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## How Does My Research Question Come About? The Impact of Funding Agencies in Formulating Research Questions

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## How Does My Research Question Come About? The Impact of Funding Agencies in Formulating Research Questions

### Abstract

It is a widespread claim that the research question should primarily come from a careful literature analysis (Creswell, 2007). Actually, it is basically a good suggestion, mainly for novices, to avoid the mistake of choosing a research method only for ideological reasons, and far from the phenomenon that one is willing to explore. However, this idea does not take into account other complex phenomena involved in constructing a research question. First of all, the epistemological framework, which is never neutral and performs what I am supposed to investigate; second, the kind of funding agency, which has an indisputable impact not only on the ethical - political level, but also on the methodological choices. In this paper I will compare, in the light of the research that I have conducted thus far, the methodological impact of different types of funding agency, particularly on the formulation of the research question itself.

### Keywords

Funding Body, Funding Agencies, Grounded Theory, Research Questions

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## How Does My Research Question Come About? The Impact of Funding Agencies in Formulating Research Questions

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*It is a widespread claim that the research question should primarily come from a careful literature analysis (Creswell, 2007). Actually, it is basically a good suggestion, mainly for novices, to avoid the mistake of choosing a research method only for ideological reasons, and far from the phenomenon that one is willing to explore. However, this idea does not take into account other complex phenomena involved in constructing a research question. First of all, the epistemological framework, which is never neutral and performs what I am supposed to investigate; second, the kind of funding agency, which has an indisputable impact not only on the ethical-political level, but also on the methodological choices. In this paper I will compare, in the light of the research that I have conducted thus far, the methodological impact of different types of funding agency, particularly on the formulation of the research question itself. Keywords: Funding Body, Funding Agencies, Grounded Theory, Research Questions*

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It is a well-known post-positivist myth that the empirical researcher can be neutral politically and ethically with his/her field, and even many qualitative researchers somehow agree with this statement, since neutrality seems to guarantee inquiry's rigor, trustworthiness, and legitimacy (Diebel, 2008). The researcher is supposed to be politically independent in designing the research project and ethically detached from the participants. The paradigm turn (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and especially the critical theory paradigm has powerfully criticized this assumption from a political perspective (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). In particular, many scholars have argued that locating funding for qualitative research is a political process (Cheek, 2005; Roth, 2002). However, what I would like to illustrate here is that the funding body has also a *methodological* impact of which the researcher should be aware and should learn to deal with.

Few years ago, I was funded by a broadcasting company associated with the former Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi. This circumstance made me very concerned and unsettled for many reasons. But this was also the reason for taking very seriously the problem of the ethical (and political) underpinnings of funded qualitative research. Doing research under these circumstances made me understandably worried about the possibility to carry out my research with the autonomy I wanted. The research topic – television experience of 3-6 years old children – was very controversial and a heated debate divided, and still is dividing, professionals, academics, NGOs in two opposite perspectives on the role of TV viewing for little children.

And I actually realized that the impact of funding agencies also has *methodological* consequences on the research practice.

After a brief review of some main positions about the issue of the development of the research topic and the research question, I will examine the sources from where a topic or a general problem comes about, and then how it can be shaped into a workable research question. In this passage, I identify four specific constraints. In this paper, however, I will deepen only one of them: the funder-related constraints. I will illustrate the methodological impact of funding agencies by presenting a case of a research on the use of television in

families, funded by a mixed board of television industries and children's advocate groups. Then, I will show four possible solutions to the methodological problem of funding related to four different paradigms, and, finally, I will present what we actually did in our research to deal with this issue.

### 1. Choosing a Topic

Choosing a research topic (or problem) in qualitative inquiry and establishing a workable research question are two different, but interrelated processes, and it is difficult to define which one comes first or after (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Researchers are always embodied in the world they wish to explore and their stance is never neutral or separate from the world in which they live. So the research question that one cuts off from the whole topic is difficult to isolate like a figure on the background.

However, in the practice of research the passage from the first step to the second step is necessary, and represents one of the most difficult processes, especially (but not only) for novices (Silverman, 2000).

Traditionally, every research comes from a topic that then requires to be transformed (or reduced) into an experimental hypothesis or a focused research question. Quantitative research calls this delicate passage "operationalization" – the transformation of abstract concept in something measurable. By the way at the beginning of the 1970s even some qualitative methodologists talked about operationalization too (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, p. 101; see also Denzin, 1971).

