About the website

This text has a comprehensive companion website which features resources for instructors and students alike.

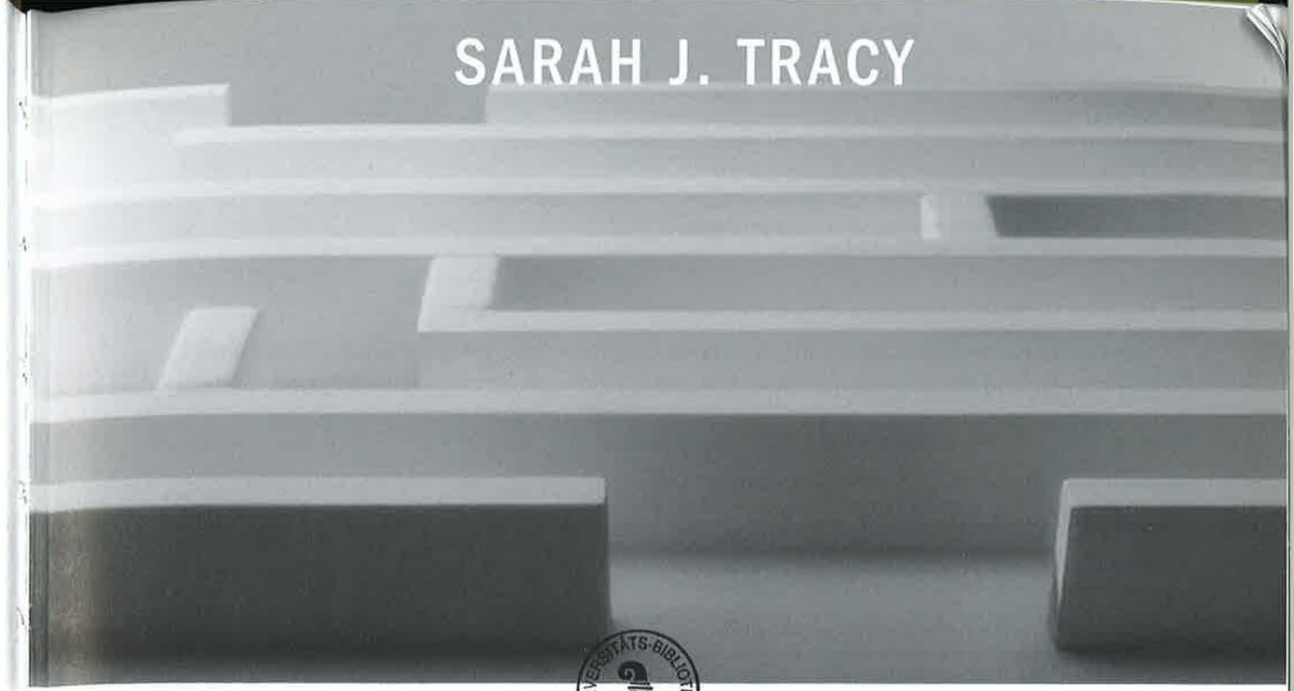
Instructors

- Powerpoint slides to accompany each chapter
- Sample syllabi for both undergraduate and graduate courses
- A testbank, containing problems for each chapter, including answers
- Lesson plan outlines for each chapter
- 23 additional activities created by guest contributors

Students

- Master list of key terms and definitions
- Worksheets for each chapter
- Exam guides, containing key terms and concepts for each chapter
- List of helpful websites, videos, movies, and blogs

Please visit www.wiley.com/go/tracy to access these materials.



SARAH J. TRACY

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

COLLECTING EVIDENCE, CRAFTING ANALYSIS, COMMUNICATING IMPACT

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

narrative tour a written document, usually accompanying a visual map, that explores a scene's physical layout, feelings, smells, sounds, tastes, and temperatures, also providing rich descriptions and tentative interpretations

participants the individuals whom qualitative researchers study are not known as "subjects," but as participants, because they create, and participate in, the research process *together with* researchers

participant information table a table used to organize information about participants; it may include a variety of demographic and methodological data

participant observation (also see **fieldwork)** a method through which researchers generate understanding and knowledge by watching, interacting, asking questions, collecting documents, and making audio or video recordings

public documents websites, brochures, pamphlets, or advertisements that provide information about a research site

textual harvesting the practice of using information (usually gathered from the Internet) without permission from the participant or regard for ethically questionable repercussions

total institutions a term developed by Goffman to refer to organizations like cruise ships, prisons, and hospitals, where some inhabitants of the institution never go home and therefore are controlled in a more total manner than in typical organizations

visual map a visual representation of a research site, roughly drawn or professionally developed, that details the physical scene and key positions of the participants

CHAP

Proposal writing

Explaining your research to institutional review boards, instructors, supervisory committees, and funding agencies

Contents

Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact, First Edition. Sarah J. Tracy.

This edition first published 2013

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007.
Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available for this book.

978-1-4051-9203-3 (hardback)
978-1-4051-9202-6 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image © Stockbyte / Getty Images
Cover design by Simon Levy

Set in 10/12pt Minion by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India
Printed in Malaysia by Ho Printing (M) Sdn Bhd

1 2013

I dedicate this book to all my past students, research participants, mentors, and colleagues who have taught me that anything worth doing well is worth doing badly in the beginning.

