



From *meh* to meaningful: Sharpening your research questions

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Do RQs occur in all types of research?

- Almost always present in qualitative research
- Almost always used in review, and often in conceptual or theory papers
- Sometimes present in quantitative research, either as overall orientation OR a specific question where theories provide ambivalent possibilities
- Often present in mixed methods


AMJ MANAGEMENT RESEARCH CANVAS

AUTHOR NAME

PROJECT TITLE

DATE

VERSION

AUDIENCE & PRIOR RESEARCH <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which audience should find your research interesting & relevant? • How does prior research address the puzzle? • Is the audience composed of those who have done the prior research, or is it a different audience? 	RESEARCH QUESTION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific question does your research answer? • Why is it important to answer this question? 	THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS & RELATIONSHIPS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the key constructs in your theoretical framework? • How do they relate to one another? • Why should we expect these relations between the constructs?
BOUNDARY CONDITIONS & LIMITATIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How broadly applicable are the findings and in what conditions might they <i>not</i> hold? • What are the main limitations of your study and how can future research address them? 	<div style="text-align: center;">  <p>THE PUZZLE</p> <p>What broad management question does this research project address?</p> </div>	RESEARCH SETTING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what social setting is the research conducted? • Why is this setting appropriate for this study?
CONTRIBUTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the empirical findings change how we think about the puzzle? 	EMPIRICAL FINDINGS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What empirical patterns do you see in your data? 	RESEARCH DESIGN & ANALYSIS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data do you use to answer your research question? • How do you <u>analyze</u> the data?

For more information see: Dorobantu, S., Gruber, M., Ravasi, D., & Wellman, N., 2024. From the Editors- The *AMJ Management Research Canvas: A Tool for Conducting and Reporting Empirical Research*. *Academy of Management Journal*, 67: 1163–1174.

slido



Why can it be valuable to use an RQ?

ⓘ Start presenting to display the poll results on this slide.

Why use RQs?

- I. Helpful for keeping you/ your co-author team on track by providing focus & shaping research design
- II. Useful for your reviewer/ examiner / reader
 - i. Orients them in the direction you want
 - ii. Meets reader expectations/ a 'norm' the reader is looking out for, so can be disorienting if not provided (depending on journal/ discipline)
 - iii. Stimulates curiosity in your reader so they appreciate an issue is more interesting or complex or debated than they realised (so they will continue reading!)
- III. Helps shape your literature review (LR) / background
 - i. Identifying what needs inclusion
 - ii. Conceptualizing your LR as alternative or incomplete answers to your RQ
- IV. Clarifies your contribution(s) (via answer relative to the RQ)
 - Allows the generation of interesting and *influential/ impactful* research (versus trivial and mediocre research)

(Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, 2024; Hancké, 2009)

