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A Brief Guide for Developing a Research Question

In your dissertation, you are expected to generate a plausible answer to a specific question about an empirical phenomenon. When confronted with this task, students often find the very first step in this endeavour – identifying a suitable question – quite challenging. This memo will help you to master this task by introducing some basic strategies for developing a research question and pointing towards some of the pitfalls associated with this process.

I Extracting a question from an ‘interesting topic’

When beginning to think about your dissertation, you’re likely to be soon clear about the topic you want to write about: you have a strong interest in an issue (e.g. European Integration) or a policy field (e.g. regulation of financial markets) and you would like to use the thesis as an opportunity to satisfy your curiosity about it. Even though a strong interest in a topic is a valuable motivational asset for writing a dissertation, such a preference is much too vague a starting point for doing research. You need to identify the specific aspect of, for example, European Integration you will write about. Such a focus is introduced by a precise research question. The following remarks represent general strategies that help you to develop one.

- **Search for moments of CHANGE**

Explaining a phenomenon as a whole (e.g. European Integration) is not feasible within the resource constraints you are facing. Rather, look for episodes in which your phenomenon displays some discontinuity (e.g. an increase, a decrease, intensification, interruption, change to a qualitatively new level). At moments of change, we can search for factors in the environment of your subject that also deviate from their normal state. Such variables can then be treated as candidates for the forces that sustain and drive the general process you are interested in.

- Search for VARIATION

If you are interested in identifying the cause(s) of a phenomenon, look out for variations in its presence (i.e. presence vs absence, more vs less). Having cases at hand that differ with respect to the value of the dependent variable allows you at a later stage to eliminate those variables as potential causes that are similar in each instance.¹ Such variations can be found ...

- ... *between different units* (e.g. variation in the regulation of financial markets among European countries)
- ... *within units* (e.g. in the case of federal states, look for variation among the units' constitutive parts (*Laender*))
- ... *over time* (e.g. the value of the outcome some variables for the same unit might vary over time.) Focusing on inter-temporal variation is a particularly helpful strategy when you're interested in the adoption of a specific policy or the foundation of an institution. For, such events are often preceded by earlier, but failed attempts to introduce the policy or to create the institution. If that is the case, you have a temporal variation in the success of introducing the policy / institution and, as described above, you will then be able to use similarities and differences in contextual variables to assess their causal significance.

Please note: The imperative to search for variation usually also applies when you consider doing a single-case study. In the course of a case study, you will inevitably draw on either within-case comparisons (e.g. before and after the appearance of the phenomenon) or experiences in other cases. An awareness of such variation will then also help you to assess the relative causal significance of potentially explanatory variables.

¹ A variant of this strategy is to search for similarities in the phenomenon of your choice in contexts that are decidedly different. Here, similarity in potentially relevant variables (amid contextual differences) can then be taken as a cue for their causal effect on the outcome.

- DIS-AGGREGATE your phenomenon

Many of the phenomena of interest to Social Scientists are constituted by a number of sub-units or contributing processes. Grouping such constitutive units / processes under one label creates the impression of homogeneity among them. This perception, however, is not always justified. For example, compliance by member states with EU norms differs across the types of norms (e.g. environment vs. migration) and across member states. This fact is, however, masked by the conventional reliance on summary statistics (e.g. member states incorporate 40 percent of all EU norms in national law). Thus, when investigating an issue such as norm-compliance in the EU, it would be advisable to examine the phenomenon for its values at the level of constitutive units (e.g. compliance by states with different types of norms), again, looking for variation between them.

- Search for ANOMALIES

Observations that do not make sense in light of established knowledge or that deviate from what we would expect given generally accepted theories are also a worthwhile starting point for a dissertation. The investigation of such phenomena might allow you to modify existing theories or to specify their domain of application. (But before you claim to have identified a puzzle, carefully check that alternative explanations really do not hold!)