At some point in the qualitative process, most researchers will write one or more research proposals. A **research proposal** is a detailed plan that lays out the purpose, path, and procedures of the project. It serves as a wonderful tool for organizing and mapping the project and for communicating its worth to key audiences – people like teachers, advisors, funding agencies, and institutional review boards (IRBs). Research proposals offer an opportunity for these key audiences to give feedback that can enrich the project and ensure that it aligns with ethical, legal, and other institutional guidelines.

This chapter presents a review of United States institutional review boards, an explanation of different "levels" of human subjects' review, and tips for how to navigate the IRB approval process. Some qualitative researchers have an ambivalent or hostile attitude toward IRB. I will review controversial issues related to IRB and provide suggestions about how you can best incorporate human subject protections in your own research.

The chapter also supplies a step-by-step guide to writing a research proposal – a course assignment that often serves as a centerpiece project in methodology courses. A proposal in the form of a prospectus is usually required for graduate students pursuing master's theses or doctoral dissertations. Furthermore, granting agencies and scholarship boards usually ask for their own specialized research proposal. Whether or not you are required to write a research proposal, doing so generates focus for forthcoming projects.

Getting started with institutional review

As discussed in Chapter 2, the creation of **human subject protections** was prompted by ethically questionable research practices. Furthermore, after the atrocities committed by Nazi doctors in World War II, member countries of the United Nations adopted the Nuremberg Code, which requires voluntary informed consent. Most review boards are governed by the **Belmont Report** – a statement of basic human subject principles issued by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, which includes a number of ethical edicts discussed below. Review boards are typically made up of administrators, researchers, and scholars. They generally require a scientifically valid research design, which protects research participants' safety, privacy, health, and welfare. Furthermore, they try to ensure that the study's benefits outweigh its risks and have the potential to improve society.

To begin the IRB process, researchers should access their own university's procedures and protocol. A good place to start is the review board's website. This is usually found by Internet search phrases such as "institutional review board" or "human subjects" on the university's homepage. These websites usually provide information on workshops and downloads of proposal worksheets. The website will also list answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs), provide examples of consent/assent forms and verbal scripts, and gives you the university's IRB contact information. Researchers may also be required to complete a web-based training program – such as the one hosted by the American National Institute of Health – and offer proof of certification when they submit research protocols to the IRB.

You can get good IRB advice by talking to other students or teachers who have gone through the review process and are willing to share past proposals. Also, keep in mind that IRB staff are well versed on how to navigate the review process. Although you should not waste their time with questions easily answered online, IRB employees may provide individual, group, or classroom consultations as you design your project, determine the level of review necessary, and fill out forms.

The IRB proposal: rationale, instruments, informed consent, and confidentiality

A primary part of most IRB proposals is explaining the study's rationale. This part consists of a brief description, purpose, and design of the project. It may include:

- the guiding research questions;
- the project's duration and scope;
- the participant recruitment procedures;
- the methods of data collection, for example interviews, participant observation, website analysis.

The presentation of the rationale should avoid technical terms, theoretical jargon, and overuse of citations. The document must be understandable to personnel from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. It should also explain clearly why the research is significant (see Chapter 11 for more on significance).

Another key part of the IRB proposal is describing the **research instruments**, considered to be the tools used to carry out the research. For laboratory or survey studies, research instrumentation may be quite involved. However, in qualitative studies, *the researcher is the instrument*. In view of this, most qualitative researchers need only provide a list of interview questions, and perhaps discuss their focus group and observation procedures. In providing interview questions for IRBs, I recommend that researchers be as all-inclusive and broad as possible. This will help ensure that the questions are still applicable even if the exact foci of the study morph over time. If the study's goals are relatively undetermined – or if they change dramatically – the researcher should provide an addendum to the original IRB application when s/he determines the specific direction of interviews or focus groups. This is a common practice for qualitative researchers, as we rarely know what our interview questions should be until we spend some time in the field.

The IRB also requires that researchers demonstrate the ways participants (or participants' representatives) will provide voluntary and **informed consent**. This means that participants are free from coercion and comprehend the potential risks and benefits of the study. Participants must understand that they can withdraw from the research at any time and will not lose any benefit or entitlement by refusing to participate. For example, researchers are not allowed to withhold health care to inmates who do not sign up for the study, or to withhold a grade because students do not participate. Indeed, if research participation provides students with extra credit, students should also be offered alternative opportunities for extra credit.

Like other parts of the IRB proposal, consent forms should be written so as to be understandable to the study population. They should include simple explanations of the purposes, procedures, and planned outcomes of research. Potential risks and benefits should be brief and to the point. In a study investigating a family history of conflict, the researcher might note that interview questions could present the risk of bringing up emotionally troubling memories. However, the benefit of the study may be that participants are able to talk through potential future conflicts.

Researcher's Notepad 5.1 provides an example of a consent letter used by former student Jennifer Scarduzio in her study of wellness and the judicial system. Because many institutions require their own special format (and in some cases they may only require an informational letter rather than signed informed consent), researchers should check their institution's guidelines when creating consent letters and other required materials.

RESEARCHER'S NOTEPAD 5.1

Participant consent letter

WELLNESS IN THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please read the following explanation of this study. Signing this form will indicate you have been informed about the study and that you consent to participate. I want to ensure you understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits – if any – are associated with the study. This should help you decide whether you want to participate.

