RESEARCH QUESTIONS

R esearch is detective work, and every case begins with a mystery, a question about social life. Just as good detective work depends upon a well-defined mystery, high-quality research is led by appropriate and clear questions. Adequate questions are a central component of high-quality research, because characteristics of questions greatly shape other design decisions, such as the types of data (content, origin, form) and data generation techniques that make sense given the question.

> Suitable questions for social research are about the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* of social life and can be answered using the methods of social research.

The questions leading social research are simply that—questions about characteristics, causes, consequences, processes, and meanings of social life. Research *can* examine questions about the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* of social life; it *can* explore "so what" questions about the consequences of how the world is organized and the consequences of specific human behaviors. What social research *cannot* do is tell us what should be evaluated as moral or immoral. Social research is a toolbox of rules, conventions, and techniques for discovering what *is*; philosophy, ethics, and religion are ways to assess what *should* be. That said, while social research is *not* capable of making moral evaluations, it most certainly is the way to generate data upon which to base such evaluations. Data describing the characteristics, causes, and consequences of events such as prison overcrowding, delinquency, urbanization, and

so on can be evidence upon which to make the moral evaluations that in and of themselves lie outside the capabilities of social research.

Methodological thinking requires the ability to identify and evaluate questions written by others as well as the ability to write questions for research you are designing.

IDENTIFYING RESEARCH QUESTIONS IN PUBLISHED RESEARCH

Evaluating the quality of published social research requires evaluating research questions; yet before this can happen, the questions leading the research must be identified. An important skill in reading and evaluating research is the ability to identify research questions.

Because a research question is simply that—a question—it would seem that they should be written as questions. Sometimes that is true. Yet it still can require quite careful reading to find these questions in published research, as seen in the following examples.

> **Example 3.1:** The question leading the research on "Addicts' Narratives of Recovery" is somewhat hidden in a paragraph in the section Sample and Methods. This section is as much about what the researchers are *not* interested in as about what they *are* interested in:
>
> > What we sought to do was not to critically assess individuals' accounts of their recovery experience in order to produce a genuine ex-addict group, but rather to look at the process of coming off drugs from the perspective of the drug users themselves. Our question was not "have they genuinely managed to become ex-addicts," but "*what is the nature of the individuals' accounts of their recovery and in what ways might the recounting of those narratives be part of the recovery process?*" [emphasis added] (lines 94–100)

Rather than writing questions as questions, it is more common for researchers to transform questions into statements.

> **Example 3.2:** In "The Digital Identity Divide," readers are told that "this article considers the complex ways that schools and universities perpetuate the digital divide" (lines 23–24). Quite a bit later, we learn that "this study uses narrative inquiry to investigate how holding a technology identity subtly influences academic and social life at the university setting" (lines 105–107). Although these are statements, notice how easy it is to turn them into questions: What are the complex ways that schools and universities perpetuate the digital divide? How does holding a technology identity subtly influence academic and social life at a university setting?

Example 3.3: In "Identity Threat and Dietary Choices," readers learn that researchers "investigated whether members of non-White immigrant groups choose and consume American food as a way to convey that they belong in America" (lines 17–18). Considerably later in the article, researchers tell us they "investigated whether the motivation to convey an identity can also bring about actual dietary decline" (lines 47–49). Notice, again, how these statements are easily understood as questions: Do members of non-White immigrant groups choose and consume American food as a way to convey that they belong in America? Does the motivation to convey an identity bring about actual dietary decline?

When reading research, it is important that you figure out what questions are being asked. Very often, this requires some detective work, because questions can be in the middle of paragraphs and they might be in the form of statements rather than questions. Often research questions are located in statements beginning with phrases such as "in this study," "here we examine," "we are interested in," "the purpose of this study," and so on. Exhibit 3.1 shows how research questions actually appear in the articles in the appendix. You should notice how common it is for questions to appear as statements—and how easy it can be to translate these statements to questions.