Before examining the problems in qualitative research that are also related to the transformation/reduction of a concept into a workable research question, it is interesting to see how a research theme emerges and how one considers a research area as relevant. There are many factors that influence the choice of a topic, and there seems to a wide agreement on this among the scientific community of social scientists. As one of the most influential scholars in social research methods confirmed in his best-selling handbook, Kenneth Bailey (1994) suggests six elements that influencing the researcher in the choice of a topic:

- 1) Sociological paradigm
- 2) Researcher's values
- 3) Degree of reactivity
- 4) Methodology
- 5) Analysis unit
- 6) Time

Although this functional list can be useful, I prefer to define these factors in a less positivistic way (Tarozzi, 2008). My argument is to summarize these influential elements into a two main axes (*personal interests* and *scientific knowledge*) and to add a third ax, the *constraints*, which lacks in the most of the literature. The former is a deep motivation to deal with a topic. It can be generated by a direct experience in the field or by existential or emotional involvement. The latter is due to a specific scientific or technical competence. It is when the researcher masters the scientific literature of a topic such that he/she is able to point out deficiencies or areas not fully explored and indicate new contradictions, misunderstandings and ambiguities.

Of course, it sometimes happens that the theme is suggested or assigned by someone like a PhD supervisor, funding is available only on certain topics, and so on (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In particular, the influential elements in choosing a topic can include:

- 1) Personal interests: Concentrating on a topic that one is deeply interested in is a way to strengthen the motivation toward research and to overcome all predictable difficulties. As Glaser stressed, it is important to choose a durable research area, which the researcher can explore regularly for life (*life cycle interest*) and that is constantly set up in different varieties and forms, as well as in the various contexts in which he/she works. (Glaser, 1978, p. 25)

Another source of personal interests is having direct experience in the field. The personal and professional experience, or what Janice Morse calls “already being there” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 37), is good for intimate knowledge of the various dynamics embedded in the area, but also dangerous as it may lead to excessive involvement.

- 2) Scientific knowledge: Technical and non-technical literature. Being competent or an expert in a specific topic is a source for finding a theme worth exploring. In the scientific literature, it is possible to find gaps among fully explored issues, to uncover some topic worth studying more deeply, to shed light on something that has been completely ignored within the literature, to suggest new perspectives to deal with old problems, and to show contradictions, incongruences, or ambiguities among different interpretations of the same phenomenon. (Silverman, 1993)

A particular case is grounded theory. As it is known, literature analysis is a controversial issue for grounded theorists. Many of them (the classical Grounded theory advocates) argue that it should not be a source for the research question because it would prevent the possibility of being open to the data (Glaser, 1992). Instead, classical grounded theory suggests another element useful for choosing a topic: the *main concern of participants* (Glaser, 1998), of the professionals and practitioners working in a certain area. Like in participatory research design, the theme in grounded theory can be a problem that stakeholders are worried about. To give practitioners the responsibility to select a topic that is considered relevant is a way to avoid to interrogate the theme with preconceived ideas or hypotheses or to use a too academic and abstract perspective.

## **2. Elements Limiting Research Questions**

Pinpointing a precise research question from a topic is not only important because it reduces the inquiry to a workable size, but also because methods should be congruent to the research question (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Morse & Field, 1995). The qualitative researcher needs a clear, focused, and defined question interpreting not only the theme, but also the stance and the tone of the research. I only partially agree with this statement. I realized that several elements contribute to shape a research question, which I try to show in the following paragraphs.

However, as every graduate student (and their advisors) know very well, this passage is as important as it is difficult. And it is not only a pragmatic problem of purposiveness of the research. When a topic or general problem is located in a workable research question, many elements influence and narrow the scope, the purpose, the range and the nature of the research question. I identify four of them, but in this paper I will concentrate only on the second, and address the first very briefly.

- 1) Paradigmatic constraints.
- 2) Sponsor-related constraints.
- 3) Ethical-political constraints. The researcher's values that imply judgments on the reality to be investigated, which exceed the empirical inquiry.
- 4) Organizational constraints. Time and human or financial resources that shape the scope and the extent of the research project.

These constraints are not only related to practical issues to make the topic affordable. Any limitation, any reduction of complexity has its own costs. In other words, there are theoretical as well as political implications.

### **3. Paradigm as Research Constraint**

Although this constraint as a matter of scientific knowledge should be put in the second ax (scientific knowledge), I refer to it as a constraints because its practical implication for research practices. A paradigm is the window through which the researcher sees the world. According to Kuhn, it not only offers a map that guides around and within the idea of science shared among the scientific community, but also it performs and elicits the questions that are worth investigating (Kuhn, 1962). It frames the theme and question in a suitable way, and imposes a precise posture on the researcher by shaping the way to interrogate the reality and selecting some objects instead of others. Therefore, it defines the problems, issues, objects and methods to be addressed.