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Jennifer Scarduzio, MA, a doctoral student under the direction of Sarah J. Tracy, PhD – both at [name of department, university and address].

Project description This study is about judges' emotions as they communicate to the public, along with wellness issues in their occupations. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate at any time.

Procedures If you agree to take part in the study, I will observe you in your daily work. Furthermore, here are examples of questions I may ask you during an interview:

- What are the ways in which you try to remain neutral when communicating decisions?
- Can you provide a specific example of a situation in which a defendant frustrated you?
- Can you provide a specific example of a situation in which a defendant made you laugh?
- What are some of the ways in which you try to balance your work and your outside life?
- What are your favorite and your least favorite parts of your job?

Approximately 15 participants over the age of 18 will be invited to participate in this study. The interviews will occur at a time and place that is most convenient for you. Interviews will be audio-recorded and recordings will only be used for research purposes.

Risks and discomforts Risks for participating in this study are minimal. You will be participating in an interview that may elicit emotions about your job. The only risk of the study is the possibility of experiencing some stress from discussing aspects of the job. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you may choose to skip questions, or you may ask to be withdrawn.

Benefits There are no direct benefits for participating in this study other than the possibility of gaining greater understanding of wellness issues related to your job.

Study withdrawal You have the right to withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time, for any reason. You have the right to refuse to answer any question(s).

Confidentiality Every effort will be made to maintain the privacy of your data. To protect confidentiality, no personally identifying information will be used. The results may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your name will not be used.

To reduce concerns about confidentiality, you will choose or be assigned a pseudonym, and none of your information will be kept under your real name. All electronic files of observation notes, interview transcripts, and audio files will be kept in physically secured locations by using password-protected files and locked drawers.

Invitation for questions If you have questions about this study, you should ask a researcher before you sign this consent form. If you have any questions following this study, please feel free to contact Jennifer Scarduzio at [contact email].

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project, or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them – confidentially, if you wish – to the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, at [contact phone number].

Authorization I have read this paper about the study, or it was read to me. I know the possible risks and benefits. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can withdraw at any time. I have received, on the date of the signature, a copy of this document. I realize I will be audio-recorded.

Name of Participant (printed) _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

For some research projects, forms of *assent* rather than of *consent* are most appropriate. **Assent** is used with participants who are particularly vulnerable on account of their age (minors under the age of 18 in the United States) or have diminished capacities due to mental impairment, sickness, or educational disadvantage. Research with members of these groups requires *consent* from a guardian, parent, or trustee; additionally it should also (if possible) garner *assent* from the participant. The form of assent varies from population to population, but in most cases the researcher verbally describes the project in a way that can be easily understood, discusses the voluntary nature of the study, explains that a guardian has provided consent, and notes the participants' right to withdraw at any time.

If you are examining a private group, club, or organization, IRB may request a letter of permission from an official gatekeeper. Given the usual time constraints, I recommend drafting such a letter yourself and then allowing organizational members to modify it, print it out on the group's letterhead, sign it, and return it. The letter should indicate the title of the project and the researcher's name and make a statement to the effect that gatekeepers understand the duration and type of the proposed research. Researcher's Notepad 5.2 provides an example of a letter I drafted for Nouveau Jail, whose gatekeepers ended up copying it on their stationery, under their official letterhead, pretty much word for word.

In addition to consent and permissions, another principal component of the IRB proposal is explaining how private information about participants will be protected. Tactics to do so include keeping data under lock and key, in password-protected computers, and assigning pseudonyms to participants who desire confidentiality.

Additionally, in order to ensure confidentiality and avoid the **deductive disclosure** of a research participant (Sales & Folkman, 2000), researchers may need to modify slightly, or even to omit some data – especially in publications. *Deductive disclosure* is the indirect identification of respondents through the use and piecing together of known data. For example, Elizabeth Eger (formerly Rush) chose to collapse data when one of her police

RESEARCHER'S NOTEPAD 5.2

Gatekeeper permission letter

[Date]

[IRB Contact Information]

This letter serves as official permission for Sarah J. Tracy to conduct a research study, entitled *Communication and Correctional Employees*, at the Nouveau County Jail.

We have met with Sarah and understand that this research study will include several different aspects. She will observe jail employees in their daily work, shadowing them and taking notes. She will also conduct in-depth interviews with employees so that she can learn more about correctional officers' emotion labor and burnout issues.

We understand that the on-site research may last for a period of six months, and that Sarah might be present for up to 20 hours per week. We will work with her on developing a schedule.

Sarah has made it clear that all employees will be given a choice as to whether they would like to participate in the study. We understand she will offer employees informed consent forms to sign before they are observed or interviewed and audio-recorded.

In sum, we are fully informed about and give Sarah J. Tracy official approval to conduct her research at [context]. If you have any questions, feel free to call me at [phone].

Sincerely,

[Gatekeeper and Contact Information]

officer participants recounted experiences that were tied to both his job position and his race (Rush, 2012). Because he was the only officer with these unique indentifying markers, she modified these specific details in published reports in order to avoid deductive disclosure.