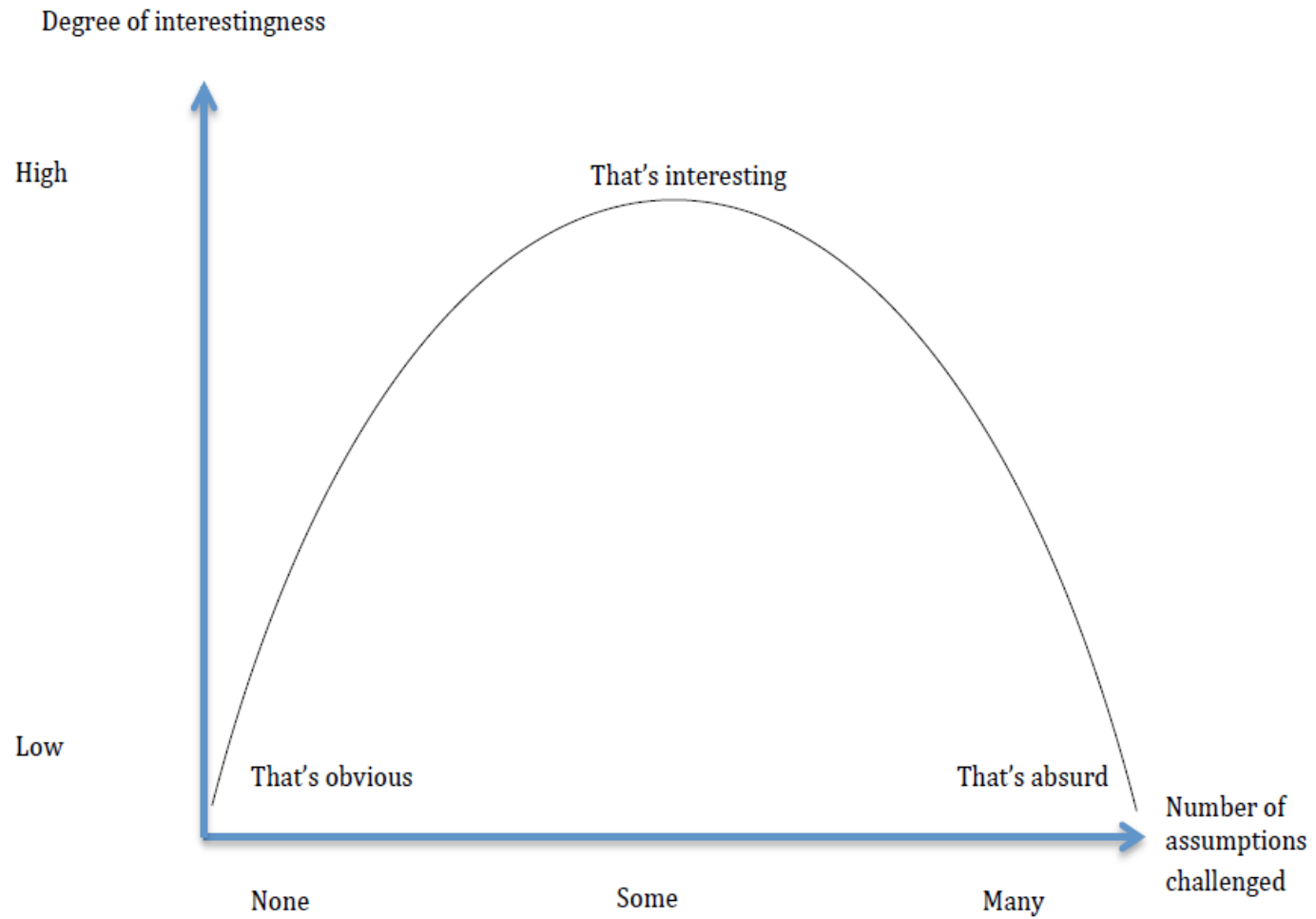


Impactful research is interesting ...

Interestingness comes from intriguing the reader

- Challenging assumptions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, 2024; e.g., divestiture is bad as newcomers feel devalued versus divestiture is good as it enables conformity)
- Providing a compelling argument regarding the motivation for a study (Pratt, 2009; e.g., high failures rates of elite newcomers as a reason to study their socialization)
- Be aware that “gap-spotting” is liked versus loathed; persuade the reader that the gap is important/interesting

Indicator of the interestingness of a research contribution



Alvesson and Sandberg (2013, 2024)

Typology of Research Questions – *examples use work-life balance policies*

(adapted from Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, 2024)

1 Descriptive

Generate knowledge that characterizes a problem or phenomenon – what it is or does, or why it has certain qualities

- What are the key characteristics of work-life balance policies?
- What are the effects of work-life balance policies?

3 Comparative

Generate knowledge about relations between phenomena – concomitance (joint occurrence), equivalence (similarity), or difference

- What are the differences in work-life balance policies across public versus private healthcare organisations?

2 Normative

Generate knowledge about how something should be done

- How can work-life balance policies be designed for maximum effectiveness in maintaining or improving employee well-being?

4 Explanatory

Generate knowledge about contingent relations between phenomena – correlation (X with Y), causality (X causes Y), or conditionality (X causes Y in the presence of Z)

- Why and when do work-life balance policies improve employee wellbeing?
- How does having a supportive boss impact the effects of work-life balance policies on employee well-being?

Your Turn! (with your neighbours)

Use the example of workplace well-being initiatives

1 Descriptive

Generate knowledge that characterizes a problem – what it is or does, or why it has certain qualities

- What workplace well-being initiatives.....?