When you cannot locate research questions even with careful reading, consider that perhaps the questions might only seem to be missing, because the article was written for people who have specialized knowledge that you do not have—knowledge allowing them to understand what is not explicitly stated. At the same time, do not assume that the problem is yours, because not all published research is high-quality research characterized by clear and obvious questions. In such cases, slow down in your reading and be very attentive to keeping the critical/skeptical stance, because ambiguous or missing questions can be an indication of less-than-quality research.

The lesson here is when writing research, be sure to include specific questions; when reading research, be sure that you identify the specific questions being examined. Simply stated, you cannot evaluate the extent to which research resolves a mystery if it is not clear what mystery was being investigated.

CONSTRUCTING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

An important skill in designing research is developing the ability to *write* good questions. Unless you will be replicating (simply redoing) research already done by someone else, constructing research questions can be a messy process, often starting only with fuzzy ideas about interesting topics. If you are designing a research project, it is best to expect that writing good

Exhibit 3.1 Research Questions in Published Research

Title/Author	Questions as They Appear in the Article	Question Form
Abramowitz/Saunders: "Exploring the Bases of Partisanship"	[W]e test[ed] the social identity theory by examining the influence on party identification of membership in a wide variety of social groups (lines 63–64).	What is the influence on party identification of membership in a wide variety of social groups?
Bowser: "Ethnography of Racial Identities"	[hypothesis]: There is now a hierarchy of public identities based upon perceived ethnicity and Muslim affiliation . . . This hierarchy is acted out through social interaction . . . in [public] (lines 73–76).	Is there a hierarchy of public identities based on perceived ethnicity and Muslim affiliation? Is this hierarchy acted out through social interaction in public spaces?
Goode: "The Digital Identity Divide"	This article considers the complex ways that schools and universities perpetuate the digital divide (lines 23–24). This study uses narrative inquiry to investigate how holding a technology identity subtly influences academic and social life at the university setting (lines 105–107).	How do schools and universities perpetuate inequality? How does a technology identity influence academic and social life in a university setting?
Guendelman/Cheryan/Monin: "Identity Threat and Dietary Choices"	We investigated whether members of non-White immigrant groups choose and consume American food as a way to convey that they belong in America (lines 17–18). We investigated whether the motivation to convey an identity can also bring about actual dietary decline (lines 47–49).	Do members of non-White immigrant groups choose and consume American food as a way to convey that they belong in America? Does motivation to convey an identity bring about actual dietary decline?

Exhibit 3.1 (Continued)

Title/Author	Questions as They Appear in the Article	Question Form
McIntosh/McKeganey: "Addicts' Narratives of Recovery"	We are . . . interested in the way in which [narratives of recovery] may be used by addicts as an integral part of [their recovery] (lines 24–26). What is the nature of the individuals' accounts of their recovery and in what ways might the recounting of those narratives be part of the recovery[?] (lines 98–100)	How do drug addicts use narratives of recovery to help them recover from drug use? [same]
Odland: "Unassailable Motherhood, Ambivalent Domesticity"	I examine how *Ladies' Home Journal* . . . participated in the discursive construction of maternal identity (lines 38–40).	How did *Ladies' Home Journal* participate in the discursive production of maternal identity?
Ridner/Walker/Hart/Myers: "Smoking Identities and Smoking Behavior"	The purpose of this study was to examine smoking identity and smoking behavior among college students. The specific aim was to explore the relationship between smoking identity and the number of days smoked in the past month (lines 51–54).	What is the relationship between smoking identity and smoking behavior among college students? What is the relationship between smoking identity and the number of days smoked in the past month?
Stretesky/Pogrebin: "Gang-Related Gun Violence"	This study considers how gangs promote violence and gun use (lines 1–2).	How do gangs promote violence and gun use?

questions will require considerable time and energy. While there is not one magic formula for how to write good research questions, here is one way you might think about the task: The process of writing questions is that of gradually narrowing down broad topics (say, an interest in why some of your friends love anything to do with computers while others find technology a constant source of frustration) to much smaller topics capable of being empirically examined ("What are the relationships between technology identity and using technology?").

