PART TWO: THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL.

1. Why a research proposal? All research is about finding a testable idea to research, defining the research problem specifically, investigating the issue systematically in a planned way, analysing the data and then reposting your findings.

Before beginning any research, you must have thought about and planned the entire process carefully otherwise you’ll probably end up wasting time and money. Also, in most cases research is expensive and funding from organizations would be required – so one has to convince these funders that the research is actually do-able and feasible (by giving them a detailed plan of how you’ll conduct it, exactly how long it will take, what it will cost, and what’s in it for them). For these reasons, the research proposal is essential - it is both a plan and a persuasive document; it explains what the project is about, why it is important and how it will be conducted, allowing for the project to be evaluated.

2. Steps in the research proposal. The following steps are necessary in order to formulate a research proposal (we’ll discuss the actual structure of the proposal in the next section):
1.  a. Find a research idea/focus that interest you
    b. Do a literature search/review regarding the topic (including what has already been done in that area, what theories are relevant to it).
    c. Refine the research idea into a research question, statement or hypothesis, which specifies the constructs in a testable way that implies how they will be measured, and that implies a relationship between variables (if appropriate).

2. Identify the theoretical constructs in the research question/hypothesis and operationalise these variables (which will give you an idea of how you’ll need to measure the variables); also make sure that the proposed relationship between the variables in question is clear (if a quantitative study). At this stage, it should be clear whether the research will require a positivistic, descriptive-interpretive or constructionist paradigm. If it is a positivistic, quantitative study focusing on causal relationships, you’ll also need to state which is the independent and dependent variable and make sure your research hypothesis meets the criteria of a good hypothesis.
3. Consider the ethical and pragmatic feasibility of studying those variables.

4. Data collection. (What type of information are you going to use, and how will you measure this information, and how will you obtain it from the data sources)

   Consider what type of data you need to elicit (quantitative or qualitative; words or behaviours; people, texts; individuals, groups)

   How should you elicit this data

   **Sources**: interviews, questionnaires, observation in a lab or in a naturalistic setting, archival material, participant observation - are your instruments valid and reliable (if quantitative), and how do you know this?

   **Designs**: cross-sectional, longitudinal, sequential - do you need a single observation or a series of observations: are you using one group of subjects or more than one group)

   What level of measurement are you using to measure the variables in question and will this level be sufficient for the purposes of analyzing the data

   **Sampling strategy** (what technique are you using and is this consistent with the overall perspective adopted—qualitative / quantitative; i.e. do you hope to generalize your
findings out to the wider population? Which population are you targeting exactly? Are you content to supply a rich understanding of an issue using a few subjects? How will you draw / select the sample? How large should the sample be?)

Consider the ethical and practical problems which may arise here -

Is it a feasible study (how difficult will it be to find the required sample; will there be problems of attrition and non-compliance? Do I have access to the test or interview or do I need to construct myself? Do I know how to administer the test or do I need to pay someone to do so? How much will this cost me? How long will the whole business take? - Can you pull it off?;

Is it ethical? - how will I protect the welfare of the subjects; get informed consent; don’t use deception; will I need to debrief them after the study; do they know that they have the right to withdrawn at any time and that their participation is voluntary, confidential, anonymous.

5. The overall research design (if quantitative) - is this a true experiment, a pre-experimental study, a quasi-experimental study, a one-shot case study, a correlational study
- are you going to make an intervention/manipulate an independent variable (experimental) or are you just observing events that have already occurred (correlational), or are you describing a phenomenological experience (qualitative).

6. Data analysis - are you going to be using statistics, if so is it a descriptive or inferential statistical analysis (this will depend on the scale of measurement used to measure the variable; if inferential statistics, which is the appropriate method for your purposes - this will depend on whether you are looking at correlations or differences between groups, including the number of groups and the levels of the independent variable, as well as the number of independent variables to be studies); are you using content analysis (if so, is it quantitative or qualitative content analysis); if it is content analysis, which themes am I hoping to find, and how will I code the data; is it discourse analysis from a constructionist perspective.

7. Limitations. What limitations of the research are present (e.g. poor reliability/validity of instruments; small sample size) and why are these limitations unavoidable; also, how will I try to compensate for or circumvent these limitations; is it a pilot study, which nears that a more
methodologically sound study can be done later, if the results are promising.

8. What is the time-frame involved (specifically, how long will it take to collect the data, to analyse the data and to report the results)

9. Budgeting (specifically, what will it cost to carry out the study, including to employ someone to do the interviews, to transcribe the results, to type it all up, etc; do I need to photocopy, etc)

10. Give the study a title (it is best to do this last, once the research has been formulated). Examples of titles include: the relationship between stress in the workplace and job-satisfaction; the effects of infertility on women’s perceptions of their marital relationships; the relationship between being an only child and perception of one’s social skills as an adult; the relationship between perceived success in career and perceived success in relationships; the phenomenological experience of chat-rooms: a hermeneutic inquiry.

