

personal reflections, as operationalized in the immersion journals each team member will be keeping (see Chapter 10). In intersectional team-based netnographies, we would expect to see cogent inclusion and analysis of the divergent perspectives of the researchers, as their research and personal experiences differentially refract the phenomenon under study. Medrado and Muller (2018), for example, provide a rich portrayal of the intersectional perspective of black Brazilian mothers represented on a feminist blog/media platform. Alongside this, they present a cultural and historical unpacking that studies the digital activism and social conflicts created when a range of feminisms intersect on the site. Using individual immersion journals to systematize a similar process, teams can build upon the strengths of personal ethnographic viewpoints to expand into multiple research perspectives.

As we have learned in this section, the organization of data by teams is important and can be facilitated by use of a central online depository. Division of labor is also important, and some alternatives that this section discusses are dividing work by online site, by county, by netnography movements or operations, or by perspective of the researcher. With this brief set of guidelines in place to help steer your team netnography, it is time to slide into the first movement of netnography, the interrogatory movement. Are you ready to start a project? Are you ready to start thinking about asking research questions?

ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying that if he had an hour to solve a problem and his life depended on the solution, he would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, because once he knew the proper question, he could solve the problem in less than five minutes. If Einstein says that asking the right questions is so crucial that he would stake his life on it, we should probably believe it.

Because research questions are incredibly important to the success of your netnographic project, this section is dedicated to helping you construct and focus research questions appropriate for netnography. As Belk et al. (2013: 17–20) point out, ‘there are two basic sources of inspiration for original, important research questions: prior research, and empirical phenomena’. Prior research can be conceptual or theoretical, but its most important aspect will be its abstractions, the constructs that it uses, and the specified relationship between them, which is theory. Empirical phenomena encompass contexts such as sites or events, types of behavior, or even types of social actors. For beginner researchers – and to be frank for seasoned professionals too – it can often be difficult to distinguish whether a conceptual research area or an empirical phenomenon has already been sufficiently understood. In order to help, this chapter has a series of exercises and guidelines to get you closer to that goal post of a thoughtful, significant, innovative, and intriguing research question.

Topics and Angles

I propose that there are two major parts to a research question. The first is the topic of the question. All research questions have a particular topic, which is its subject or focus. The topic is an answer to the question ‘What exactly is the concept that you will investigate?’ Topics need not be concrete, but can be abstract. You could be studying faith, sexual orientation, or cyber-bullying, or you could study a particular online site, or certain sites that foster climate denial, neoliberal beliefs, or anti-immigrant nationalism. As White (2017: 43) suggests, you could begin writing your research question topic with a single sentence. Simply fill in the blank:

I want to investigate _____.

After you decide on a topic, you can refine that topic endlessly. Topics and questions are infinitely malleable. Let us say that you started out by stating that you want to investigate the topic of cyber-bullying. Your follow-up refinement could be as follows:

I want to investigate the cyber-bullying of young Asian females by non-Asians.

Research questions also have a particular angle of inquiry or focus. This is their second part. The angle of inquiry is the answer to the question ‘What do you want to know about the topic?’. The angle of inquiry provides important boundaries that define the question, fencing in what it includes and what it excludes. The more specific the angle of the question becomes, the narrower is the investigation. Being precise can be a good thing, but there are often trade-offs between being focused in your questioning, and being either overspecific or context-bound, and being interesting. Particularly with qualitative techniques like netnography, you probably are best advised to keep your questions fairly wide and open enough at the beginning to allow surprises and the opening up of unexpected but potentially fruitful new pathways to explore. Consider the following extended example, in which you would once again fill in the blanks:

I want to investigate _____ in order to learn who/what/where/when/whether/how or why they _____ so that we (as a field) can better understand _____.

Creswell (2009: 129–31) suggests that you should try using exploratory verbs such as ‘discover’, ‘understand’, ‘explore’, ‘describe’, or ‘report’ in your research question. As an example, we might add an angle to the more specific question about Asian female cyber-bullying as follows:

I want to investigate the cyber-bullying of young Asian females by non-Asians in order to build a contextualized understanding of the racist attitudes, roles, rituals, and identities that circulate on social media.