Step 1. Start with a general topic you find interesting. The possible topics for social research are as endless as they are fascinating. Sociologists explore questions about relationships among individuals, groups, social processes, and social structures, including topics such as gender, disability, social class, identity, family, education, politics, social problems, and work. Criminologists examine similar topics with a particular emphasis on understanding the characteristics, causes, consequences, and resolutions of crime and deviance. Social workers also are interested in relationships among individuals, groups, and social systems with the particular goals of understanding the causes, consequences, and solutions to troubles people experience. Because the process of doing research is most appealing if you are interested in the topic, start with something you find intriguing. Perhaps you read something that was exciting for a class? Maybe you always have wondered how something works? Keep your eyes and ears open and be alert to all the mysteries of social life swirling around you.

Step 2. Review the existing literature. The next chapter, "Literature Reviews," talks about the design task of learning what already is known about your topic. What research already has been done? What gaps are there in what is known? What seems to be fairly agreed upon, and what seems to be characterized by disagreements? As you read, pay particular attention to the end of reports, where researchers often offer their opinions about what kinds of questions still require answers. It could be that you will find an excellent question already has been written by someone else. That is good luck.

It might also be helpful to get into the habit of jotting down your thoughts and questions as you read. This will be an informal record of possibilities, and as you read over your notes, you will start to see what kinds of topics draw your attention. In the beginning stages of your exploration, do *not* try to come up with specific questions for your research. Rather, think creatively and broadly about the general topics. Explore possibilities.

Step 3: Write a question. You started only with a general topic. Now that you have some ideas about what others have said and what previous research has shown, can you write a specific research question?

Step 4: Go back to the literature. Once you have a question, you might need to go back to the literature, because now you will be looking for articles about more specific topics.

Step 5: Repeat (and repeat). This is a process—writing questions, reading, and modifying questions. The process ends when questions that are *suitable* for studying by the methods of social research are also *appropriate*, given the characteristics of the researcher, study participants, and practicalities.

ASSESSING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While there are *technical* characteristics of good research questions, not all technically adequate questions are appropriate. If you are designing research, it would be well to think about your own characteristics, the characteristics of the people who will be participating in your study, and the practicalities of doing the research that would be needed to answer the question.

Thinking About Researchers

While the image of researchers within positivist perspectives is of people who are emotionally detached from the process of research, this is not always the case. If you are designing research, there are some things you might think about as you start to form topics and questions. Thinking about these in the beginning stages of your research can save you much time in the long run.

Research and Personally Meaningful Topics

Researching topics that are interesting is beneficial, because working on mysteries you find interesting is more fun than working on those you do not much care about. Topics that are exciting often include those that are personally meaningful. Recent immigrants can be attracted to questions about immigration; very religious people can be interested in topics surrounding religion and spirituality, and so on. Doing research on personally meaningful topics can be beneficial: Researchers' personal experiences can lead to sensitivities not possible without such experiences; personal relevance can be a powerful motivator and source of energy to do the sustained work required for producing quality research.

At the same time, there can be negative consequences when researchers explore topics that are about their most deeply held values and/or topics that

are centrally significant experiences in their lives. The lesson is obvious: If you are designing research on a topic that is *very* important to you, do *not* try to convince others—or yourself for that matter—that you are approaching your work in the dispassionate and objective manner valued within positivist frameworks. You must be honest about how your own values and biases shape your research design as well as the processes of data generation and data interpretation. Such biases are very troublesome within research from positivist perspectives; they are not necessarily problematic in research from interpretive or critical perspectives. Just be honest.