3 Comparative

Generate knowledge about relations between phenomena – concomitance (relationship), equivalence (similarity), or difference

- What / Which..... workplace well-being initiatives?

2 Normative

Generate knowledge about how something should be done

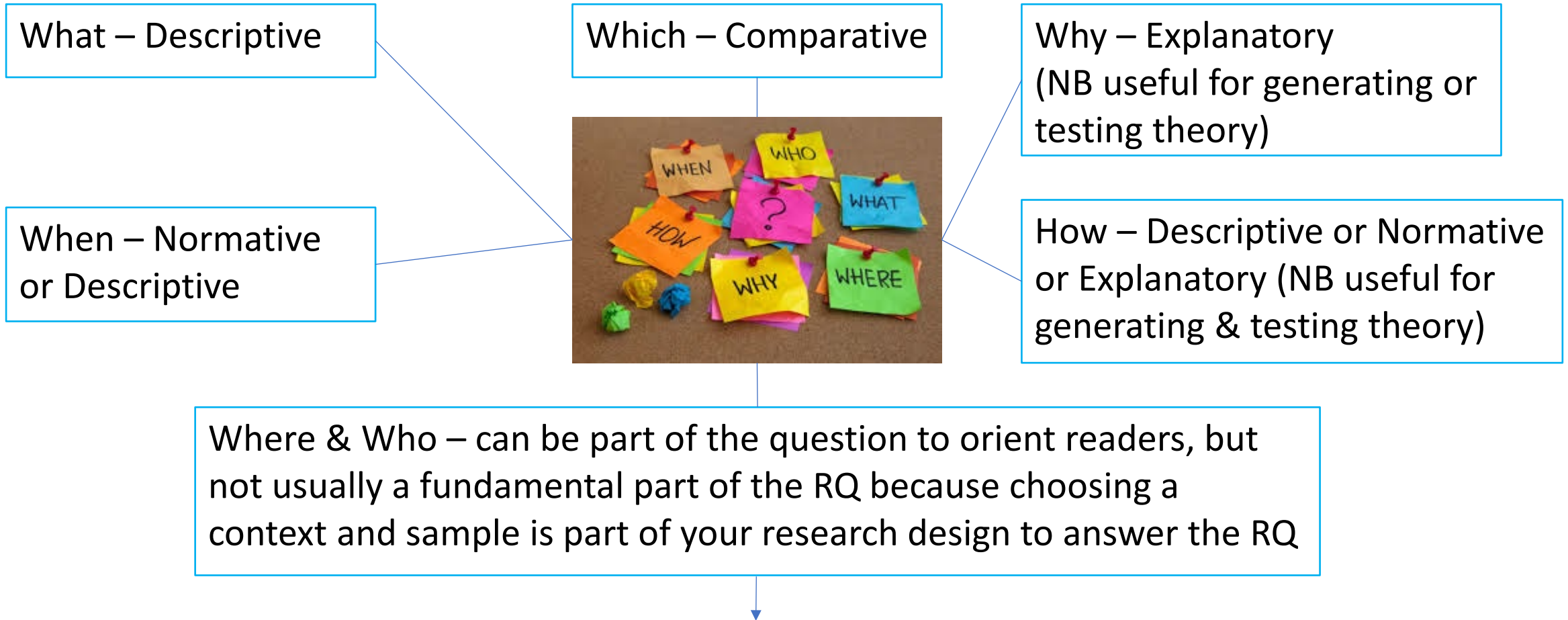
- How can/ should workplace well-being initiatives?

4 Explanatory

Generate knowledge about contingent relations between phenomena – correlation (X with Y), causality (X causes Y), or conditionality (X causes Y in the presence of Z)

- How/ Why/ When workplace well-being initiatives?

What Which When Why How Where & Who



There *will* be exceptions e.g., “Who benefits most from work-life balance policies – senior executives, middle managers, or team members, and why?” [equally, could be “Which group...”]

Your Turn....

1. Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH) sets off from her cute cottage with beautiful garden carrying a basket of treats for her grandmother.
2. LRRH walks happily through the deep dark woods; she is not scared.
3. On the way through the woods, LRRH meets a wolf, who slyly learns her destination and hurries ahead.
4. The wolf arrives at the grandmother's house, disguises himself as the grandmother lying in bed, and waits for LRRH.
5. When LRRH arrives, she notices her "grandmother" in bed looks strange as she can see the big ears, big eyes, and big teeth of the wolf.
6. A nearby woodsman rushes to help LRRH (he has heard her scream) and puts the wolf in chains, and they sit down to eat the basket of treats.



Develop your own interesting LRRH RQ!



With your neighbour(s), and drawing on at least one of your areas of academic expertise or interest, develop an interesting RQ **based on LRRH!**

1. Decide whether it will be descriptive (what...), normative (how should...), comparative (which...) or explanatory (how/ why...)
2. If you have time, play around with alternatives

Contextualising your RQs
through writing to
enhance “interestingness”

Example 1: emphasising need for
theoretical contribution

Example 2: emphasising novelty/
unknowns (through unanswered
questions)

Example 3: enabling surprise
through emphasising logical
disconnects



Enhancing “interestingness” 1

Example 1: emphasising need for theoretical insights

- Ensuring your reader appreciates that there is a need for theoretical development/incomplete answers that leads to your RQ
- Example (next) of organisational identity where there is a huge research literature already.

Enhancing “interestingness” 1

Example 1: emphasising need for theoretical insights

- The authenticity and identity literatures suggest divergent predictions about when and how people with multiple identities will experience authenticity at work.
- On one hand, an authenticity perspective suggests that consistency and stability are at the core Thus having multiple identities may pose a threat to authenticity....
- On the other hand, identity theorists have argued that because people naturally straddle multiple roles and groups....
- The authenticity literature has neither adequately considered nor empirically examined the dynamic, ongoing, and socially dependent nature of self-construction and identity....
- This is an especially important issue in the current “gig” economy, which provides platforms to allow people to monetize multiple passions and interests...
- Yet current theory cannot explain how the enactment of multiple jobs may affect people’s understandings of their selves and sense of authenticity.
- **RQ: How** do individuals with multiple identities cultivate and sustain authenticity at work? [EXPLANATORY]

Caza, B. B., Moss, S., & Vough, H. (2018). From synchronizing to harmonizing: The process of authenticating multiple work identities. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 63(4), 703-745.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0001839217733972>

Enhancing “interestingness” 2

Example 2: emphasising novelty or unknowns

- Often a topic or area might be dismissed for being either important but thoroughly researched with nothing left to discover or, at the other end, trivial and unimportant. Emphasising that this isn't the case piques interest.
- Example (next) of workplace gossip which could be dismissed as irrelevant.

Enhancing “interestingness” 2

Example 2: emphasising novelty/ unknowns (*here through unanswered questions*)

- Despite progress toward a more balanced view of organizational gossip—a view that acknowledges gossip’s beneficial functions and outcomes, as well as its detrimental ones (REFS)—many questions remain unanswered regarding how gossip shapes organizational life.
- For example, what factors determine whether gossip plays a largely functional or dysfunctional role in the workplace (REFS)?
- Does gossip necessarily take place outside the formal structures of organizations, or can it be embedded in such structures (REFS)?
- To what extent can gossip be treated as a basis for official organizational action (REFS)?
- And how does gossip interact with power at different organizational levels (REFS)?
- *RQ: **What** is organizational gossip and **how** does it shape organizational life?*

[DESCRIPTIVE & EXPLANATORY]

Greenslade-Yeats, J., Cooper-Thomas, H., Corner, P. D., & Morrison, R. (2024). A paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 26(2), 187-210. [https://doi.org/ 10.1111/ijmr.12345](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12345)

Enhancing “interestingness” 3

Example 3: enabling surprise through emphasising logical disconnects

- Reader may not realise that well-established ideas or theories do not fit well together. RQ can help reader them have an ‘aha’ or ‘oh’ moment through highlighting these problems.
- Example (next) of work-family conflict, where the normative solutions are part of the problem.

