

Description

How-to research series: 4. Writing a research question, MORE acronyms?

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BP, FMF, FH, SROM, VBAC, CS, IOL, ARM, OP, LOA (and all the rest), CTG, ECV, MAU, EDD, PPH, PV… oh maternity care loves an acronym, doesn't it? How many acronyms can you think of that you use regularly in a week at work IRL? Go on, count them.

I know, I've barely got going with this list, but don't worry, I'll spare you the rest.

Last month we talked about how to find out what issues are important to the people who might benefit from a research project. This month we'll be going from how to get from a general topic to a specific research question and start exploring examples of methods we use in qualitative research. IDK about you, but OMG sometimes all those acronyms are just too much. Yet here I am, in Blog Number 4, giving you three more.

These three – PICO, SPIDER and FINER – are all used to help researchers to design specific research questions that not only lay out what a research project is about, but guide the methods they will use, what populations they will be working with, and provide useful checklists to make sure a question is worth committing time and resources to exploring.

PICO?

You may well have heard of PICO before. Quantitative researchers often use it to help them formulate research questions and it works perfectly for studies like clinical trials, that have a:

Population (Who are you recruiting?)

Intervention (What will happen to them?)

Comparison, and an (What are you comparing the intervention to? Or is the control no intervention?)

Outcome (what are you measuring?)

Some PICOs also include a **T**ime period (over what period of time will you be looking for the outcome?)

An example of a PICO question is:

> In infants unable to latch for breastfeeding (Population), does prompting through finger feeding (Intervention) result in a higher rate of latching (Outcome) when compared with prompting through bottle feeding (Comparison) over the first year of life (Time)?

Whilst PICO(T) is really useful if you're designing a project that will test, for example, the clinical outcomes for a single intervention, trying to get qualitative research to fit into PICO is like putting a square peg into a round hole. It just doesn't fit. Often, us qual researchers are looking at a complex intervention – like a new type of service, rather than a single device or procedure. We're not just curious about comparing clinical outcomes with or without the intervention, but instead might want to find out about patient and staff experiences, without a clear comparator. It just doesn't really work.

So there's SPIDER.

SPIDER has five components (P and I go as a pair):

Sample: who will you be speaking to? This won't be a whole 'population', or even likely to be representative of a whole population, but choosing your sample carefully is absolutely crucial (more on this in a future blog).

Phenomenon of **I**nterest: Qualitative research is interested in the 'hows' and 'whys' of a situation. It doesn't always involve exploring the before-and-after impact of an intervention (like finger feeding in the PICO question). Instead we might be interested in ongoing experiences or behaviours.

Design: I could spend a lifetime talking about this, but suffice to say that an explicit theoretical framework (which is a complicated way of saying "this is my starting point from where I understand the world") and choosing methods that will answer your research question are THE factors that will make the findings of your project robust and legitimate (and more on this in next month's blog).

Evaluation: What are you looking to find out from the people you consult? These are likely to include views, experiences and opinions that are not 'measurable' in a quantitative sense.

Research Type: The over all type of the project (e.g. qualitative, mixed methods etc).

Some aspects of SPIDER, in particular the Design and Research Type, are unlikely to make it into the final research question. But SPIDER also acts as a checklist that will help you focus what you want to explore.

I've had a go at mapping SPIDER onto one of the research questions for my own PhD research and, well, it almost fits!:

> What effect do different workspaces (part of the Design) have on midwives' (Population) experiences (Evaluation) of dissonance between their professional ideals and reality of practice (Phenomenon of Interest) and the strategies they deploy to manage the difference (another Phenomenon of Interest)?

The fact it doesn't fit brilliantly says far more about my question than it does about SPIDER. Doing this made me realise that my question wasn't all that great. It was missing detail about the population (which midwives? Where?). It fails to explain which workspaces I'm interested in; I was comparing an obstetric unit and an alongside midwife-led unit, but you wouldn't know that from seeing this! And I describe two phenomena of interest – the *dissonance between the ideal and the reality of NHS midwifery practice,* but also the *strategies* midwives use to help themselves cope with the dissonance. Let's try again:

> How do midwives' experiences of the dissonance between their professional ideals and reality of practice differ between those working on an obstetric unit and those working on an alongside midwifery unit in the NHS?

Can you have a go at making it even tighter?

So that's SPIDER. What is FINER?

FINER is a bit different from the other two. It's a handy checklist you can use to decide if the research question you've come up with using SPIDER is worth spending your time on:

F: Is it feasible?

Think realistically about how long you have to spend on this project. Even a PhD project has to be pretty limited in scope to fit into the time available and research, especially qualitative research, can take a while. You might be able to narrow down your project by limiting the sample of people you choose to speak to, or by limiting the scope of the topic. You might also need to think carefully about the feasibility of the methods you choose. Will you be able to consult the documents or participants you might need to answer this question? I'll be talking more about methods later in this blog series.

I: Is it interesting?

You might be about to spend a lot of time thinking about this issue – do you care enough? If this isn't a topic that gets you excited, it's ok to leave it to someone else.

N: Is it novel?

This one is tough! Can anything really be original? It's true that anything you choose to look at has likely been looked at before. But perhaps the context you're looking at is new. Or the group of people you're interested in. A literature search (see the previous blog!) is crucial here to find out what is already out there. Don't bother reinventing the wheel.

E: Is it ethical?

It's our duty as researchers to minimise the negative impact of our research on participants. I'll be talking about ethics in much more detail in a later blog, but at this initial stage of planning, one of the most important ethical questions you can ask is: will the information I get from this project be useful? In other words: should I be doing it? Taking part in qualitative research inherently demands something of others and you need to be able to justify their time, effort and any (intended or unintended) implications for participants.

R: Is it relevant?

You did your consultation, right? So you know the answer is yes!

It's true that a clear and simple research question is likely to get more complex as you start to read around it, but if you start with a question that is too broad, or vague, this will make it hard before you've even started. And it's absolutely fine to choose one overarching question, with a small number of sub-questions. Next month I'll be talking methods and how you go about identifying which methods will help you answer your question(s) – the make or break part of a qualitative research project.

BBFN,

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