained the house, and parented their son, who was 15 at the time of the diagnosis. Their older daughter was away at college, but was the donor for the bone marrow transplants.

Initially, Carol had felt that her family was coping well, but as the crisis wore on, she was surprised by the amount of anger and emotional distress expressed by the older siblings, anger that, despite her counseling training, she did not understand. Watching her family getting "back to normal" after this ordeal, she realized they were never going to be the same. She also realized that her prior assumptions about their experience had been incorrect, and she became very interested in understanding this experience.

At a doctoral student meeting, another student, who knew of Carol's involvement with her daughter's cancer, asked her about her dissertation plans. Carol replied that she would be looking at children's development of conflict resolution skills, and briefly described her plans. The student replied, "What a missed opportunity!" explaining that she thought studying the consequences for families of adolescent cancer would be a terrific topic. After thinking about this, Carol went to her advisor, mentioned the student's idea, and asked, "Is this crazy?" Her advisor replied, "I've been waiting for you to be ready to do this."

Carol did a literature review and found that little was known about the meaning and consequences of adolescent cancer for families, particularly for siblings. She also found that, with increasing survival rates, schools were dealing with many more students who had been affected by a

lengthy experience with cancer, as either a survivor or the sibling of a survivor, but had little experience in handling these issues. Motivated by her own interest in this topic, the lack of available information, and the growing importance of this issue, she changed her dissertation to a study of the long-term impact and meaning of adolescent cancer for survivors and their siblings, and its effect on the sibling relationship. She enrolled in my dissertation proposal course in the fall of 1997, defended her proposal in the spring of 1998, and defended her dissertation 1 year later. She says that she "loved every minute of her dissertation"; she even took her data with her on a vacation to Bermuda when she was finishing her data analysis (Kaffenberger, 1999, personal communication).

A second decision that is often influenced by personal goals and experiences is the choice of a qualitative approach. Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (1993) argued that "every graduate student who is tempted to employ a qualitative design should confront one question, 'Why do I want to do a qualitative study?' and then answer it honestly" (p. 107). They emphasized that qualitative research is *not* easier than quantitative research and that seeking to avoid statistics bears little relationship to having the personal interests and skills that qualitative inquiry requires (pp. 107–110). The key issue is the compatibility of your reasons for "going qualitative" with your other goals, your research questions, and the actual activities involved in doing a qualitative study. Alan Peshkin's motives (Example 2.2) for doing qualitative research—that he liked qualitative fieldwork and that it suited his abilities—are perfectly legitimate ones, *if* you choose research questions for which this is an appropriate strategy.

Traditionally, discussions of personal goals in research methods texts have accepted, implicitly or explicitly, the ideal of the objective, disinterested scientist, and have emphasized that the choice of research approaches and methods should be determined by the research questions that you want to answer. However, it is clear from autobiographies of scientists (e.g., Heinrich, 1984) that decisions about research methods are often far more personal than this, and the importance of subjective motives and goals in science is supported by a great deal of historical, sociological, and philosophical work.

The grain of truth in the traditional view is that your personal (and often unexamined) motives as researcher have important consequences for the validity of your conclusions. If your data collection and analysis are based on personal desires *without* a careful assessment of the implications of the latter for your methods and conclusions, you are in danger of creating a flawed or biased study.

King Gustav of Sweden wanted a powerful warship to dominate the Baltic, but this desire led to an ill-considered decision to add a second gundeck to the *Vasa,* causing it to capsize and sink and thus dealing a severe setback to his goals.

For all of these reasons, it is important that you recognize and take account of the personal goals that drive and influence your research. Attempting to exclude your personal goals and concerns from the design of your research is neither possible nor necessary. What *is* necessary is to be *aware* of these goals and how they may be shaping your research, and to think about how best to achieve them *and* to deal with their influence. In addition, recognizing your personal ties to the study you want to conduct can provide you with a valuable source of insight, theory, and data about the phenomena you are studying (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 25–30; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 42–43); this source will be discussed in the next chapter in the section titled "Experiential Knowledge." Example 2.2 describes how one researcher's personal goals and values influenced (and were influenced by) a series of qualitative studies.