Enhancing “interestingness” 3

Example 3: enabling surprise through emphasising logical disconnects

- [Problem] “Stagnation” is the word many use to describe women’s stalled movement into high-level positions ... This stagnation is a key component of gender inequality in the laborforce, but its persistence is still poorly understood.
- [Discuss disconnects in their data that distressed men and women] These disconnects not only cast doubt on this firm’s work–family conflict explanation and solution, they also replicated a puzzle found in the work–family literature. ... Hence the popular work–family conflict explanation for women’s stalled advancement does not square with women’s or men’s lived experience, either in our firm or more broadly, and the currently popular solution to the problem has the perverse effect of maintaining it in both places.
- We took these parallels between our firm and the research as the basis for our orienting research questions: **why** does work–family conflict persist as the dominant explanation for women’s stalled advancement despite evidence that calls it into question, and **why** do accommodations persist as the dominant solution despite evidence that they perpetuate the problem? In other words, **(RQ) why** do organizations’ prevailing beliefs and remedies regarding women’s stalled advancement systematically, if unwittingly, maintain gender inequality? [EXPLANATORY]

Padavic, I., Ely, R. J., & Reid, E. M. (2020). Explaining the persistence of gender inequality: The work–family narrative as a social defense against the 24/7 work culture. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 65(1), 61-111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839219832310>



Challenge for you in the future:
Notice what writing strategies scholars use to emphasise 'interestingness' leading into an RQ

RQs often improve over time

- Adjustment over time especially occurs for qualitative, also reviews, less so for conceptual/ theory or quantitative
- Also, you are unlikely to write a perfect RQ from the start – they need ongoing editing due to
 - Refinements in thinking from you/ your supervisors/ your co-authorship team
 - Clarity coming from your data analysis as to what RQs you can *actually* answer
 - Feedback from reviewers (or other valued readers)



RQs can adjust via research and/ or review processes

First manuscript submission:

*RQ: **How** do newcomers experience and respond to tournament socialization?*



Manuscript RnR submission:

We have addressed your third point concerning our theoretical contribution, analytic insight and theorizing [especially regarding tournament socialization]... by adding a second research question

*RQ1: **How** do elite newcomers respond to tournament socialization? and*

*RQ2: **Why** are some elite newcomers' responses to tournament socialization more successful than others?*



New journal manuscript submission:

Deleted tournaments as reviewers wanted winners and losers, which weren't in our data

*RQ: **What** unique challenges do elite newcomers face during socialization and **how** do they react to these challenges?*





In other words, your RQ(s) is likely to develop over time



Criteria for evaluating RQs

- RQs should be clear – understandable to non-experts; include focal constructs but exclude unnecessary jargon
- RQs should be researchable – capable of translating into a research design(s)
- RQs should have the potential to contribute to knowledge; building off past theory &/or research but taking an additional step (of whatever size)
- RQs should be of ‘Goldilocks’ size – neither too big nor too small
- RQs, if multiple, should be linked to allow a coherent contribution
- RQs should provoke interest – give direction to produce research that is interesting and impactful for academia, industry and / or society at large

Computers are useless as they
only give us the answers

attributed to Pablo Picasso



Ideally today's session has helped you sharpen your approach to research questions as a tool in your research tool kit



What Which When Why How Where & Who



What – Descriptive

- What are the most effective elements of work-life balance policies for improving employee wellbeing and productivity?

When – Normative or Descriptive

- When should work-life balance policies be used for maximum employee benefit: before or after an organisational restructure (i.e. link to job insecurity)? OR Do work-life balance policies work better when...?

Which – Comparative

- Which work-life balance policies work best for insecure employees: encouraging positive action or addressing negative experiences? OR Do work life balance policies work better if they target positive action or address negative experiences?

Why – Explanatory – critical for generating or testing theory

- Why are work-life balance policies (in)effective? (*theoretical / explanatory mechanism*)

How – Descriptive or Normative or Explanatory

- How do insecure employees respond to renewed work-life balance policies? (*descriptive*)
- How should organisations structure work-life balance policies to support employees with high job insecurity? (*normative*)
- How can work-life balance policies be made more effective? (*theoretical / explanatory mechanism*)

Where & Who – can be part of the question to orient readers, but not usually a fundamental part of the RQ because choosing a context and sample is part of your research design to answer the research question. But there will be exceptions e.g., “Who benefits most from work-life balance policies – senior executives, middle managers, or team members, and why?”