11. Covering letter (this is a request for funding or assistance, usually from an organisation to whom you are sending your proposal, as noted above). You need to state why you are doing the research proposal (to get funds, or to
propose a project for further study, or to show that the project is useful, worthwhile and feasible).

3. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROPOSAL WITH EXAMPLES OF PHRASING (using the descriptive-interpretive paradigm).

The covering letter.

This must contain the reason for the research proposal (applying for funding; proposing a project for further study; Explaining to the relevant person – such as a manager of an organization / a superintendent of a hospital, etc – why a particular phenomenon needs to be researched).

“The following is a proposal for a research project for the purposes of (identifying/investigating …………..). The proposal introduces the topic and explains the nature and methodology of the planned study.

I believe that the results of this study will (aid the functioning of your organization/ enhance an understanding of …../yield useful information for the purposes of …. ), and thus I am submitting this proposal to your organization in the hope
of obtaining funding. As you will see the project is both practicable and ethically feasible”.

It’s a good idea to use the following headings for the proposal;

**The title**. A brief phrase reflecting the essence of the project, containing the key terms of the problem question/statement, It must make sense, be precise (meaningful) and must reflect all the key issues of the study (appropriate).

Typical headings from a descriptive-interpretive perspective would include: The effects of … on (subjects) perceptions of …; The relationship between perceived … and perceived …; The phenomenological experience of … in (subjects); A hermeneutic inquiry into …; The perceived effects of … on (subjects’) …; The perceived causes of … in a group of (subjects); (subjects’) experience of their condition; The perceived effects of …: a hermeneutic inquiry:

**General introduction**. Here you need to give a very brief outline/overview of the study, stating the research problem or
focus and briefly how it will be studied, and why that method is appropriate.

“The proposed study will attempt to (explore/investigate the relationship between x and y/ the experience of ... by ... / replicate the results of previous studies in the area of ...) using a (qualitative/quantitative) methodology based on personal interviews using an (unstructured/ semi-structured/ structured questionnaire) and (content analysis), in the framework of a (descriptive-interpretive/hermeneutic) paradigm.

This methodology is appropriate for a study that attempts to facilitate a clear, rich understanding of the subjective experiences of...”

**The research problem/focus.**

**Literature review and justification for study.**

Here you give a justification for why this study is relevant and necessary, providing the context for the research question/ focus. Including here is a brief literature survey, including What’s already been done in the field, what hasn’t yet been done. This literature review may also be used to contextualise your study in the relevant theory. In any case, the review
should be more than just a summary – it should be an integration of the literature and previous findings, that lays the foundation for your research. (e.g. what aspects of the topic have been studied so far, which haven’t; have the studies all been qualitative or mostly quantitative, and if so why is it necessary to study it from the other perspective; have the studies all been done in USA or Europe, and why do you think there would be a difference in studied here).

“A review of the literature shows … . The proposed research, on the other hand, will be descriptive-interpretive in nature, as the aim is to generate rich description of the phenomenon from the subjects.”

**The research problem.** Now that you have outlined the Context/justification for the study, you can present the research problem and the proposed design very briefly. If a quantitative study, present the research hypothesis here.

“More specifically, and on the basis of the above review of the literature, the research question to be addressed is ..”

**Variables/key concepts.** Here you give a more refined and specific research question/statement, operationalising the terms/concepts in a clear, unambiguous and precise manner. In
addition, you need to indicate briefly how these constructs are to be observed.

“The key concepts/variables involved are (...) and (...), which are operationalised as ...”

**Research methodology.**

**Data to be obtained.** What data are to be obtained and why such data are justified/appropriate given the type of research project.

“The data to be obtained are verbal accounts of the Subjective experience of ..., which is the appropriate unit of analysis for a hermeneutic/descriptive-interpretive study.”

“The data to be obtained are the descriptions emerging from the interactional context of an interview, consistent with a qualitative approach.”

**Sample/subjects/data sources.** The sources must be indicated as well as why these sources are appropriate given the type of research project. You should state that these sources will provide sufficient information to address the research question/problem. Also, it is important to state clearly how you will get access to these sources; if there are any potential problem in gaining access, these must be stated
as well as how you plan to resolve these problems. If there
are no problems foreseen, then state this explicitly.

“A single group design will be used in which the subjects
are (5) (...) from (...) who will be selected on the basis of
(common experience/...). All will have (...educational
qualifications).

The sampling method will be purposive, allowing for
accessing data that is richly descriptive and thus
transferable
to other human contexts, rather than emphasising the use of
quantitative data to be statistically analysed and
generalisability.