EXAMPLE 2.2

The Importance of Personal Values and Identity

Alan Peshkin's personal goals, rooted in his own values and identity, profoundly influenced several ethnographic studies he did of schools and their communities (1991, pp. 285–295; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, pp. 93–107). In his first study, in a rural town he called Mansfield, he liked the community and felt protective toward it. This shaped the kind of story that he told, a story about the importance of community and its preservation. In contrast, in his second study, an ethnography of a fundamentalist Christian school (which he called Bethany Baptist Academy, BBA) and its community, he felt alienated, as a Jew, from a community that attempted to proselytize him:

> When I began to write . . . I knew I was annoyed by my *personal* (as opposed to research) experience at BBA. I soon became sharply aware that my annoyance was pervasively present, that I was writing out of pique and vexation. Accordingly, I was not celebrating community at Bethany, and community prevailed there no less robustly than it had at Mansfield. Why not? I was more than annoyed in Bethany; my ox had been gored. The consequence was that the story I was feeling drawn to tell had its origins in my personal sense of threat. I was not at Bethany as a cool, dispassionate observer (are there any?); I was there as a Jew whose otherness was

> dramatized directly and indirectly during eighteen months of fieldwork. (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 103)

In hindsight, Peshkin realized that if he had been less sympathetic toward Mansfield, he could have told a different, equally valid story about this community, whereas if he had identified with Bethany and wanted to support and perpetuate it, he could legitimately have showed how it was much like Mansfield.

In a third study, this one of an urban, multiethnic and multiracial school and community that he called Riverview, Peshkin resolved at the outset to try to identify the aspects of his identity that he saw emerging in his reactions. He listed six different subjective "I's" that influenced this study, each embodying its own goals. These included the Ethnic-Maintenance I and the Community-Maintenance I that he had discovered in his earlier studies; an E-Pluribus-Unum I that supported the ethnic and racial "mingling" that he saw going on; a Justice-Seeking I that wanted to correct the negative and biased images of Riverview held by its wealthier neighbors; a Pedagogical-Meliorist I that was disturbed by the poor teaching that many minority students received in Riverview and sought to find ways to improve this; and a Nonresearch-Human I that was grateful for the warm reception he and his wife received in Riverview, generated a concern for the people and community, and moderated otherwise sharp judgments he might have made.

Peshkin strongly recommended that all researchers systematically monitor their subjectivity:

> I see this monitoring as a necessary exercise, a workout, a tuning up of my subjectivity to get it in shape. It is a rehearsal for keeping the lines of my subjectivity open—and straight. And it is a warning to myself so that I may avoid the trap of perceiving just what my own untamed sentiments have sought out and served up as data. (Peshkin, 1991, pp. 293–294)

Exercise 2.1 is one way to engage in this monitoring.

In addition to influencing his questions and conclusions, Peshkin's personal goals were intimately involved in his choice of methods. As he stated, "I like fieldwork, it suits me, and I concluded that rather than pursuing research with questions in search of the 'right' methods of data collection, I had a preferred method of data collection in search of the 'right' question" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 102).

In addition to your personal goals, there are two other kinds of goals (ones that are important for other people, not just yourself) that I want to distinguish and discuss. These are practical goals (including administrative or policy goals) and intellectual goals. Practical goals are focused on *accomplishing* something—meeting some need, changing some situation, or achieving some objective. Intellectual goals, in contrast, are focused on *understanding* something—gaining insight into what is going on and why this is happening, or answering some question that previous research has not adequately addressed.

Both of these kinds of goals are legitimate parts of your design. However, they need to be distinguished, because while intellectual goals are often a fruitful starting point for framing research questions, practical goals can't normally be used in this straightforward way. Research questions need to be questions that your study can potentially answer, and questions that ask directly about how to accomplish practical goals, such as "How should this program be modified to make it more equitable?" or "What can be done to increase students' motivation to learn science?" are not directly answerable by any research. Such questions have an inherently open-ended nature (expressed by terms such as "can") or value component (expressed by terms such as "should") that no amount of data or analysis can fully address.