I also suggest that you think very carefully before designing research on a topic that is personally painful. The social research process requires immersion in the subject, and while some people find deep engagement to be therapeutic, others find it very upsetting. Stated truthfully, because the tasks and goals of research are *not* the same as the tasks and goals of therapy, confusing research and therapy can produce both bad research and bad therapy. I have seen students design research projects they are unable to implement: A woman who had been raped found she could not listen to other women talk about their own rape experiences, because listening to their stories led her to recall her own experiences; each interview felt like she was reliving her rape. A man who had grown up with an alcoholic, abusive father found he was not really interested in doing research on this topic—he did not want to listen to the experiences of others, unless they were like his own experience; he found himself arguing with people he was interviewing, trying to change their perspectives to match his own.

The lesson for research design is that it is best to explore topics that are interesting and perhaps personally meaningful yet think carefully about designing research on topics that are *very* meaningful. Ask yourself if you really want to absorb yourself in the topic.

Research and Personal Perspectives on Social Life

A topic in the last chapter was how underlying assumptions about social life associated with positivist, interpretive, and critical perspectives influence research design. While I will return to how these influence other characteristics of research design, I want to make a preliminary comment that whether you are designing research or evaluating the research of others, you will be most comfortable with research that is more or less in line with how you personally view the world. So if you are very concerned about social justice, you will be biased toward having positive evaluations of articles informed by critical perspectives, and you will be most comfortable using this perspective in research you design yourself. What this means is that when designing research, it is best to start with the kinds of questions

associated with the perspectives you find most comfortable. You might change your perspective as you develop the project, but start where you feel most comfortable.

Research and Working Styles

At the beginning stages of designing research, you should think about how you prefer to work. Some people do their best and are most comfortable when they have a fairly clear idea of precisely how their research will proceed. If this is you, then you should design research that is securely grounded in the current state of knowledge. This is *deductive* research, where data gathering does not begin until the researcher has a fairly detailed idea of what to look for and for how findings will be understood. In this case, you should write a research question on a topic where a great deal already is known. If you are a person who *really* dislikes the feeling of working without a clear image of what you are doing, then consider doing a *replication* study (where you are repeating a study that has already been done), which is the most deductive research possible.

Other people like the excitement of exploring the unknown; they feel comfortable working on projects without clear expectations of how the project should be done or of what the final product should look like. If this describes you, then you should consider *inductive* research, which is characterized by beginning data generation with only general notions of what might be found. In this case, you should seek a topic where not a great deal already is known.

In my own experiences, I have found that there is *no* relationship between the personal preferences of students to engage in deductive or inductive research and their abilities as researchers. This is another of those instances where *different* simply means *different*, where one preference is not better or worse than another and where one method does not take more—or fewer—skills than another. Doing well with inductive research requires a high tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; doing well with deductive research requires careful attention to how the smallest details of current understandings are being supported or refuted. Keep this in mind as you think about your research topic and as you refine your interest to specific questions.

Thinking About Research Participants

Much research uses data produced by researchers who ask people to talk, answer survey questions, participate in experiments, and so on. Whenever research requires participants, it is the responsibility of researchers to ensure that people are not harmed by their participation. I will say more about this in Chapter 6, because questions about protecting research participants are most

obviously raised during the process of developing techniques to generate data. What I would suggest is to memorize the following general rule; if you keep it in mind, you will be well along in designing research that protects the people participating in your study:

> The well-being of study participants is the *first, foremost*, and *primary* responsibility of social researchers.

During the early stage of thinking about research, remember that some topics require special sensitivity. Subjects such as religious beliefs and sexual identifications, for example, tend to be associated with strong feelings; topics such as grave illness, death, suicide, abortion, and family troubles of all types can be personally experienced as traumatic and private.

> Focus on how your research project will appear from the perspective of your research participants. Do not assume that they share your experiences, values, and biases.