Different levels of IRB review

Some types of research projects require more careful review than others. In the following section, I explain the different types of review and the types of project that fit into them. From reading over human subjects' requirements, researchers make an educated guess about the correct level of review, but the IRB makes the final decision.

Exempt review

The quickest and least involved type of review, the **exempt review**, is generally used for qualitative studies of public behavior. For the study to be exempt, information must be recorded in such a manner that participants cannot be identified. Furthermore, the data cannot reasonably place participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or damage their financial standing, employability, or reputation. An examination of greeting behavior in

an airport – especially if the researcher does not record specific names or identifying details – is an example of an exempt study. Exempt review requires an abbreviated IRB form and a copy of interview questions. Furthermore, exempt researchers supply a cover letter informing participants of their rights, rather than asking them to sign a letter of consent (which could be traced back to the participant). The researcher supplies this letter to participants before conducting "on-the-spot" interviews – and s/he may not even need such a letter if s/he is just observing people from afar.

Expedited review

The most common type of review for qualitative projects is the **expedited review**. This type of review includes the standard IRB application, and the permission turnaround period is typically several weeks longer than for exempt reviews. Expedited review is necessary when the researcher keeps a record of participants' names or identifying details – such as a contact log, or a name attached to the interview transcript. In short, if data are connected to identifying details of a participant – for example their name or phone number (even if this information is kept in a password-protected file) – an expedited review is usually necessary. Furthermore, if the participants' data may potentially harm them criminally, financially, or occupationally, the research must go through an expedited rather than an exempt review. Signed consent or assent forms – rather than just informational letters – are also required for projects in this category.

Kendra Rivera, a past student and co-author, went through expedited review for her research on border patrol agents (Rivera & Tracy, 2012). Negotiating access and tracking progress in the field necessitated writing down research participants' names and contact information. Furthermore, studies of law enforcement always hold increased risks of viewing criminal activity. Because the study opened this possibility, and because it included potentially sensitive questions about border patrol agents' jobs, the project fit the parameters of expedited research review.

Full-board review

Finally, research projects with especially sensitive topics or vulnerable populations must go through the most rigorous full-board review. **Full-board review** is required for studies with participants who have a diminished capability (or none at all) to give their consent – such as children, people who are mentally, physically, and educationally impaired, and non-native-language speakers. Research on economically disadvantaged persons is also closely scrutinized, so as to ensure that financial remuneration for the research is not unduly coercive. Given the ethical missteps of past research, it is no surprise that Native peoples, prisoners, and detainees also receive extra levels of human subjects' protection.

Full-board review can take more than three months. Studying protected populations requires that researchers plan ahead and budget their time accordingly. Amy Way was required to go through full-board review when she researched a young girls' running team (2012) and a youth outreach club (in press). Even though it took Amy longer than other students to receive permission for her project, the extra time paid off. Amy's research goals were to collect personal accounts of gender, wellness, and work socialization from the youths' point of view, and without her actually talking to them this research would have been impossible.

Indeed, just because some groups have special protections, it does not follow that they cannot or should not be studied. Some of the ethically and socially most important research – of gang members, homeless people, drug addicts, sick people, children, pregnant teenagers – may require full-board review. Such was the case, for instance, with Adelman and Frey's (1997) study of communication and community among people living with AIDS. It is just as unethical and problematic to purposefully leave out certain populations from research as it is to focus upon them. However, research that includes these groups requires a stronger rationale about the potential good emanating from the research, and very clear information about how the participants will be protected.

The quirks of IRB

As discussed in Chapter 2, the IRB emerged in response to ethically problematic medical and psychological experiments rather than in response to qualitative field research. However, review boards are increasing their overview (some would say surveillance) of a range of qualitative projects emanating from the humanities and social sciences (Nelson, 2004). IRB review boards face criticism on the grounds that they lack familiarity with qualitative methods, use formulaic approaches that are at odds with interpretive research, and are staffed by personnel whose members are most familiar with value-free empirical methods, which assume neutrality and objectivity (Christians, 2005; Hamilton, 2005). Unfortunately, many of IRB's current procedures, practices, forms, and rules still assume a paradigmatic approach that may not pertain to qualitative inquiry (Tracy, 2007).

For instance, as evidenced by the National Research Council report (Shavelson & Towne, 2002), many governmental leaders in the United States believe that, for something to "count" as research, it must be scientific, objective (value-free), and generalizable (that is, it must pertain to contexts or participants beyond the ones in the particular study). These assumptions trickle into human subjects' definitions and practices. Here is a case in point: the United States Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Human Research Protections (2009) uses the following definition of research:

> Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to *generalizable* knowledge. (Italics added)

Most IRBs indicate that, if researchers are not engaged in a systematic investigation specifically designed to develop generalizable knowledge, then they need not seek IRB approval. This would suggest that autoethnographic, creative nonfiction, or oral history projects – in which researchers examine their own life experiences or record personal narratives, making no claim to formal generalizability – may be able to skip IRB review. On the other hand, this rule ostensibly serves as a loophole by encouraging some ethnographers to forgo IRB approval altogether (and indeed, some highly esteemed qualitative scholars do not submit their research for IRB review).