On the other hand, research questions such as "What effect has this new policy had on program equity?" or "How did students respond to this new science curriculum?" are not only potentially answerable, but can advance the practical goals implied in the previous questions. For these reasons, you need to frame your research questions in ways that help your study to *achieve* your practical goals, rather than smuggling these goals into the research questions themselves, where they may interfere with the coherence and feasibility of your design. A common problem that my students have in developing research questions is that they try to base these questions directly on their practical goals, ending up with questions that not only can't be answered by their research, but fail to adequately guide the research itself. I will discuss this issue more fully in Chapter 4; here, I am simply emphasizing the difference between these two types of goals.

The point is not to eliminate practical goals from your design; in addition to the reasons given previously, practical or policy objectives are particularly important for *justifying* your research. Don't ignore these goals, but understand where they are coming from, their implications for your research, and how they can be productively employed in planning and defending your study.

WHAT GOALS CAN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH HELP YOU ACHIEVE?

Qualitative and quantitative methods are not simply different ways of doing the same thing. Instead, they have different strengths and logics, and are often best used to address different kinds of questions and goals (Maxwell & Loomis, 2002). The strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers.

I will describe five particular *intellectual* goals for which qualitative studies are especially suited, and three *practical* goals to which these intellectual goals can substantially contribute:

1. Understanding the *meaning,* for participants in the study, of the events, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved with or engage in. I am using "meaning" here in a broad sense, including cognition, affect, intentions, and anything else that can be encompassed in what qualitative researchers often refer to as the "participants' perspective." This perspective is not simply their account of these events and actions, to be assessed in terms of its truth or falsity; it is *part of* the reality that you are trying to understand (Maxwell, 1992; Menzel, 1978). In a qualitative study, you are interested not only in the physical events and behavior that are taking place, but also in how the participants in your study make sense of these, and how their understanding influences their behavior. This focus on meaning is central to what is known as the "interpretive" approach to social science (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Geertz, 1974; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979).

2. Understanding the particular *context* within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions. Qualitative researchers typically study a relatively small number of individuals or situations, and preserve the individuality of each of these in their analyses, rather than collecting data from large samples and aggregating the data across individuals or situations. Thus, they are able to understand how events, actions, and meanings are shaped by the unique circumstances in which these occur (Maxwell, 2004a).

3. Identifying *unanticipated* phenomena and influences, and generating new, "grounded" theories about the latter. Qualitative research has an inherent openness and flexibility that allows you to modify your design and focus during the research to understand new discoveries and relationships. This flexibility derives from its particularistic, rather than comparative and generalizing, focus, and from its freedom from the rules of statistical hypothesis testing, which require that the research plan not be significantly altered after data collection has begun.

4. Understanding the *process* by which events and actions take place. Merriam stated that "The interest [in a qualitative study] is in process rather than outcomes" (1988, p. xii); while this does not mean that qualitative research is unconcerned with outcomes, it does emphasize that a major strength of qualitative research is in getting at the processes that led to these outcomes, processes that experimental and survey research are often poor at identifying (Britan, 1978; Maxwell, 2004a, 2004c; Patton, 1990, p. 94).

5. Developing *causal explanations.* The traditional view that only quantitative methods can be used to credibly draw causal conclusions has long been disputed by some qualitative researchers (e.g., Britan, 1978; Denzin, 1970; Erickson, 1986). Miles and Huberman (1984) argued that

> Much recent research supports a claim that we wish to make here: that field research is far *better* than solely quantified approaches at developing explanations of what we call local causality—the actual events and processes that led to specific outcomes. (p. 132)

Although the traditional view has been abandoned by some researchers, both qualitative and quantitative (e.g., Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; cf. Maxwell, 2004a, 2004c), it is still dominant in both traditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Shavelson & Towne, 2002).