If you want to propose research on topics that have even the *slightest chance* of being sensitive or upsetting, then you need to seek advice from others who have done such research and/or from people who are familiar with the specific issues pertaining to that particular topic. Expect also that research on sensitive or disturbing topics will be closely examined by institutional review boards, which are local committees charged with reviewing and certifying that proposed research will do no harm to study participants.

I will return to the topic of protecting research participants in Chapter 6. For now, the lesson is that as you start to settle on a topic and begin the process of transforming this topic to specific questions, do not forget that the well-being of your study participants must always remain your first consideration.

Thinking About Practicalities

The process of research often begins rather abstractly—the potential researcher reads, thinks, writes questions, modifies those questions based on readings, and so on. Yet the process ends very practically: Researchers go out into the world and talk with people, watch people, run experiments, analyze magazine articles, and so on. It is not uncommon for "perfect" questions and "perfect" research designs to become somewhat less than perfect, because the

practicalities of doing research get in the way of perfection. I will talk about this in several chapters: Some questions that sound appropriate for research turn out to be too complicated (Chapter 5); it might be too expensive to generate data using the most appropriate technique, or ethical questions might be posed by that technique (Chapter 6); the question might require a sample of people who cannot be obtained (Chapter 7). The messiness of real research is that it is about people and social life, both of which are complicated, and so on

The lesson for designing research is that practicalities can make it impossible to examine the exact question researchers wish to pose. If problems are discovered early in the design process, they often are easily resolved. I return to my optimism:

> Problems (of any type) do *not* mean the topic must be abandoned. Consider problems as opportunities to be creative.
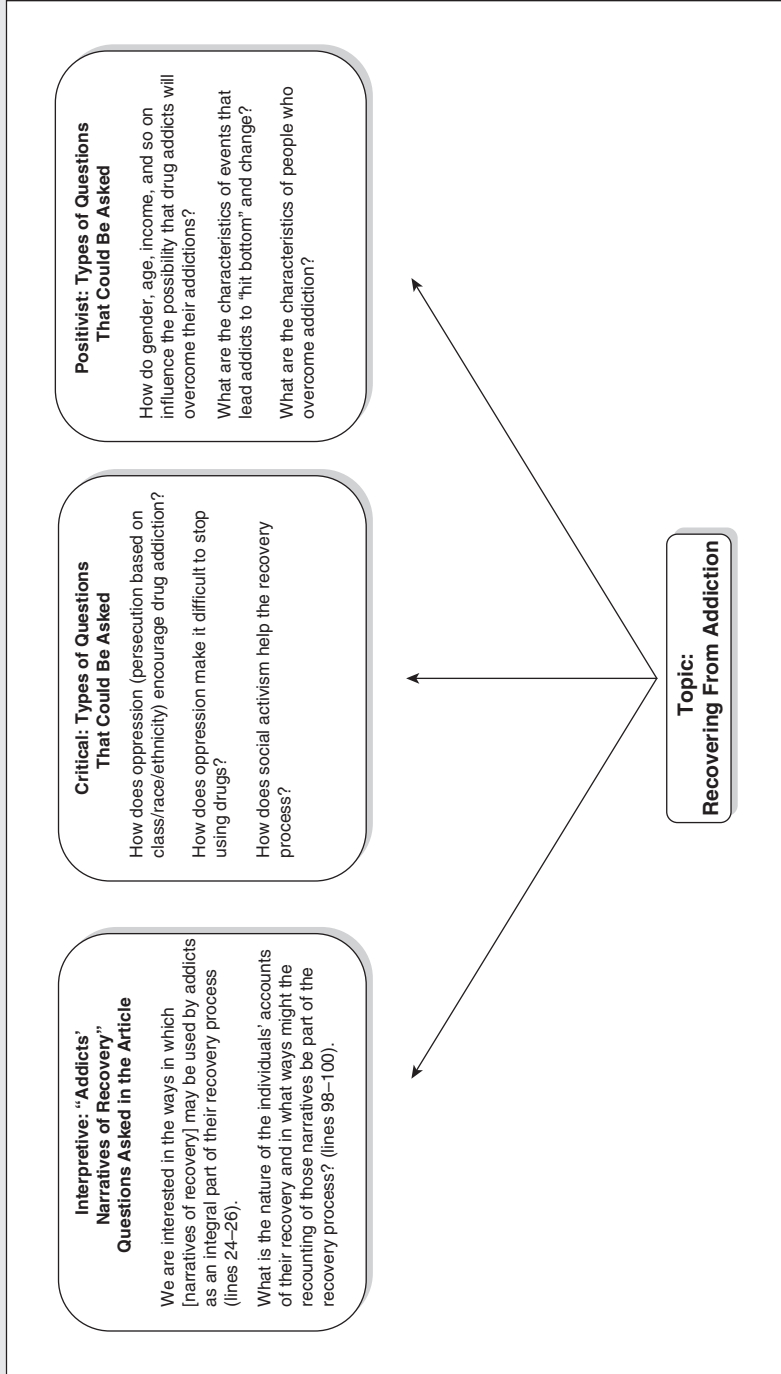
RECONSTRUCTING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Methodological thinking encourages viewing research design as a *creative* process; it involves thinking about the task of overcoming problems (of any type) as occasions for creativity. Think outside the box; think about alternatives.