Lincoln and Guba (1994, 2000), in their well-known taxonomy, established four kinds of basic paradigms that explain and guide research in social sciences<sup>1</sup>. More recently (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), they added one more, the participatory paradigm. They examine these paradigms in the light of their conception of reality (ontology), their idea of scientific knowledge (epistemology), and their procedures concerning the social research (methodology). The four (plus one) paradigms outlined are:

- 1) Positivism
- 2) Post positivism
- 3) Critical theory
- 4) Constructivism
- 5) (Participatory)

In the last decades many scholars have argued about how to name these paradigms and their number. However, what it is important to stress is the fact that placing a researchable question within a positivistic or constructivist paradigm will radically transform the research question itself. This is why the conception of reality, the idea of relationship among researcher and his/her subject and participants, the methods and the techniques appropriate and acceptable, are basically different.

Therefore, the possibility to interrogate the reality with a focused research question and reducing and shaping a general theme is intimately related to the kind of knowledge that one expects to discover or to construct, and to how this is considered achievable.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I locate the notion "paradigm" in a more abstract level, at epistemological level and not in a theoretical perspective-level (Crotty, 1996): a paradigm has to do with a theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and not only with a worldview informing the methodology; it provides a context, grounding its logic and criteria.

#### 4. Funding Agencies as Research Constraint

Very often the role that funding agencies play in shaping the research question is misconceived or underestimated, and the story on the implications of doing funded qualitative research tends to remain untold for various reasons (Cheek, 2000).

Here, the distinctions between pure or applied research (pure would be for the sake of curiosity and functions to advance knowledge for its own sake; applied would be for the sake of practical advancements and seeks to solve practical problems), has nothing to do with it. This distinction does not make any sense in the majority of qualitative research that are either funded or unfunded.

But can a research be ever unfunded in the sense that it is completely independent, oriented only by the researcher? While there are different ways to fund research in different countries, both public and private funding always manipulate and shape the scope, the range, the purpose of the research question, and the researcher is never entirely free to develop aims of the study and its general direction. According to Julianne Cheek, seeking, “gaining and accepting funding for qualitative research is not a neutral, value-free process” (Cheek, 2005, p. 387).

My argument is that these well-known constraints have an impact not only on the ethical or political dimension of the research, and on the possibility for researcher to keep the control of the entire process, but also on the methodological level. In this sense they affect particularly the qualitative research process.

From this perspective, qualitative research seems to be more fragile and exposed to the danger of inopportune intrusions than quantitative research. Being based on somewhat less rigid and controllable procedures exposes qualitative research to a major risk of intrusion or to be subdued to the funder’s expectations.

Of course, these pitfalls are not unique to micro qualitative research. Large quantitative surveys are affected by funding bodies, as well.

For example, the most objective among the objective indexes is the inflation percentage, measured by building a sophisticated consumer price index. In Italy, this index is officially calculated by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), a national agency. This index has huge political influence because it shows the rise in prices, which inevitably has a major impact on investors and on citizens’ attitudes toward the government. This index becomes unavoidably a judgment on the government’s action in political economy. For these reason, it is supposed to be absolutely independent. However, it is odd to notice that this index very often agrees with the political decision of the various governments who fund and control the institute, and nominated its chair and its board.

But in general, the numbers, the facts, and the measures can be less brought into question than meanings and their interpretations. So it is important that qualitative researchers do not take their assumptions on funded research for granted and become fully aware of the risk of intrusion from funding or political bodies. In all the topics dominated by a considerable economic or political interest (and these are very often the fields in which we are involved) the risk of being submissive to the funding agency’s political or economic interests is very high. Let us consider, for example, the research on global warming funded either by NGOs or multinational companies, or medical research sponsored by big pharmaceutical companies, or those funded by a local political institution. I have direct experience of a participatory action research funded by a municipality that wanted to improve children’s political participation, but they opposed the results showing that in that city, the general level of actual participation was very low, and that the local government did not do enough to improve it. Hence, the funders stopped the project, which disconfirmed their policy.

## **5. An Example from the Research**

I would like to outline my argument, that funding agencies have an impact not only on the ethical level but also on the methodological one, by presenting a case of a research that I have recently undertaken (Tarozzi, 2007).

The study was based on grounded theory and aimed at exploring processes of family television governance in homes with preschool children. Our topic was to explore three Italian cities (Trento, Bologna, and Naples) and to understand the processes at the root of basic television routine within family routine. In 2005, 15 families were visited 3 to 6 times each, and 5 other families were interviewed with a final semi-structured interview to evaluate the whole theory developed from the analysis.