Part of the reason for the disagreement has been a failure to recognize that quantitative and qualitative researchers tend to ask different kinds of causal questions. Quantitative researchers tend to be interested in whether and to what extent *variance* in *x* causes variance in *y.* Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, tend to ask *how x* plays a role in causing *y,* what the *process* is that connects *x* and *y.* Mohr (1982) used the terms "variance theory" and "process theory" to refer to these two general approaches to research, and I will return to this distinction in later chapters. This emphasis on understanding processes and mechanisms, rather than demonstrating regularities in the relationships between variables, is fundamental to realist views of causation, which are prominent in the current philosophy of science (Maxwell, 2004a). Weiss (1994) provided a concrete illustration of this difference:

> In qualitative interview studies the demonstration of causation rests heavily on the description of a visualizable sequence of events, each event flowing into the next. . . . Quantitative studies support an assertion of causation by showing a correlation between an earlier event and a subsequent event. An analysis of data collected in a large-scale sample survey might, for example, show that there is a correlation between the level of the wife's education and the presence of a companionable marriage. In qualitative studies we would look for a process

through which the wife's education or factors associated with her education express themselves in marital interaction. (p. 179)

This is not to say that deriving causal explanations from a qualitative study is an easy or straightforward task (Maxwell, 2004c). However, the situation of qualitative research is no different from that of quantitative research in this respect. Both approaches need to identify and deal with the plausible validity threats to any proposed causal explanation; I will discuss this further in Chapter 6.

These intellectual goals, and the inductive, open-ended strategy that they require, give qualitative research a particular advantage in addressing three practical goals:

6. Generating results and theories that are understandable and experientially credible, both to the people you are studying and to others. Patton (1990, pp. 19–24) gave an example of how the responses to the open-ended items on a questionnaire used to evaluate a teacher accountability system had far greater credibility with, and impact on, the school administration than did the quantitative analysis of the standardized items. Bolster (1983) made a more general argument—namely, that one of the reasons for the lack of impact of educational research on educational practice has been that such research has largely been quantitative, and doesn't connect with teachers' experience of everyday classroom realities. He argued for a qualitative approach that emphasizes the perspective of teachers and the understanding of particular settings, as having far more potential for informing educational practitioners.

7. Conducting formative evaluations, ones that are intended to help improve existing practice rather than to simply assess the value of the program or product being evaluated (Scriven, 1967, 1991). In such evaluations, it is more important to understand the process by which things happen in a particular situation than to rigorously compare this situation with others.

8. Engaging in collaborative or action research with practitioners or research participants. The "face credibility" of qualitative research, and its focus on particular contexts and their meaning for the participants in these contexts, make it particularly suitable for collaborations with these participants (Reason, 1988, 1994; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). In addition, there are important ethical arguments for incorporating the perspectives and goals of these participants in your research design (Lincoln, 1990).

Sorting out and assessing the different personal, practical, and intellectual goals that you bring to your study can be a difficult task. In addition, this is not something you can do once, when you begin designing the study, and then forget about, as Example 2.2 illustrates. Some of your goals may not become

apparent to you until you are well into the research; furthermore, they may change as the research proceeds. Example 2.3 provides an account of how one doctoral student went about identifying her goals in making a decision about her dissertation topic. Exercise 2.1, at the end of this chapter, is what I call a "researcher identity memo"; it asks you to write about the goals and personal identity that you bring to your study, and their potential benefits and liabilities for your research. Example 2.4 is one such memo, written for my qualitative methods class; it shows how one student wrestled with deep and painful issues of her own identity and goals in planning for her dissertation research on language curriculum reform in Bolivia. All of the examples in this chapter illustrate some of the advantages that reflection on your goals can provide for your research.

EXAMPLE 2.3

Deciding on a Dissertation Topic

During her first year of doctoral work, Isabel Londoño, a native of Colombia, enrolled in a qualitative research methods course. For her research project, she interviewed seven women from her country who were working in Boston, exploring their experiences balancing work and family. While working on the project, she also began to read some of the feminist literature available in the United States on women executives, women's psychological development, and women's experience managing work and family. She was excited by the new ideas in this literature, which she had not had access to in her own country, and decided that she wanted to focus on issues of executive women in her country for her dissertation.

At the end of her first year, Isabel took a leave of absence from the doctoral program to work as the chief of staff of her former college roommate, whose husband had just been elected president of Colombia. Among her responsibilities was gathering information on employment, education, and the status of women in her nation. One of the issues that emerged as critical was the need to assess the effect of a recent shift in educational decision making from the national to the local level. In the past, most decisions had been made by the national ministry of education; now decisions were being shifted downward to the mayors in local municipalities. No one was really sure how this change was being implemented and what its effects were.

