

## HOW TO IDENTIFY A RESEARCH QUESTION?

### *I How to Extract a Question from a “Topic” that Interests You?*

I assume you currently have only a vague notion about the content of your dissertation. You know that you have an interest in a large topic (e.g. European Integration) or a policy field (e.g. regulation of financial markets) but you are uncertain about the specific aspect of, for example, European Integration you would like to write about. When thinking how to get from the level of topic to the specific theme of your dissertation, it is imperative that you think in terms of identifying a question. Although your work will also be a study of a general topic, e.g. European Integration, we primarily expect that it answers a specific question. The following remarks represent general strategies that increase the probability that you will find one.

- search for moments of CHANGE

Explaining a phenomenon in its totality (e.g. European Integration) is not doable within your constraints, if ever. Rather, look for episodes in which your phenomenon displays some discontinuity (e.g. increase, decrease, intensification, interruption, change to a qualitatively new level). At moments of discontinuity, we can search for conditions and/ or forces that also deviate from a normal state and thus point to the conditions and forces that sustain and drive the process you are interested in.

- search for VARIATION

If you are interested in the determinants of a phenomenon (in a specific country) look out for variations. You are only able to separate relevant from irrelevant factors if you have one or several contrasting cases. Variations, in turn, can be found ...

- *between 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)

- *over time* (e.g. the value of some variables for the same unit might vary over time. This point is also relevant if you are interested in the adoption of a specific policy or the foundation of an institution. For most supposedly one-off events are preceded by earlier – but unsuccessful – attempts to introduce such a policy/ institution. If so, you have a temporal variation in the success of introducing a policy and you will be able to search for contextual differences that distinguish these episodes.)

➔ The imperative to search for variation also applies to (supposedly) single-case studies. It is inevitable that you draw at least (implicit) inter-temporal comparisons (e.g. before and after the appearance of the phenomenon) when studying a single case. Most likely, you are also drawing comparisons to other cases. Make such implicit contrasts explicit. As a consequence, you will be able to make stronger statements about your one case!

- DIS-AGGREGATE your phenomenon

- Many of the phenomena social scientists are interested in are constituted by a number of sub-units/ or contributing processes. Attaching a common label to sub-process creates the impression of similarity – an impression that is not always justified. For example, compliance with EU norms by EU member-states is likely to differ between types of norms (e.g. environment vs. migration). Thus, when investigating norm-compliance it is advisable to contrast different type of norms and thereby to identify the conditions that are associated with a smaller or greater degree of member-state compliance.

- search for ANOMALIES

Puzzles, observations that do not make sense in light of established knowledge or deviate from what established theories would lead us to expect, are also a worthwhile starting point. On the basis of such observations, you might be able to add to or correct

theories. (But make sure, your puzzle is a real one! Check carefully whether alternative explanations really do not hold!)

## ***II Strategies for Minimising the Risk of Re-Starting from Scratch***

Developing a question and research design is never a linear process. In the process of becoming familiar with theories and the gathering of empirical facts, you will have to go back and adapt your initial question and research design. Although you cannot completely eliminate the need for modification, you can influence how often and how far back you have to go. Two primary sources for frustrations along the way lie in the way the question is framed and in the presence of dubious pre-conceptions. Thus ...

- focus on CONDITIONS for certain states/ processes
  - Student: ‘Is the EU a “normative power”?’ (i.e. Do ethical standards trump economic interests in EU’s external relations?)

There cannot be a conclusive answer to that question. The EU, as any other actor, will sometimes prioritise moral values; sometimes it will “follow the money”. Thus, a more fruitful way to approach this question (and more manageable for research) is to ask for the conditions under which one motivation tends to be dominant. As a consequence, rather than searching for the policy or process in which the EU always acts virtuously (which you will not find) you will seek for instances in which it occasionally acts like this (and contrast such occasions with instances in which material interests prevail).

- DON’T be guided by PERSONAL PREFERENCES in ...
  - selecting a theory
- Student: ‘I want to use theory X (e.g. Historical Institutionalism) to study Z’.

→ Why do you want to use that theory? Personal dislike for, say, Rational Choice is not a good reason. Good reasons are the failure of previous works to explain Z with other theories or the fit of a theory to a phenomenon.

- the empirical cases you want to study

- Student: 'I want to compare country X with country Y'.

→ Why country Y? Your familiarity with, say, France's history or culture is not always the best reason for including this country. Make sure that the empirical unit you choose also corresponds to other needs of your research design (e.g. because Y does not comply with an established theory's predictions) or because it contrasts with the observations we have made for X.

- GET RID OF PRECONCEPTIONS about causal relations

- Student: '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.'

→ There are too many assumptions already built in. Firstly, you assume that norms trump material interest. OK, that assumption is acceptable (under the conditions described above, though!). Yet, whether norms prevail over material interests in security policies cannot be taken for granted. And even if norms would (under some conditions) prevail over material interests/ security concerns, it is even less certain that NATO's enlargement exemplifies that. The relation between norms and security policies on the one hand and between norms and NATO's enlargement on the other is what needs to be investigated. A statement about their relations is what would be the outcome of the process. Policy domains and specific empirical cases need to be carefully selected while designing the research project rather than defined at the beginning.

- DISTINGUISH between Principle and Practice / Word and Action

Frequently, matters of ‘principle’ and ‘practice’ are confused when talking about the ‘institutionalisation of ...’. Be clear whether you want to look at the adoption of some formal arrangement or the arrangement’s impact on practice (e.g. the implementation level). Although both are legitimate research concerns, the two are analytically distinct processes that involve different actors, processes etc. Being clear about the level at which you want to study the phenomenon will help you to avoid confusion in the formulation of a research question, selection of theories etc.

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

Don’t see reading and the examining the state of the art as a nuisance you would prefer to ignore. Since you are unlikely to be an expert within in the theoretical and empirical study of your phenomenon, you need to rely on someone telling you where to go and which avenue to avoid. This is what the state of the art does. It tells you what has already been studied, what has been successful, what was a failure etc. In short, like a Lonely Planet guidebook, the State of the Art tells you where it is worth spending your time – just with the difference that the state of the art does not come in as a neat package as the Lonely Planet but is scattered around in handbooks (e.g. *Oxford Handbooks of Political Science*), journals (e.g. *Annual Review of Political Science*) or review articles (e.g. *Perspectives on Politics, World Politics, Comparative Politics* etc).