Despite the lure of opting out of review, a research project that has not been reviewed carries potential disadvantages – including the possibility that universities may not back the researcher if the project goes awry. Furthermore, there are horror stories of ethnographers being asked by department heads or institutional review boards to quash ethnographic publications in the eleventh hour (for a compelling account of this, see Rambo, 2007). Also, research projects that are not reviewed by IRB may be judged as being less rigorous, significant, and "real" than reviewed research (Krizek, 2008). Finally, for legal and ethical reasons, some publications will refuse to publish research that has not been reviewed.

So, is IRB approval absolutely essential? IRB review may be unnecessary for qualitative exercises designed solely for pedagogical purposes (e.g. students doing a fieldnote assignment in their undergraduate methods class). In such cases the course instructor should check with his/her IRB office and ensure that the methods are carried out in line with the ethical principles of voluntary consent. However, if the qualitative exercise may eventually result in presentation or publication outside of the classroom, then review is advisable.

Review is advisable in most cases, even if the approval process is filled with challenges. Fitch discusses typical qualitative IRB troubles, which may include:

> working in a community where obtaining written consent is at odds with cultural norms or associated with repressive governmental authority, conducting focus group discussions where the primary threat to confidentiality comes from the other group members themselves, beginning with a loosely structured set of questions to explore rather than hypotheses to test, and being personally involved with the community to be studied. (Fitch, 2005, p. 270)

Despite these potential issues, Fitch explains that researchers can successfully navigate IRB skirmishes by asking questions and by actively responding to IRB personnel – in person when necessary. She urges researchers to be accountable and reasonable, remember that their research procedures may indeed involve some risk, and realize that human subjects' protection is a complex issue, where no one person has a monopoly on the truth.

Additionally, every university's rules are slightly different regarding what types of projects need review and what level of review is necessary – and human subjects' guidelines vary widely across international requirements. To be on the safe side, researchers are encouraged to seek out the procedures of their institution earlier rather than later. Review boards certainly hold some principles in common (e.g. informed consent); however, many IRB decisions are a matter of interpretation. Some IRBs allow graduate students to serve as "principal investigators," while others require full-time faculty members to act as their sponsors. Some require informed consent for participant observation and informal interviews, while others require consent forms only for audio-taped formal interviews. Some IRBs ask for a clear timeline of when the data will be destroyed, while others are more concerned about where the data is stored. Some view narrative, autoethnographic, and oral history projects as scientific research in need of being reviewed, while others do not.

If time is an issue, researchers have the easiest route toward approval when they align their research plan and proposal with familiar IRB practices. Deviation from typical procedures requires that researchers make a case for their approach. For instance, a researcher might be called on to explain that a printed consent form is inappropriate for her study because participants in that culture view print as paternalistic, individualistic, intrusive, and therefore unnecessary (Fitch, 2005). In its place, the researcher should describe alternative avenues of informed consent that are culturally more appropriate.

In summary, creating an application for IRB is an integral step for most qualitative research projects that will result in public presentations or publications. Despite concerns that review boards are still more familiar with and friendly toward quantitative scientific projects, my experience with IRB has largely been positive. The application process helps to clarify the project and serves as an ethics check. Furthermore, IRB staff and boards tend to be quite friendly toward problem-based contextual research that provides opportunities for improvement and transformation.

Creating the scholarly research proposal

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, research proposals are a requirement not only for review boards, but also for other scholarly audiences. Such proposals tend to be rule-governed documents. Their success is often determined by the ability of the writer to closely adhere to the standards and guidelines of the professor(s), the institution, or the agency requiring it. For example, if a grant-giving organization asks for a four-page proposal with 12-point font and one-inch margins, this is exactly what applicants should submit. Many great projects are eliminated from grant and scholarship competitions solely because they do not follow format directions.

In the following section you will find information on how to create your own research proposal. Regardless of individual idiosyncrasies, most research proposals consist of the parts outlined in Tips and Tools 5.1: title, abstract, and key words; rationale; research purposes and goals; review of existing knowledge and/or literature related to the project; delineation of guiding research questions or problems to address; plans for data collection and analysis procedures; and, in some cases, timeline, budget, and projected outcomes.

For those researchers taking a top-down, deductive, or *etic* approach – or for those who are required to write up a proposal earlier rather than later, for a class, grant, or scholarship application – the next section will be immediately useful. For those who prefer a more inductive, *emic*, or contextual approach, I recommend you skim the next section for now. Indeed it is always helpful to familiarize yourself with literature and research connected to your phenomena of interest. Then, after you have situated yourself within the literature and the scene, you can return to these pages and write up a research proposal that can guide the rest of your data collection and analysis.

Title, abstract, and key words

Many people judge a book by its cover – and a research project by its title, abstract, and key words. Titles of research proposals have two primary goals: (a) to communicate the main topic(s) of the research; and (b) to invite the reader to learn more. To achieve the first goal, the title should be self-explanatory and include key words about its main topics, disciplinary affiliations, and methodological approach. To achieve the second – the invitational – goal, the title should be at least easy to understand and devoid of technical language, and also potentially creative or catchy. However, forgoing clarity in favor of cleverness is ill advised. I will forever be thankful to my doctoral advisor, Stanley Deetz, for gently encouraging me to modify my first single-authored article title from "Smile, You're at Sea" to "Becoming a Character for Commerce" (Tracy, 2000). The first title was fun, but cutesy, while the second is catchy, capturing with more gravity the profit motive behind cruise ship employees' cheerful display.