Similarly, the size of the sample is appropriate for the
descriptive-interpretive nature of this study.

The procedure for accessing the subject will be to ...

The research process and the motivation for the study
will be explained to all of the participants and informed
consent will be obtained, with confidentiality ensured.”

**Data collection.** How will you elicit the data?
If you are going to use a questionnaire, then state where this
will come from (are you going to construct it yourself?) and
if there are any problems foreseen in gaining access to the
tests or questionnaires or administering the tests, then say
so; if not, say so, too.

It is important that you also mention the issues of
reliability and validity of the instruments used — if it is a
qualitative study that does not place emphasis on these
issues, say so and the reasons why. Even if you are
constructing your own interview, you should state: “An
independent rater will corroborate the reliability and
validity of the questionnaire, although given that this is a
qualitative, descriptive —

interpretive study, reliability and validity are not central
issues.”

“Individual interviews will be conducted with the
participants using a (semi-structured) interview schedule in
order to avoid imposing a pre-determined frame of reference on
the data as much as possible. The interview will involve a
sequence of broad to progressively narrower questions (a
funnel sequence) to ensure that a broad range of categories
are canvassed, while at the same time allowing for some
structure.
This questionnaire will be constructed by the researcher on the basis of (the review of the literature presented above/the results of previous studies). Examples of the questions include (...) / are included in the appendix to this proposal.

These interviews will be recorded and transcribed”

**The research context.** Are there any (social or political or cultural) aspects/events in the context of the data collection that may influence the process? If so, say so; even if there are not, you should still mention the socio-politico-cultural context in which the study is taking place.

**Data analysis.** What method are you going to use and why is it appropriate given the research question (will the information produced by the analysis be appropriate to answer the research question?)

(The following example may be heavily summarized):

“The method of analysis is (qualitative/quantitative) content analysis, using techniques of coding the data into a coding frame by allocating conceptual labels to fragments of data, and then identifying themes within and across subjects’ accounts.
The initial coding will occur by scrutinizing the data closely, line-by-line. The researcher will then break-down and conceptualize the data into categories embodied in the texts. To do so, questions will be asked about each fragment of data (such as ‘what does this fragment represent?’) and each fragment will then be given a conceptual label. These labels will then be compared for similarities and differences and on this basis a conceptual code of categories will be set up.

This code will then be fine-tuned by revisiting the data, cycling back and forth until they represent the best fit of the data. The reliability of this coding scheme will then be validated by using two independent raters, and adjustments will be made accordingly.

Then, themes within and across subjects’ responses will be identified on the basis of the dominant motifs in order to address the research question. Based on the literature review presented above, possible themes/motifs that may emerge/are expected to emerge include[...]

A shorter example: “An outline of the topics for the interview will be developed via consultations with independent
experts in the field and a close reading of the literature. The interviews will then be analysed using content analysis, aiming to identify the most salient themes in the protocols, which will be achieved via a coding of the raw data for descriptive patterns and themes.”

**Pragmatic considerations.** (This includes the time and money frameworks)

**Time framework.** This should be clear and realistic.

“[…] hours will be required to [interview each subject/transcribe the interviews/analyse the protocols…], […] hours will be required to […], etc, for a total of […] hours. The entire project will thus require a period of […] weeks and should thus be completed by [date].

**Budgeting.** This should be clear and realistic.

“The project should be fairly cheap to conduct, with the major costs being [R… for assistants / R… for postage / R… for telephone / R… for travel / R… for photocopying / …]. It is estimated that a total of [R…] will be required.

**Ethical considerations.** This includes obtaining informed consent, confidentiality issues, and competence to administer the tests. All of these must be stated; if there are any
potential ethical problems, say so and how you would resolve these; and if not, say so too.

“As noted above, informed consent will be obtained from the participants and confidentiality will be assured. No ethical problems are expected to arise from this research.”

**Limitations.** Here you state the limitations and why these are limitations, why they are unavoidable, and what you’ll do to compensate for them. This would include reiterating that the size of the sample is small, but emphasizing again that the study is descriptive-interpretive and thus is more interested in rich description and transferability than generalisability. This discussion should be balanced (the good points and the limitations of the study, together with why these are unavoidable).

**Expected outcomes/Relevance of expected findings.** Here you state who will benefit from the results of the study and how – e.g. will it benefit the building of theory, or therapeutic purposes, or specific groups, or society in general. This discussion must be appropriate in terms of the nature and the context of the research project.

**References.** All references used in the literature review or data collection section (such as published tests) go here.
The writing style of the proposal should be professional, scientific, short, to the point, clear and logical. Use the above headings or something similar to them and make sure that one paragraph follows logically from the other.