Risk-Free Questioning

With the fill-in-the-blanks options of the section above, you may have already begun thinking about your research question. This section offers a further set of exercises to focus on the conceptual topic of your research question. Your topical focus will inevitably be shaped by a variety of forces, not only your curiosity and idiosyncratic thirst for particular kinds of knowledge, but also the extant current of interest and thought running through your academic field, your particular academic department, and your colleagues, perhaps even something you saw recently in the media or heard in another research presentation. As well, you may be working in a team. If so, landing on a particular topic may require some advocacy, discussion, and negotiation. The topical interest you institute into your research question will direct you to locate your netnography in certain areas, and the angle of your question will cause you to look for particular kinds of data within those particular areas. In order to begin learning more about creating research questions, let us begin to practice with a no-risk exercise that focuses in on a particular theoretical or conceptual area that you are comfortable exploring.

5.1

EXPLORING THE CONCEPTUAL BASIS OF A PRACTICE RESEARCH QUESTION (PROJECT EXERCISE)

Step 1 Pick a Practice Research Question relating to an abstract theoretical concept in your field.

Step 2 If you can, discuss your question with a classmate. Then, together, explore that theoretical topic using a search engine such as Google Scholar. Look at a few academic articles. Track down a few references. Read a few abstracts. Try to learn, with an investment of about 15 minutes of time, what has been written about this theoretical topic. What discernible patterns exist in the literature about this topic?

What gaps do you detect in our collective knowledge? What unspoken assumptions could you challenge? Write down a summary of what you have learned.

Step 3 Based on what you have learned, refine and revise your research question into a new research question that more clearly specifies the research gap that you have identified.

Step 4 (Optional): Repeat the procedure one or two times.

Step 5 After you are done, discuss or write down, what you have discovered.

Situating Netnography in Research Traditions

In netnography, although we are using social media data, we often situate our work within particular fields such as nursing or queer studies, and within particular research traditions that are related to cultural topics and their consideration, such as hermeneutic, phenomenological, critical, or neopositivist traditions. These fields and traditions guide us to consider particular kinds of research questions, which I have called ‘particular angles of inquiry’. For example, netnographic inquiry within a hermeneutic research tradition would likely consider questions regarding how cultural bases shape particular kinds of experience and behavior. Work within a phenomenological research tradition might consider questions about the essence of people’s lived experiences. Work within a critical research tradition would lead us to develop questions about the factors contributing to the oppression of some marginalized group of actors, and how to alleviate those conditions. Work that comes from a neopositivist research tradition might prompt us to inquire about the factors that explain a particular phenomenon or the consequences of its occurrence (see Belk et al., 2013: 20–26). You might look back at your initial theoretically-derived research question exercises, which you may have completed above, and examine them in light of these research traditions. Do your theoretically-derived research questions resonate with any of these research traditions? Do they contain any related angles of inquiry?

Conceptual or theoretical topics are one source of inspiration and focus for your netnographic research question. Now let’s turn to the other source: an empirical phenomenon. Let’s begin with another exercise, one which is similar in structure, but actually quite different in focus from the one you just completed. To continue learning more about research questions, we will continue our practice with another risk-free exercise in which you now focus in on an empirical phenomenon, for example, a context such as a site, event, type of behavior, or social actor.

EXPLORING THE EMPIRICAL OR PHENOMENAL BASIS OF A PRACTICE RESEARCH QUESTION

Step 1

Pick a Practice Research Question relating to an empirical phenomenon that you find worthy of investigation.

Step 2

If you can, discuss your question with a classmate. Then, together, explore the empirical phenomenon using search engines such as Google and Google Scholar. What has been written about the phenomenon already? What news articles? What academic articles? Read a few abstracts and the first few paragraphs of the news stories and articles. Try to learn, with

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