Many of the same suggestions about the title hold true for the abstract and for the key words. A fair share of readers will never read further than the proposal's introductory framing material. Officials at granting agencies often make immediate decisions about reviewers on the basis of key words and abstract. Given the widespread use of online search engines, you should consider listing key terms that might be employed to locate your proposal through computerized word searches. Consider:

- methodological terms (e.g. qualitative, ethnography, naturalistic, interview, participant observation);
- names of disciplines (e.g. communication, sociology, criminal justice, psychology, management);
- types of context (e.g. nonprofit, education, corporation, retail, family);
- theoretical approaches (e.g. feminist, critical, interpretive, poststructural).

Finally, you should be aware of the outlet's rules regarding the length of titles, abstracts, and key words. In most cases, titles should be between 10 and 15 words – and usually not more than two lines; outlets often ask that abstracts be between 100 and 200 words. The number of key words is often limited to a range between three and five.

TIPS AND TOOLS 5.1

Research proposal components

Every group, professor, granting agency and scholarship board has its/his/her own preferences for what belongs in a research proposal and for the relative length of each section. The outline below overviews the sections and page lengths I typically recommend for a double-spaced, typed, 12–15-page classroom assignment.

Title, abstract and key words (~½ page)

Introduction (~2–3 pages)
- Research purposes and goals
- Reference to key audience, terms, and approaches
- Rationale (practical, theoretical, and/or methodological)

Literature review/conceptual framework (~6–8 pages)

Research questions/foci (usually incorporated in Introduction or Literature review)

Methods (~3–4 pages) – See Tips and Tools 5.2 for details
- Researcher's role
- Background of site/participants
- IRB approval
- Sampling plan
- Sources of the data collected (e.g. participant observation, interviews, focus groups, online data, documents)
- Research instrumentation and approach (e.g. examples of interview questions, methods of transcribing, fieldnote writing)

  [the preceding two sections are often combined]
- Proposed methods of analysis

References (variable)

Budget (~1 page)

Timeline (~1 page)

Potential outcomes/findings (~1 page)

Introduction/rationale

The introduction and rationale provide an opportunity to quickly grab the attention of your core audience and explain why readers should care about the project. This section includes several key elements.

Purpose statement

First and foremost, the reader needs to understand the primary purposes and goals of your research. Make the goal statement obvious and explicit. It is perfectly fine to say: "The primary purposes (or objectives or goals) of this research project are..." Revisiting this statement repeatedly is crucial for ensuring that the project, as eventually written, actually carries out the goals framed in the introduction.

Conceptual cocktail party

Second, the introduction should identify, name, and begin dialogue with the research project's central audience – or, as my doctoral committee member Anne Sigismund Huff called this group, the "conceptual cocktail party." Just as people have their favorite friends they gather around at a party, researchers also have their dream team of scholars, activists, journalists, professionals, or public figures with whom they would like to dialogue about the project.

In the first couple of pages of the manuscript, you should name and cite four to five people whom you would love to read, respond to, or critique the project. Although these particular people may not be contacted, their names will serve as context cues for your readers, and especially for readers who have been their students, protégés, followers, and admirers. And you may get lucky. Sometimes reviewers of a grant proposal are chosen precisely because they are familiar with the scholars cited in the first few pages. If nothing else, citing these people early on lets the reader understand the types of conversations you are hoping to engage through the project, setting the tone for your rationale.

Rationale

The **rationale** is a third important ingredient in an introduction. In the rationale, the researcher clearly answers the question, "Who cares?" This is accomplished through an explanation as to why the study is significant, important, and helpful. Strong rationales are specific. They also tend to be multi-pronged, meaning that they attend to why the study is significant theoretically, practically, and methodologically.

Phronetic, contextual research that focuses on salient issues in the field usually has a built-in practical rationale. For instance, in 2009 former student Liz Cantu conducted a qualitative study on how various stakeholders made sense of mortgage foreclosures. Given the foreclosure epidemic hitting the United States at that time, Liz's study had a built-in practical rationale.

A theoretical rationale may be achieved by answering questions such as:

- How will this study build upon existing knowledge?
- How does it fill a gap?
- How might it bridge various concepts in a useful way?

It is usually not good enough to simply suggest that "xyz topic has never been studied before." Rationalizing a study on a *lack* of knowledge can invite counterarguments from your reader (a stance that you do not want to encourage). And, if a project has never been done, there might be very good reasons for it – say, the study is not feasible, or the topic is not smart or interesting. A rationale based on *need* and *added value* rather than on lack is much more persuasive. You can focus on the value of the study by discussing how the research may help settle a theoretical debate, incrementally build understanding, or problematize a long-standing assumption.

Finally, some projects have a significant methodological contribution. Given the valuable data garnered through interpretive, contextual, and naturalistic methods, certain theories or topics may be better understood solely by using qualitative methods. Indeed, qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observation can significantly enhance theories or topics that have primarily been studied through the lens of positivist paradigms or quantitative experiments, surveys, or self-reports. For example, in working with Holocaust survivors, Carolyn Ellis and her colleagues devised an interaction interview format that allowed them to actively engage and work with participants to construct their stories (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997).