Modifying Questions to Reflect
Particular Views of Social Life

Earlier I suggested that when designing research, you should think about your own perspectives on social life. If you do this, you might decide that, for one reason or another, the question you have written is drawing from a model of social life that is not the most interesting to you. Perhaps you are drawn to a positivist-linked image of social science as the objective and value-free study of social life, yet the question you have written seems more in keeping with critical perspectives, because it assumes inequalities and promotes particular values. Or maybe you are interested in how people make meaning, but your question seems to assume that people are controlled rather than meaning-makers. You should expect to find a great many such inconsistencies: Social life is complex, so the overwhelming majority of topics can be—indeed, should be—examined through different perspectives. What this means is that it most often is easy to re-write a question in order to slightly refocus it. Consider, for example, Exhibit 3.2:

Exhibit 3.2 Varieties of Research Questions: Drug Addiction

Interpretive: "Addicts' Narratives of Recovery" Questions Asked in the Article

We are interested in the ways in which [narratives of recovery] may be used by addicts as an integral part of their recovery process (lines 24–26).

What is the nature of the individuals' accounts of their recovery and in what ways might the recounting of those narratives be part of the recovery process? (lines 98–100).

Critical: Types of Questions That Could Be Asked

How does oppression (persecution based on class/race/ethnicity) encourage drug addiction?

How does oppression make it difficult to stop using drugs?

How does social activism help the recovery process?

Positivist: Types of Questions That Could Be Asked

How do gender, age, income, and so on influence the possibility that drug addicts will overcome their addictions?

What are the characteristics of events that lead addicts to "hit bottom" and change?

