



Tips and Tools for Sociologists

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Tips on Developing Research/Thesis Topics

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Here are a few tips to get you started when thinking about topics for research or the reformulation of concerns or issues into a research-friendly form. They are not all meant to be followed in a specific order.

1. Write out your concern or issue as a question or questions (make sure they are sentences with a question mark at the end). Note that a single issue can serve as the basis for many questions. I sometime will write the questions down on separate cards or pieces of paper so that I can organize them in various ways (see below).
2. Avoid the formulation of questions that can be answered by 'yes' or 'no'. Revise them to suggest a variety of possible responses. For example, instead of asking "Does gender-bias cause poverty?" ask "What are the ways in which gender-bias causes poverty?" or "What are the primary factors causing poverty?".
3. Organize the questions in various ways that make some sort of logical sense. This may be by level of generality (e.g. general questions vs. specific ones within them), by theme, topic, order of answering (e.g. the first question must be answered before the second), or some other structure that makes sense to you.
4. Note that questions can also vary with respect to the type of information, data, or arguments required to answer them. Three of the most frequent types are the following:
 - Analytical questions: The answers to these depend on the definition or logical structure of key concepts in the question. For example, a question such as "What is alienation?" depends on how you define "alienation". Answering such a question requires research on how it has been defined in the past plus some judgment on your part about the relative merits of those definitions.
 - Normative questions: The answers to these questions depend on you making some sort of value judgment. For example, a question such as "What is the best way to reduce poverty?" requires us to make value judgments about various options for reducing poverty.
 - Empirical questions: The answers to these questions depend on you collecting some sort of empirical evidence (qualitative and/or quantitative). For example, questions such as "How many people are poor in Canada?" or "What social conditions support genocide?" require us to collect and analyze some sort of data to answer.

Note as well that most questions include elements of all three of these types of questions. When answering the last example, I would need to define what I mean by

‘genocide’ and ‘support’ (analytical), make value judgments about genocide (normative), as well as collect the information of an empirical nature.

This is not an easy task in most cases, so don't be discouraged if you find it difficult. Often the questions are too big for a single paper, but don't reject them if they are important since they will help you focus your attention to find other (more manageable) questions that might contribute to an answer for the big questions.

5. Write out some answers to each of the questions you have posed. You don't have to be 'right' about your answers, just do some speculation on what the possible answers might be. Do this without collecting data or conducting research – just be imaginative and creative. Make a full list of all the reasonable answers to the questions – including the answers that you don't accept as valid, but that you think can be found in the academic or public discourse. Include these on your list. This is an important basis for developing your research design, so don't gloss it over. You need to know the kinds of arguments within which your research will take place. When compiling your lists of possible answers feel free to ask your friends, relatives, enemies, people on the street, etc. – but don't make it any kind of formal research project that involves reading or collecting data. The idea at this point is just to compile some interesting possible answers to your questions.
6. As you develop your lists you may notice that your questions change in various ways. This is fine. Just write down the new ones and proceed to identify possible answers to them as well.
7. When you have some nice lists, then start sorting them into various groups based on things of interest to you. You might choose such bases as: interesting and not-interesting; ones you believe and those you don't; those that you think are important and those that are not; those that can't be answered and those that can; and so on.

I find it is useful to identify those questions and/or answers that matter to me. For example, identify those where the answer would make a big difference to your understanding, your choices, your life, or the lives of those you care about. I don't find it useful to spend time researching questions that are basically rhetorical (i.e. those where you think you already know the 'right' answer and just want to 'prove it'). You may want to set up your research design with this type of approach, but that is for a later stage in the process – not the stage where you are deciding on a research topic.

8. Don't get misguided by the idea that you cannot formulate your questions and answers from a value position. It is true that social research requires us to construct our research design so that we could be wrong, but it doesn't require us to be 'unbiased' in the formulation of the questions and answers at this stage.
9. After you have explored the various questions and possible answers then identify the one question which is most interesting to you. List out as many possible answers to

the question that you can think of (or your friends can think us, etc.). For each answer, provide a brief statement about the reason or way in which this is an answer to the question.

10. Write a brief statement about why it is important to answer this question. This may have something to do with the question, the various answers, or the implications of them for particular people, groups, or consequences. You may include a comment on any different implications there are for each of the possible answers.
11. Identify the key concepts in the questions and answers you have chosen. Provide a brief definition for each of them.
12. If you have trouble deciding which question is most interesting, then follow the instructions for 9, 10, and 11 for all the ones you think are interesting.