Isabel found that investigating an issue that affected the lives of many people in her country changed her perspective, and raised questions about her choice of a thesis topic:

> It became an issue of what was my responsibility to the world. To find out how to solve a personal, internal conflict of executive women? Or was there a problem where I could really be of help? Also, what was more rewarding to me as a person—to solve a problem that affected me personally or solve a problem of the world?

She also felt pressure from others to select a topic that clearly linked to her career goals and showed that she knew what she wanted to do with her life.

Coming to a decision about her dissertation research topic forced Isabel to identify and assess her personal and practical goals.

> I thought about why I got into a doctoral program. What I hoped to get out of it personally, professionally, academically. Why did I end up here? Then, I thought about what are the things about the world that move me, that make me sad or happy? I analyzed what that interest was about—people, feelings, institutions. It was important for me to see the themes in common in my interests and motivations. It gave me strength. I also was open to change. Change is the most scary thing, but you have to allow it.

She decided that she would study the decentralization of educational decision making in six municipalities in her country. In making this decision, she chose to disregard others' opinions of her:

> What I have decided is *no,* I am going to do my thesis about something that *moves me inside.* I don't care if I am ever going to work on that topic again because it's something I want to learn about. I don't want to use my thesis as a stepladder for my work, that feels like prostitution. So I believe the interest should be on the thesis topic itself, not on where that is leading you, where you're going to get with it.

One of the things that supported her decision was reading the literature on her topic:

> That was very important because I discovered that what I was interested in was something that had interested a lot of other people before, and was going on in a lot of other places in the world, and was affecting education in other countries. This made my topic relevant. It was very important for me to understand that it was relevant, that I was not just making up a dream problem. I think that's something you always fear, that the problem you see is not really important. I also learned that although other people had done work on the problem, *nobody* had the interest I had—the human impact of implementing a reform in the administration of education.
>
> Writing memos for classes was key, having to put things to paper. I also started keeping a thesis diary and wrote memos to myself in it. The date and one word, one idea, or something that I'd read. Many of the things I've written about have now become the list of what I'm going to do *after* I do my thesis!
>
> Finally, I think it's important to really try to have fun. I figure, if you don't have fun, you shouldn't be doing it. Of course, sometimes I get tired of my topic and hate it. I sit at the computer and I'm tired and I don't want to do it, but every time I start working, I forget all that and get immersed in my work. And if something has the power to do that, it must be right.

The particular decisions that Isabel made are not necessarily the right ones for everyone; they are unique to her own identity and situation. However, the *way* that she went about making the decision—seriously and systematically reflecting on her goals and motives, and the implications of these for her research choices—is one that I recommend to everyone deciding on a major research project.

EXERCISE 2.1

Researcher Identity Memo

The purpose of this memo is to help you examine your goals, experiences, assumptions, feelings, and values as they relate to your research, and to discover what resources and potential concerns your identity and experience may create. What prior connections (social and intellectual) do you have to the topics, people, or settings you plan to study? How do you think and feel about these topics, people, or settings? What assumptions are you making, consciously or unconsciously, about these? What do you want to accomplish or learn by doing this study?

The purpose of this exercise is not to write a *general* account of your goals, background, and experiences. Instead, identify those goals and experiences, and the beliefs and emotions that connect to these, that are most relevant to your planned research, and reflect on *how* these have

informed and influenced your research. See Examples 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 for some of the things you can do with such a memo—not as *models* to mechanically follow, but as *illustrations* of the kind of thinking that this memo requires. If you are just starting your project, you can't be as detailed or confident in your conclusions as some of these researchers are, but try to aim for this sort of exploration of how your identity and goals could affect your study.

The memo is intended to be mainly for *your* benefit, not for communicating to someone else; try to avoid substituting presentation for reflection and analysis. I suggest that you begin working on this memo by "brainstorming" whatever comes to mind when you think about your prior experiences that may relate to your site or topic, and jot these down without immediately trying to organize or analyze them. Then, try to identify the issues most likely to be important in your research, think about the implications of these, and organize your reflections.