II Minimising the risk of re-starting from scratch

Writing a dissertation never is a linear process. When you get to know the relevant theories, operationalize important variables or analyze the collected data, it is very likely that you will encounter information that require the adjustment of your research design. Although you will not be able to completely eliminate the need for modifying your research plan while doing research, you can influence how often and how far back you have to go by choices made at the stage of developing your question. Thus ...

- ... focus on CONDITIONS for behavior

When trying to understand the behavior of actors, we are often guided by the implicit assumption that they act consistently, i.e. that they have one type of goal that they invariantly seek to realize with their actions. This bias is reflected in questions such as ‘Is the EU a “normative power”?’ (i.e. Do ethical standards trump economic interests in EU’s external relations?). It is unlikely, however, that there will ever be a conclusive answer to that question. The EU, as any other actor, will sometimes prioritise moral values in its decision-making, sometimes it will favour its economic interests. Thus, a more fruitful way to approach the issue of an actor’s motivation is to ask for the conditions under which one type of goal will trump others. With a framing like this, you will not be frustrated by observations that suggest inconsistent behaviour. Rather, you are then able to compare instances in which an actor behaved virtuously with instances in which its material interests prevailed.

- ... DON’T be guided by PERSONAL PREFERENCES in ...

... selecting a theory

Most of us have a 'pet theory'. When it comes to writing a dissertation, not few consider this then as an opportunity to either learn more about it or to demonstrate its superiority. The thesis’ starting point is then defined by the desire to use one's favoured theory (e.g. Historical Institutionalism) to study an empirical phenomenon. However, in the Social Sciences, personal preferences are not a legitimate justification for selecting theories. Rather, your choice should be guided by existing conventions within your scientific community or the previous performance of theories when explaining similar types of phenomena.

... the empirical cases you want to study

Also, you are likely to have a distinct interest in a region or a country. Again, your desire to deepen your knowledge about it is not the best justification for its

selection. However, given the limited time available to you, a case can nevertheless be made for studying a context you are already familiar with. You should nevertheless make sure that the empirical units you choose also correspond to other needs of an analytical research design (e.g. variation with regard to dependent or independent variables).

- ... GET RID OF PRECONCEPTIONS about causal relations

Often, the definition of a dissertation's subject includes the causal relations that should be investigated empirically. Consider this example: 'I am interested in how norms affect policies (in contrast to material interests). I want to study their influence on issues of security, specifically, how norms played out in NATO's recent enlargement process.' This definition of the research problem rests on the implicit assumption that NATO's enlargement was the consequence of the salience of some norms for relevant actors that then also prevailed over their material interests. However, the relation between norms, material interests and institutional change should be the subject of an investigation, not determined beforehand!

- ... DISTINGUISH between Principle and Practice

Institutions are a prominent subject for writing dissertations in Political Science. When studying institutions, be careful, however, not to confuse matters of 'principle' (the foundation of an organisation or the adoption of some formal rules) with matters of 'practice' (the operation of an organisation or the impact of rules on behavior). Although both dimensions are legitimate subjects for empirical research, they are two analytically distinct processes whose explanation would require different research designs.

- ... treat the STATE OF THE ART like a FRIEND not like your mother in law

When embarking on a new research project, one often is motivated by the desire to learn new things about one's chosen subject. Examining how scholars in the past have

conceptualised variables or what methods they used to generate explanations might therefore appear only as a nuisance delaying the satisfaction of one's curiosity. However, even if you're eager to study the subject empirically, you should take the time for examining the 'state of the art' in your field of research. For, as a novice to the field, you are unlikely to know exactly what constitutes a valuable contribution to your field and which direction to avoid. Like a Lonely Planet guidebook, the state of the art tells you where it is worth spending your time – just with the difference that it does not come in as neat a package as the actual Lonely Planet. Instead, you will have to reconstruct the state of the art yourself by examining handbooks (e.g. *Oxford Handbooks of Political Science*), journals (e.g. *Annual Review of Political Science*) and review articles (e.g. *Perspectives on Politics, World Politics, Comparative Politics*).