When rationalizing a study because of its qualitative method, it is important to keep in mind that potential key readers are those who have studied your same topic using *other* types of research methods. Hence it makes sense to review the limitations of past research in a fair manner, without undue harsh criticism. Researchers from other approaches are human beings and, as such, will likely avoid reading, appreciating, or citing your work if it paints them in a ruthlessly critical light. As one of my colleagues, Elizabeth Richards, often advises: "Don't stand on the shoulders of giants only to pee on their heads." What she means by this is that, although well-placed critique helps us extend understanding and modify theories, researchers should not come off like ungrateful children. Instead, good writing acknowledges earlier research and highlights how the current study adds nuance, depth, and complexity. Whether or not we necessarily agree with, or like, past research, we have benefited from the fact that it sets the stage for our proposed study.

Literature review/conceptual framework

The literature review, also known as the conceptual framework, is usually the lengthiest part of a research proposal (it often makes up about one third of the final report). The literature review tells the story of the primary concepts and theories that frame the study and how these ideas have evolved over time. Researchers engaging in their first qualitative data collection project should seriously consider using a theoretical framework with which they are already familiar. Alternatively, I recommend accessing theories that are easily available (such as the frameworks described in this book) or adapting material from a similar study, always giving credit to the original author(s).

How should you select the literature to review? First and foremost, the literature review discusses past research upon which the current study builds, problematizes, or extends. So a literature review for a study of how media representations shape youths' perceptions of romantic relationships might introduce the media portrayals of heterosexual and homosexual romantic relationships, a poststructuralist conceptual lens, and then review current research on romance (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). Good literature reviews also define clearly the key constructs to be examined and sum up what is currently known about the topic.

Literature reviews are usually best organized by topic or issue rather than by author. The literature review should not be written simply as a series of article abstracts piled on top of one another. Rather, it's helpful to discuss key topics as if discussing the plot of a story, and

to support key topics with references and examples. Providing a descriptive blurb of each referenced study is generally preferable to providing a single claim followed by a long list of citations.

Another way to think about the literature review is as a puzzle. The puzzle represents a body of knowledge. The literature review explains the existing puzzle pieces by explaining key terms, theories, and chunks of available knowledge. However, the literature review also clearly delineates a *missing* puzzle piece – and previews how your particular research study is designed to fill that gap. This approach illustrates the body of existing knowledge, but also points out what is unknown, confusing, or broken. The literature review shows that some knowledge may not yet exist – but it avoids critiquing individual past authors for failing to pursue the exact research questions proposed in the current study.

Research questions/foci

As discussed in Chapter 1, research questions are a core part of qualitative research projects. By the time you are writing a research proposal, the questions should be more specific than the guiding question from which we started: "What is going on here?" And, by the time you write the final report, research foci should be seamlessly connected to the findings. Furthermore, they should be closely associated with the title, rationale, and literature review. By the time readers have read the literature review, they should not be surprised by the research questions or foci. They should not feel as though these came out of thin air. Rather it should be clear that *of course* you would pose these questions or pursue these goals, given the rationale and story line of concepts provided so far.

Good research questions or statements of focus include language and key terms already employed and defined. For some projects, these are better placed after the rationale; for others, they emerge more naturally from the literature review. The former is often the case with problem-based phronetic studies, the latter with studies that are more theoretically derived. If you are confused about placement, consider modeling your work after an article that is particularly compelling or similar to your project. Finally, keep in mind that research questions and foci statements should guide, but not dictate, your research path. They will continue to morph throughout the data-gathering, analysis, and writing processes.

Methods

The methods section details the context, the participants, the researcher's role, the participation level, and the data collection and analysis procedures. In some cases, this section will delineate the number of researcher hours, the exact number and types of research participants, and the number of pages of transcribed data that may be expected. If the proposal is a class assignment or a thesis/dissertation prospectus, providing this information allows advising professors to provide suggestions about the planned procedures, scope, and framework.

The methods section should explain specialized qualitative words (e.g. what is an "emic approach") and should use citations to support the procedures used (e.g. you could support the idea of engaging in participant observation first, and then moving on to focused interviews, by citing successful research that has taken this approach in the past). Tips and Tools 5.2 overviews items that generally belong in the methods section.

(Data analysis methods are covered in Chapters 9 and 10, and tips of how to describe analysis methods in the final report are provided in Chapter 12.)

TIPS AND TOOLS 5.2

What belongs in a qualitative methods section?

- Researcher's role – (e.g. full participant?) and brief description of gaining access.
- Participants and sites of study – what types of participants and contextual sites are under study? Describe the context(s), number of participants, their background, and the demographics.
- Indication of human subjects review and approval from IRB – this may not require a whole section, but IRB should be noted somewhere along the way.
- The sampling plan or rationale – this may be sprinkled throughout the methods section. It explains why the context and the participants studied were appropriate given the research goals.
- Description of data collected – this includes data sources and collection procedures, such as participant observation fieldnotes, focus groups, webpages, interviews, documents. Many audiences will be keenly interested in the *number* of participants, research hours, and pages of typewritten transcribed fieldnotes, interview transcripts, or documents.
- Interview questions – these should either be embedded in the methods section or attached as an appendix.
- An overview of data analysis procedures. Although details for data analysis may not have emerged yet, it is important – especially for grant-giving and scholarship agencies – that the researcher evidences a clear plan answering the research questions, analyzing the data, and fulfilling the stated purposes.

