

# CRITICAL APPROACHES TO QUESTIONS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

RAJI SWAMINATHAN AND THALIA M. MULVIHILL

“I am encouraged by the bold steps taken by Drs. Swaminathan and Mulvihill in challenging members of the research community to embrace a critical approach. Given the seriousness of the times, their work succinctly confronts the dangerous return to research paradigms rooted in theories of deficit, marginalization, and White supremacy. For these reasons, I am indebted to their contribution.”

**David Stovall**, *Professor of Educational Policy Studies and African-American Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago*

“Swaminathan and Mulvihill tend to the important process of formulating questions throughout the entire qualitative research process; it is not relegated to the beginning of the process. There is a critical process of questioning that engages scholars at every aspect of the research process and, as such, provides the opportunity for a deeper, richer inquiry. This book is important for critical scholars who find it imperative to go beyond traditional ways of knowing and doing qualitative research.”

**Penny A. Pasque**, *Brian E. & Sandra O'Brien Presidential Professor, University of Oklahoma*



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Learning how to formulate questions that examine the power relations between the researcher and participants is at the heart of critical approaches. This book provides a comprehensive overview and treatment of critical approaches to questions in qualitative research. It also examines questions as tools for strategic thinking and decision making at all stages of the qualitative research process. Written using examples from research and teaching, it situates constructing and formulating questions as a critical aspect of qualitative research that encourages learning to interrogate, and inquire, against the grain.

The authors illustrate the ways in which different research questions necessitate different methodological choices, framing questions for research, interviewing, and analysis—suggesting some questions that can guide the writing process. With exercises, sample questions, and outlines for planning research, this book assists qualitative researchers with creating more effective questions, including formulating questions to guide reflexivity meant to confront prevailing assumptions and therefore dismantle and uncover omissions and invisibilities.

This book stands out among other qualitative research methods books in its focus on critical approaches to questions as the driver of the research imagination. Utilizing a number of examples, there is also a focused discussion of how to arrive at research questions, align interview questions with those research questions, actively construct

questions to guide the data analysis process, and use further types of questions to guide the writing process. The examples the authors employ include questions drawn from qualitative approaches to phenomenology, ethnography, life writing, feminist research, and participatory action research.

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# 1

## BACKGROUND

### Questions and the Critical Framework in Qualitative Research

#### Questions: The Heart of Research

Asking good questions is fundamental to the heart of research, critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving. In our deliberations regarding this book, one of the reasons we focused on questions was rooted in our own experiences of research, where our mutual dialogues often took the form of questioning each other and the content of our enterprise. It was in many ways at the heart of the research activity, a space where curiosity was ignited and an excitement to investigate or find out took over.

The rationale for developing a book on this topic is to elevate the much-needed discussion about the nature of the thinking processes needed in order to design critical approaches that are innovative and successful. Our aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of critical approaches to questions in qualitative research. To us, questions represent a key competency in conducting research. We use “questions” as a way to work against prescriptive and mechanical how-tos and instead discuss them as an overarching strategy to stimulate qualitative thinking for research purposes. Qualitative thinking has been defined by several scholars (Saldana, 2015; Vagle, 2014) as eschewing a single point of view or the seeking of an “objective truth” in favor

## **2 Questions and the Critical Framework**

of drawing on multiple perspectives and diverse ways of thinking; observing events, scenes, and people; discussing, interviewing, and analyzing talk and text; and constructing stories from listening deeply to participants' views of phenomena. Such thinking draws on art and creativity, as well as planned, systematic categorization leading to new insights about phenomena under inquiry. We utilize "questions" to stimulate wonder, curiosity, and mystery during the lifecycle of the research process.

Despite our acknowledgement that questions are at the center of research, our aim in this book is to resist thinking about questions as a necessity but instead conceptualize questions as a tool that can stimulate different types of thinking. The objective of this book is to provide a synthesis of how scholars have approached the subject of questions in qualitative research along with practical suggestions on how to use questions as a stimulus to thinking throughout the process of research. How do questions serve as tools for the planning and implementation of a study, for analysis of data, and for writing up research? To this end, we discuss how questions have been raised in the literature, but we also provide the qualitative researcher who wishes to undertake a project with tools that can be adapted to specific projects. The questions and suggestions for question generation that are presented in this book are not prescriptive but emerge from our own experiences of research and teaching. It is our intent, through examining and centralizing questions in qualitative research, to keep alive the mystery and wonder of research.

### **Whom Is this Book for?**

We aim to provide a comprehensive discussion of questions through the lifecycle of the research process. The critical paradigm is central to this endeavor; however the book can be used by any qualitative researcher who wants to get an overview of the effective use of questions in qualitative research. We direct this book toward students of qualitative research and academic scholars who may want to use it as a companion book in their courses. Scholars affiliated with the social sciences, health sciences, and humanities can all use this book. In addition, those who are writing their theses or dissertations and are seeking to use different approaches will also find this book useful.

## What Is the Book About?

In this book, we present questions as tools for strategic thinking and decision-making in the research process. Maxwell (2005) suggests that questions are at the “hub” or “heart” of research and emerge from the design while other researchers (Metz, 2001) suggest that questions are the starting point of research. Although they may differ on when questions should be posed, scholars are in agreement that questions undergird the research process and the strength of the research project is often dependent on the quality of questions posed by researchers. Yet, as we have frequently found in our classes, students often cannot initially distinguish between research questions (RQs) and interview questions (IQs). And further, students have difficulty understanding the variety of ways that interviews can be designed (e.g., structured, semi-structured, unstructured) and how to make these types of design decisions. Most existing textbooks on qualitative research methods embed the sections dealing with questions in relevant chapters (see for example, Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 2012) and tend to focus most attention on research questions and interview questions. However, they do not devote much space to ways to formulate questions during the data-analysis process, or during the various stages of reflexivity, or the time when you pull the whole manuscript together working and reworking during the revisions process. Further interrogating the range of ways questions can be used as dynamic tools, and recognizing that we, as qualitative researchers, can elevate our abilities to formulate and use these tools, is the driving motivation for our explorations within this book.

We provide a focused discussion of questions in qualitative research through the full lifecycle of the research process. While some articles in the qualitative literature discuss question generation, they are few (see McCaslin and Scott [2003] and White [2013] for a more recent example). There is a need to bring together, in one place, critical approaches to questions in qualitative research.

Qualitative research methodologists (Burns and Grove, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Morse, 1994) distinguish between different approaches to qualitative research and point out the types of questions asked in each research approach. They emphasize that the type of question