Below are two broad sets of questions that it is productive to reflect on in this memo. In your answers to these, try to be as specific as you can.

1. What prior experiences have you had that are relevant to your topic or setting? What assumptions about your topic or setting have resulted from these experiences? What goals have emerged from these, or have otherwise become important for your research? How have these experiences, assumptions, and goals shaped your decision to choose this topic, and the way you are approaching this project?
2. What potential advantages do you think the goals, beliefs, and experiences that you described have for your study? What potential disadvantages do you think these may create for you, and how might you deal with these?

EXAMPLE 2.4

Researcher Identity Memo for a Study of Educational Reform in Bolivia

Barbara Noel

There are several layers of personal interest I hold in the topic of educational reform in Bolivia. Probably the most personal is the bilingual/bicultural nature I share with the profile of the Bolivian population. It

wasn't until I was well into my adulthood that I recognized how deeply being bilingual has shaped my life consciously and unconsciously. Having spent my childhood in Peru and Mexico, with my bicultural parents (Peruvian mother, very Californian father), I was exposed to Spanish yet grew up speaking English at home and at school. When my family moved to Texas I was 11 and shortly after felt the powerful, sneering attitude to everything Latin American. I and the rest of the family quickly, individually, and without any discussion or conscious inner dialogue spent the next few years carving out the Latino in us and successfully assimilating to the mainstream U.S. culture. I continue to observe this inner battle within my siblings and mother. Fourteen years later, I started speaking Spanish again once I realized the futility and extent of destruction from trying to stamp out one culture in favor of another. Since then, I have turned away from a sort of cultural schizophrenia and have begun to identify where I can integrate the two cultures, consciously choosing what I see as the best of both.

In the Bolivian society, I see the same struggle I personally experienced magnified on a very large scale. I see how for most of the nation's history, one dominant culture has sought to eliminate all the others. It is no accident that forced schooling in an incomprehensible language has produced a population where more than half of the adults over 15 years of age are illiterate. The minds of the indigenous people have also been colonized. They passionately fight for their children to speak only Spanish because this, as they see it, is the only vehicle for attaining political voice and economic security. Many of them desperately seek to assimilate and cut out any traces of "cholo" or Indian in them. Even if they or their children understand an indigenous language, they will act as though they don't understand.

I mostly feel angry as I write about these issues. In a way it is this anger and the subsequent passion for justice that drove me to the field of intercultural, bilingual education. Now I find myself inside a whole country wrestling with the same problems my family and I wrestle with. I must be careful to not project my own journey onto my perception of Bolivian society. I need to seek external validation for my perceptions and ongoing theories about this struggle in Bolivia to avoid painting an inaccurate picture. The confusion for me will come from assuming that my inner lens is the same as the lenses of those with whom I speak.

Writing this memo, I have come to see how my personal base could provide a unique contribution to studying this bilingual/bicultural struggle

in Bolivia. My own experience will help me capture my interviewees' stories more vividly and sensitively. By having an inside perspective, I can help the people I interview trust me. I need to figure out just how much to share with them in order to open up dialogue and yet not have my experience corrupt their story. This sort of sharing, "I've been there too," may help my interviewees move past the barrier of how I look, a blond "gringa" from an imperialistic nation.

Another layer of interest in this study is the experience of teachers as they undergo making changes the reform asks them to make. They are being told to completely change their mental schemas for teaching, from a transmission approach to a constructivist approach, without any clear guidelines, models, or examples. This leaves the teachers at a loss as to how to begin. Six years after the reform program began they are still confused. I also entered the profession under similar circumstances, when in the U.S. teachers were being told to teach through a whole language approach. It was like being in a dark room not knowing what to grab on to and trying to act as if you have everything under control lest your job be in jeopardy. Had someone interviewed me about this process at that time, my major concern would have been to appear as if everything is wonderful and that the approach was a magic bullet for teaching. I would have been alienated from my colleagues if they had found out I had said anything remotely negative. This experience helps me to understand how vulnerable these teachers might feel and their need for expressing bravado at all costs.