The research was commissioned by Children and Television Board of Radio-TV Federation (FRT, a federation of about 150 local and private networks) to the Department of Cognitive Sciences and Education (University of Trento), and actually paid by Mediaset, the major private network within the federation and the communication company whose owner is the former Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi. The board is a foundation made up by 50% corporate television industries and 50% children's media advocacy groups, nonprofit organizations involved in child welfare or consumers rights, and parents and teachers associations from different ideological and religious perspectives.

The expectations as well as the assumptions toward the research among the TV companies and the associations were radically different. This condition induced the research team on the one side to take seriously into consideration the divergent nature of the request of the funding body and to include it in the research itself, and on the other, to bracket our opinion, assumptions, preconceived theories about children and television, before going to the field.

In the course of the long process of negotiation and access to the field, we realized that there was a tacit conflict inside the board, and that this could have an effect on the way in which we formulate our research question.

Basically, there was a divide among broadcasting companies, which expected that the research confirm their ideas that effects of television watching were harmless for children, and which in any case the responsibility of running rules for viewing lay only on the parents. On the other hand, children's advocates, despite their different political, moral or ideological backgrounds, agreed on the assumption that TV could have some negative effects on children, and so broadcasting should self-regulate (by TV companies) or be regulated (by law through the national government). They wanted an empirical validation of their assumptions.

We were caught in the middle. Our direction was to start research with a non-prejudiced attitude, without any preconceived ideas, theories, and myths, but willing to explore the experience and be open to the data. We decided to go in the field with a deliberately broad research question: "What is going on in Italian homes where there are preschool children watching television?" A broad perspective to interrogate the reality allows us to see what is happening in the homes and what will emerge, to build a theory grounded in the contexts analyzed.

This example is particularly meaningful in demonstrating the impact of funding agencies on research practice, not only because of my personal disappointment to get money in some way from Berlusconi (ethical political constraint), but also because in this case, the positions were so polarized that they were impossible to ignore. In fact, some children's advocates were also strictly dogmatic in their position, which, in this field, can be often extremely radical.

## **6. Methodological Solutions**



Now I would like to examine some methodological (not ethical, which are relevant, too) responses to deal consciously with the impact of sponsors. The various methodological responses are in some sense related to the abovementioned paradigms. I will first briefly present four possible solutions somehow linked to the paradigms outlined by Lincoln and Guba, and then I will discuss what we actually did in our research.

The first possible solution is the *neutral* one. Ignoring the problem. Assuming a neutral position, the idea that research has nothing to do with ethics, is value-free, and its results are not the responsibility of the researcher who discovers them. Actually, this ethical-political neutrality is possible only within a positivistic (or post-positivistic) paradigm, where the researcher is completely detached from the object of research and he/she is looking at the research from outside (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, chapt. 4). “Maintaining an objective stance” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), as theoretical attitude of the researcher, is a good suggestion, but is fairly never possible. And the idea to go on the field, without any preconception and influence, “giving voice” to the respondents, is a mere theoretical hypothesis, just a good point that one can never reach.

The second solution is *ideological*. Is the solution in the critical theory paradigm, the approach that refuses the myth of neutrality and announces its partisanship (with the aim of transformation) to raise the political awareness of participants, and to promote political action (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005)? This is the background behind critical ethnography, discourse analysis and Participatory Action Research (PAR). For example, some PARs refuse funding from some agencies, and consider the independence of funding one of the hallmarks of its approach. Refusing funding from either some private companies or (some) public entities is a way to keep the research independent, and to save room for emancipation of participants.

The third is the *interpretive* solution. This is the constructivist position, where the funder is a meaningful device which gives meaning to the contest and it derives its meaning from it. In this perspective, all “data” are discursively constructed and are always in relationship with something and someone. Funding bodies, as well as researcher’s subjectivity, are devices that produce further meaning and are never neutral instruments. However, this solution coherent with the constructivist paradigm is scarcely practiced. Few studies within this paradigm put this question at the center of the analysis, and the methodological implication of the relationship with the funder remains almost always an untold story.