Budget/timeline

Finally, some research proposals will call for a specific budget and timeline. This section is the place where you will delineate the necessary research materials and their costs, as well as predict how long the completion of various parts of the project will take. Do not be too conservative with your figures, as projects may often take longer and cost more than predicted. At the same time, padding the budget or timeline is ethically problematic and damages the credibility of the entire project. Tips and Tools 5.3 provides a list of items that may be especially worthwhile in the budget section.

The process of mapping out the timeline and the budget provides a good opportunity to know whether the project is too grand for the resources available. If the project seems too large, you should modify the stated goals and scope. Perhaps you need to switch your theoretical framework to focus on already familiar concepts. Possibly one of the proposed research questions can be answered through past research – and need not require your own interviews. Or perhaps the project should be broken into two or three smaller projects, or shared with a research partner.

I often recommend to students that they create a file and label it "after I've completed this class," or "after I graduate." In these files you can less anxiously compile all the great ideas you do not have time to accomplish immediately, and you'll know that these good ideas are ready and waiting when a future opportunity arises. Furthermore, for every proposal or essay, I create an accompanying "dump box" – which is essentially a computer file where I cut and paste the paragraphs, sentences, or tables that end up not really fitting

TIPS AND TOOLS 5.3

What to include in a qualitative project budget

Among other items that qualitative researchers may want to include in a budget are:

- computer equipment such as a lap-top, portable computer for fieldnote writing, digital audio-recorder, and transcription pedal;
- cost of transcribing, translation, research, or editing services;
- equipment, room rentals (e.g. for focus groups);
- researcher travel (to the site, to places for archival research, to additional granting agencies, to visit collaborators, to research conferences);
- monetary participant incentives (for interviews, focus groups, member checks/reflections, and follow-ups);
- entertainment, food, or childcare costs for the participants;
- books, on-line subscriptions, or supplies (markers, paper, posterboard);
- salary, summer support, or teaching buy-out for the researcher(s) and research assistants;
- qualitative data-analysis software (such as Dragon Naturally Speaking, NVivo, or Atlas.ti).

my emerging project. In the future, I often find a perfectly crafted paragraph that can finally see the light of day. One project's dump is another's delight!

Projected outcomes

Finally, some proposals will require a discussion of projected outcomes/results. Outcomes may be conceptual or material. For instance, conceptually, the project may help resolve a theoretical debate or increase understandings of a problem. Material outcomes, on the other hand, refer to **deliverables**, such as:

- a class paper;
- conference papers and presentations;
- external grant applications;
- scholarly articles;
- white papers;
- new class syllabi;
- a strategic plan for a new research center;
- coordination of guest lecturers.

These deliverables are material representations of the research project.

Together with other admonitions throughout this chapter, I must emphasize how important it is to avoid over-promising projected outcomes. Although you may feel tempted to list every single finding or paper that may ever result from the research, limit yourself to outcomes that are certainly achievable within the specified time period. Fulfilling fewer outcomes well is preferable to completing a half-hearted job with many; it's better to "under-promise and over-deliver."

In summary

This chapter has overviewed the institutional review board process and the writing of the research proposal. The requirements for institutional review vary from one institution to another; but many institutions ask that you explain the rationale of the research, the research instruments, the ways you will seek informed consent and maintain confidentiality, and how the research will proceed. Depending on the vulnerability of the research participants and the scope of the project, the review process may be exempt or expedited, or it may require full-board approval. Despite the fact that some qualitative researchers have difficulties with IRB, the process can help ensure the ethics of the project and also serve as a stepping stone toward writing other types of proposals.

The second half of the chapter reviewed research proposals, which are the formalized planning documents required by many external audiences. Research proposals usually consist of a title, an abstract, and key words; an introduction/rationale; a literature review/conceptual framework; research questions/foci; a section on methods; and an overview of budget, timeline, and deliverables.

You might be wondering *when* you should write the research proposal. In most cases, its due date is externally determined by granting agencies or professors. Many qualitative researchers have been asked to submit detailed research proposals long before they have been able to immerse themselves in the scene and know exactly what they plan to study. In such cases, the best you can do is "fake it to make it"; and remember that parts of the research plan can and will be modified along the way, no matter when the proposal is due.

If you, personally, have the power to determine the timing of the research proposal, my suggestion – especially for those pursuing a contextual, problem-based approach – is to develop it about *a third of the way through data collection*. This leaves enough time to get into the scene and figure out various directions, but it also encourages you to systematically review the existing literature early enough for it to usefully guide your fieldwork, interviews, focus groups, and the remaining data collection.

KEY TERMS

assent used instead of informed consent, with individuals who are vulnerable or have diminished capacities – such as children, the sick, and the mentally disabled

Belmont report a statement of basic human subject principles issued by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects

deductive disclosure the indirect identification of respondents through the use and piecing together of known data

deliverables material outcomes of a research project such as: (1) conference papers and presentations; (2) external grant applications; (3) scholarly articles; (4) white papers; (5) new class syllabi; (6) a strategic plan for a new center of research; (7) coordination of guest lecturers or; (8) a class paper

exempt review the quickest type of review for an IRB application; this level of review pertains to studies that examine public behavior and grant anonymity to participants – for example, a study of how dog walkers communicate at local parks