The personal strength I have in this area is also my biggest weakness. My ability to "put myself in their shoes" and view things from behind their lenses can also get confused by my own projection of the situation based on my own experiences. I might also be tempted to move beyond my role as investigator to reformer, provider of "magic bullets." In the past, I have impulsively offered several workshops, at no cost, just because I'd gotten so caught up in the deep needs I've perceived in their practice and their desire to learn. I need to measure my energies so that I can indeed finish what I start out to do. It will be hard to balance this relationship. I don't feel comfortable just going in as an investigator, yet my "save the world" inspirations need to be tempered into a practical approach that meets the dual purposes of helping and investigating. For me, the reform provides hope that a society may start turning around a long history of oppression by valuing its deeply multicultural character in a way I was able to do on a minute scale.

Addendum, July 2000

It is now several months since I wrote this memo. After having read through it again, I notice several things I learned as a result of going through this exercise. Before writing this memo, I knew I felt intensely drawn to the subject but didn't know why. I felt passionate about righting the wrongs but didn't understand where the motivations were coming from or even that they had a personal basis. Had I not identified my motivations for doing research in this area, I would not have realized how strongly my personal experiences could impact my study. I now realize that even though I try to be very aware, my perceptions will be inevitably colored by my personal background.

It would be easy to fault myself as a researcher by thinking that such an emotional attachment would automatically render me unqualified for such a venture. Yet, through the exercise, I was able to turn the coin around and see the strengths that I also bring through a more empathic stance. While my empathy might help me perceive subtle and important motivations for my informants' responses and behavior, it might also introduce dynamics I unconsciously bring into the situation. I also identified a pattern of behavior I engage in which is to get overly involved with a project so that my emotional connection takes over. I lose my focus and change my role from the one I had objectively started out with. Having identified this pattern, I can, in a way, construct an overhead camera to monitor my actions that might often blink a bright red light to indicate overheating.

What I have come away with from this exercise is clarity of purpose. The real reasons for doing the study. I identified how strongly I felt about the importance of the study personally and professionally. This passion has the possibility, then, to become the engine that sparks my flagging energies and guides me through the blind curves and boring straight stretches of mundane routines during the process of data gathering, transcription, and analysis. I am aware of ways I might possibly corrupt the quality of the information. I also understand how my emotional attachment to the study can be beneficial. This type of reflection helps put in motion a mental machinery that can help monitor my reactions and warn me when I veer off course. Now I see how this memo grounds the rest of the study because it clarifies, energizes, and audits the unique role each researcher brings into the arena.

NOTE

1. In this edition, I have called these "goals" rather than "purposes" in order to more clearly distinguish them from the usual meaning of "purpose" in research methods texts. There, "purpose" refers to the specific objective of a study, for example, "The purpose of this study is to investigate (understand, explore) _____" (Creswell, 1994, p. 59). I see this meaning of "purpose" as more closely connected to the research questions of a study, although distinct from these (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000, pp. 45–46).

3

Conceptual Framework

What Do You Think Is Going On?

Biologist Bernd Heinrich (1984, pp. 141–151) and his associates once spent a summer conducting detailed, systematic research on ant lions, small insects that trap ants in pits they have dug. Returning to the university in the fall, Heinrich was surprised to discover that his results were quite different from those published by other researchers. Redoing his experiments the following summer to try to understand these discrepancies, Heinrich found that he and his fellow researchers had been led astray by an unexamined assumption they had made about the ant lions' time frame: Their observations hadn't been long enough to detect some key aspects of these insects' behavior. As he concluded, "even carefully collected results can be misleading if the underlying context of assumptions is wrong" (1984, p. 151).

For this reason, the conceptual framework of your study—the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research—is a key part of your design (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2002). Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a conceptual framework as a visual or written product, one that "explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them" (p. 18). Here, I use the term in a broader sense that includes the actual ideas and beliefs that you hold about the phenomena studied, whether these are written down or not. This may also be called the "theoretical framework" or "idea context" for the study.

The most important thing to understand about your conceptual framework is that it is primarily a conception or model of what is out there that you plan to study, and of what is going on with these things and why—a tentative *theory* of the phenomena that you are investigating. The function of this theory is to inform the rest of your design—to help you to assess and refine your goals, develop realistic and relevant research questions, select appropriate methods,