*Negotiate* is the last possible solution, the one I used in the mentioned research project and the one I theoretically and methodologically advocate. This can be categorized into what we call the “phenomenological paradigm” (Tarozzi & Mortari, 2010). In this perspective, as in the interpretive, funding bodies are meaningful sources of more “data”, and they enable the construction of more data. But the difference is that phenomenology starts from this evidence, makes it explicit and then tries to overcome it in order to reach the phenomenon or, as Husserl puts it, “to be faithfully to the phenomena” (Husserl, 1913/1982, p. 44 ), and to keep analyzing it. Without this suspension of judgment, the interpretive solution would enter in a loop, the Heideggerian interpretive circle, where the meanings co-constructed in the relationship between researcher and funder are the core of the analysis and, if not ignored, should become the mainstream of the study. How to interrupt that endless circle and escape from the destiny? How can one only focus the research on the way in which the funding body looks at the relevant research questions? Phenomenologists try to do it with the notion and the practice of *epoché*, the epistemological device introduced by the Stoic ancient philosophers and developed by Edmund Husserl in the contemporary world. In its broader and trivial meaning can be referred to the ‘bracketing’ feature: Within the phenomenological methodology, it means to suspend the researcher experiences in order to take a fresh

perspective toward the phenomenon to be investigated. Bracketing is a methodological instrument that allows the researcher to be detached from preconceived assumptions. Phenomenologists, like constructivists, make tacit assumptions explicit, but they do it to mark the separation from them. This is the role of what Husserl called *epoché*, the suspension of “natural” belief that is not only the premise of the eidetic reduction, but also an instrument to catch the dimension of meaning, and tend to reach the lifeworld of people and situations. In our case applying epoché to funding bodies in order to formulate a research question fitting the phenomenon we wanted to explore requires to suspend the judgment, and to tend toward a non-conditioned attitude, sufficiently open, available to listen, unbiased, and non-judging. To list the reasons of the research sponsor, understand them but bracket them, not to be influenced by them.

The last approach/solution is what we carried out in our research to deal with and include the funding board perspective in our research design and in the emerging theory. First, we faced the problem of making explicit the FRT board’s tacit requirements, and to treat them as further data. For this purpose, we conducted several meetings with the whole committee and with some representatives to understand their perspectives and to negotiate the research design. Then in many occasions, we invited some representatives for two of our research meetings, we constantly had follow-ups during the analysis and, close to the end, we organized a workshop with the whole board to present the preliminary results of our conceptualization. This was also conceived as a sort of member check, in which we presented the first draft of our grounded theory. They knew that this meeting was a focus group aimed at collecting more data. It was video- and audio-recorded and then coded, and the analysis was included in the theory.

The tacit expectations of the two poles of the funding body became explicit and outlined two opposite research questions:

- 1) What are the harmful effects of TV on children? How can families resist and fight against them?
- 2) Are families able to manage TV viewing? Is it true that TV viewing is harmless for children?

These two polarized positions were incorporated into the substantive theory developed from the field work, and discussed with the literature and with the vision that emerged from the parents.

In particular, since this research was a grounded theory, this funding body, so meaningful and yet divided, represented a key aspect of the *main concern* of the participants. Glaser outlined that the main concern, instead of a preconceived research question, should constitute the starting point of a grounded theory. We became aware that these “participants” played a particular and major role in the study in shaping a research question that fitted their expected results and then confirm those as well.

Despite the asymmetrical power relations, in our results we have not supported either one of the positions. We focused on the processes of TV family governance and considered their beliefs as categories integrated in our theory. For example, we focused on parents’ underlying ideas, which in turn guide strategies for controlling children’s TV viewing.

In the end, we did not “discover” whether or not TV is harmful, but we seriously took into account the parent’s concern over this issue; on the other hand, we are able to develop the process, which is very effective, through which families (particularly the mothers) are able to deal with TV.

## 7. Conclusion

To transform a research problem into a research question is always a necessary but highly problematic endeavor. The researcher is constantly trapped by four constraints – Paradigmatic; Sponsor-related; Ethical-political and Organizational constraints - that too often are taken for granted and operate tacitly even in qualitative research. Here I focused in particular on the role of funding bodies by stressing their methodological function in shaping a research question. To face this problem there are four possible responses from ignoring it to taking it into account as a discursive device influencing the research. Based on my own experience and my theoretical framework I argue that a phenomenological negotiation between sponsor's perspective and researcher's autonomy is not a weak or fearful political mediation, but can be a methodological resource and a further source of data. In the end, to tell the story of the influence of a funding body in the research process is, in the end, not only an ethical responsibility, but can be also a powerful resource for analysis.

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### Author Note

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Dr. Tarozzi is also regularly invited to lead seminars and courses on GT in doctoral programs at several Italian universities including the Catholic University of Milan, University of Bergamo, University of Verona, Padova, Bologna, Urbino, Roma. In the United States, he

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