What are the characteristics of people who overcome addiction?
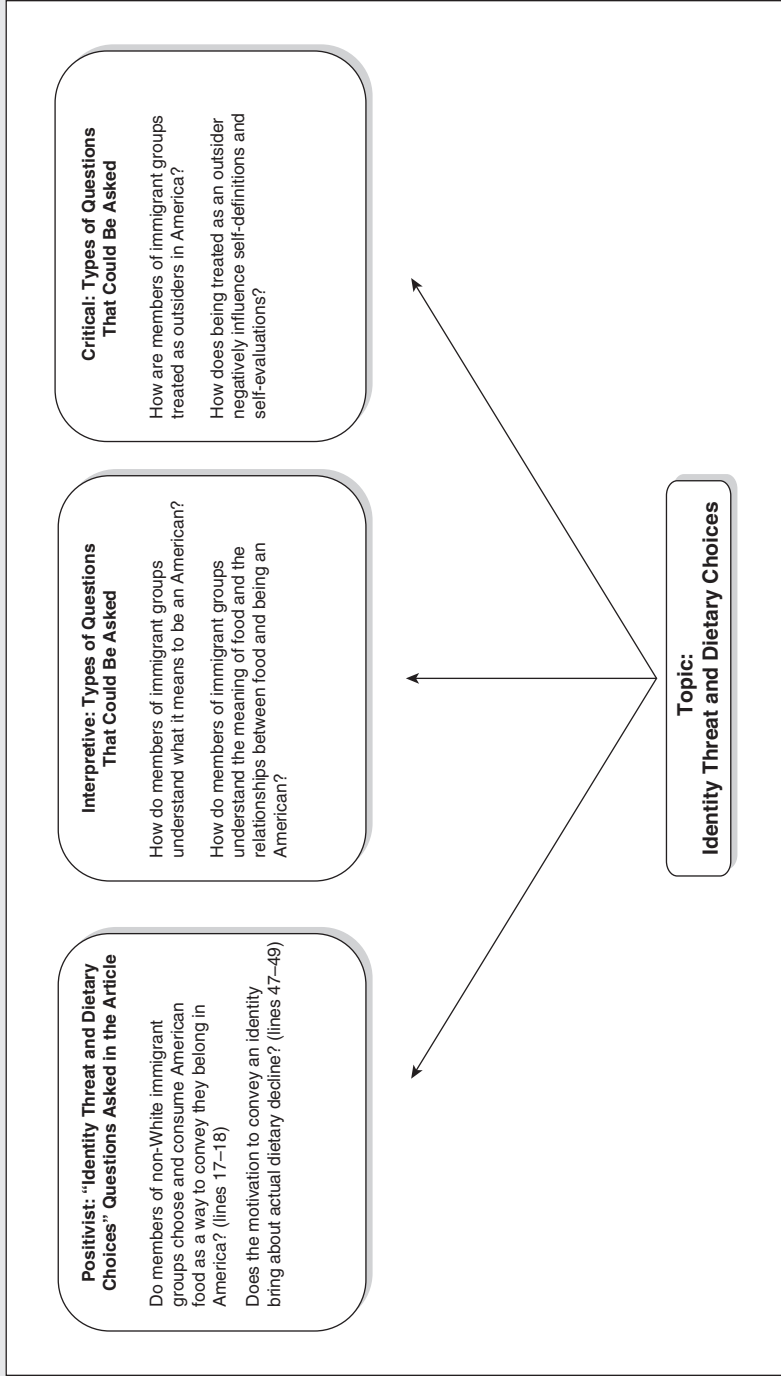
Topic: Recovering From Addiction

We know that "Addicts' Narratives of Recovery" is from an interpretive perspective, because this perspective is interested in how people make meaning, and this article is about how recovering addicts tell stories about themselves, their addictions, and their recovery and how these stories are a part of the recovery process (lines 96–100). Consider how easy it would be to shift the focus from an *interpretive* interest in meaning-making to a *positivist* perspective focus on understanding cause. There are important questions about recovering from addiction from this perspective: How do gender, age, income, and so on influence the possibilities that drug addicts will overcome their addictions? What are the characteristics of events leading addicts to "hit bottom" and change? Likewise, critical perspectives also would contain important questions about recovering from addiction: How does oppression (bias based on class/race/ethnicity) encourage drug addiction? How does oppression make it difficult to stop using drugs? How does social activism help the recovery process?

Are any of these questions better than the others? Certainly not. Questions are simply *different*. As another example, consider Exhibit 3.3, which shows the variety of questions possible for the concept of "identity threat":

"Identity Threat and Dietary Choices" is from a positivist perspective. We know this because the theory is that people (in this case, immigrants) are influenced/controlled by social life (in this case, by reactions to perceived threats to their identities as Americans). The positivist mystery in this study is empirically explored through an experiment involving relationships between threats to identity and eating behavior: Do threats to their American identity cause immigrants to change their dietary preferences from their own (often more healthy) foods to calorie- and fat-laden foods associated with the United States? This is a very good question and one with obvious practical implications, because immigrants tend to become Americanized, which includes changing their food preferences. Over time, this leads immigrants to the same poor diets associated with Americans. An interpretive researcher might think about the topic of identity threat and want to know more about meaning. The researcher might think, "Why are researchers *assuming* that immigrants experience identity threat?" Rather than assuming this, why not talk with immigrants to see how they understand what it means to be an American and how they understand links between their identities and their behaviors. From a critical perspective, this topic is clearly about relationships between experiences and oppression: How are people in immigrant groups treated as outsiders? How does being treated as an outsider negatively influence immigrants' self-evaluations?

Once again, what we have is a general interest in a topic, such as "identity threat," that can be reasonably transformed into many different

Exhibit 3.3 Varieties of Research Questions: Identity Threat

Positivist: "Identity Threat and Dietary Choices" Questions Asked in the Article

Do members of non-White immigrant groups choose and consume American food as a way to convey they belong in America? (lines 17–18)

Does the motivation to convey an identity bring about actual dietary decline? (lines 47–49)

Interpretive: Types of Questions That Could Be Asked

How do members of immigrant groups understand what it means to be an American?

How do members of immigrant groups understand the meaning of food and the relationships between food and being an American?

Critical: Types of Questions That Could Be Asked

How are members of immigrant groups treated as outsiders in America?

How does being treated as an outsider negatively influence self-definitions and self-evaluations?

Topic: Identity Threat and Dietary Choices

kinds of research questions. Questions differ because they reflect different underlying assumptions about social life and because they reflect different visions of the goals of research. What this means is that when you are designing social research, you might find yourself drawn to a particular topic, and once you settle on the topic, an all-but-unlimited number of questions are possible.

Modifying Questions to Reflect Practicalities

In each of the following chapters, I will give examples of how practicalities sometimes require modifying research questions. Here I want to restate the general lesson, because if you are designing research, you need to hear this over and over: Part of the art of research design is modifying questions so that the research topic is as close as possible to what would have been perfect. It might not be possible to locate the exact documents you wanted to examine; it might not be possible to talk with people who have the exact characteristics you are interested in; it might not be possible to find enough such people to serve as an adequate sample. Researchers often find that it simply is not possible to do the exact research they would like. It is at that point that methodological thinking—creative thinking—helps. Allow yourself to feel sad for a moment that you cannot do exactly what you wanted to do, but after that moment, think about how even a small change in your question might give you something pretty close to what you wanted and how it might actually give you more than you originally thought you could get.

It also is necessary to remember the constant problems of practicalities in social research when you are evaluating the social research of others: You might read a report of research and believe that the researchers did not ask the most important question. Before evaluating this as a design flaw, ask yourself, "Would it have been possible to do research on the most important question? Or is this, perhaps, the best we can do?"

EVALUATING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Here is a summary of the characteristics of good research questions:

1. A good question is about the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, or *how* of social life.

2. A good question requires data that can be obtained through the senses using the methods of social research.

3. A good question is sensitive to the characteristics of the person doing the research.

4. A good question is sensitive to the well-being of people who will participate in the study.

5. A good question can be explored, given practicalities.

Two remaining qualities of good research questions are topics in the next two chapters:

- A good question is supported by the existing literature (Chapter 4).
- A good question is composed of terms that can be adequately conceptualized and operationalized (Chapter 5).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

My continuing comment is that the actual practice of social research design and implementation can be messy, with each design task influencing the others. The process of constructing research questions, as well as the work of evaluating research questions written by others, is related to other components of social research design. Research questions can—and *must*—change in response to other design considerations.

In practice, the actual process of writing research questions cannot be separated from the literature review. So let us proceed to that.

Writing questions ⟺ **Learning what already is known about the topic (literature review)**