

Social Research Dissertation Workshop

Part I: Getting Started

Dr Chao-Yo Cheng

Today's workshop is for

- ▶ MRes Global Politics
- ▶ MRes Politics
- ▶ MRes Public Policy and Management
- ▶ MRes/MSc Social Research

Plan for today

- ▶ Why dissertation (and what is it)?
- ▶ Overview of the dissertation process
- ▶ Getting started: Dissertation proposal form
 - Basic personal information
 - Title and subject area
 - "Scholarly" literature
 - Data and methods
 - Choosing (naming) your potential supervisor
- ▶ Q&A

Why dissertation? And what is it?

- ▶ An **independent, original** research project, guided by your supervisor(s)
- ▶ Resembles a **peer-reviewed journal article** (12,000-15,000 words, excluding appendix)
- ▶ A **rite of passage**
 - from a student to a scholar
 - from consuming to producing knowledge
 - from an empirical technician to a well-informed researcher

Dissertation process: An overview

- ▶ Term 1 (2022): Prepare your **dissertation proposal form**; talk to the program director and/or your potential supervisor (if there is one)
- ▶ Terms 2 and 3 (2023)
 - January: Submit your proposal form by **20 January 2023**
 - February to early March: Supervisor allocation; the Department sends a confirmation email about your dissertation supervisor
 - March to June/early July: Supervision in progress; submit a proposal for ethics review, if necessary
 - July-August: Supervision ends (typically); complete your dissertation
 - September: Submit your dissertation by **15 September 2023**
- ▶ After September 2023: Extension and deferral (TBA)

Upcoming dissertation activities

- ▶ Term 2: Dissertation workshop(s); TBD
 - Navigating the writing of your dissertation
 - Managing the relationship with your supervisor
 - Preparing (and submitting) the proposal for ethics review
- ▶ Term 3: Dissertation mini-conferences
 - MSc: Meetings as part of Masterclass in Social Research
 - MRes: Meetings during Reading Week
- ▶ Term 3/summer break: Dissertation bootcamps (check with the Study Skills Team)

Proposal form

Proposal form

- ▶ The proposal form is **NOT marked**. No written comments will be provided (but you can/should come to my office hours to talk about it).
- ▶ The proposal form **helps us find you a supervisor** that best suits your research project (ideally speaking)
- ▶ The proposal form shows your **tentative ideas** for the dissertation
- ▶ The proposal form should be **short, succinct** but **sufficiently coherent and informative** (2-2.5 pages max)
- ▶ The proposal form is due on **20 January 2023** on Moodle (you will see a submission link there in late December and/or early January)

Department of Politics
DISSERTATION PROPOSAL FORM

Please upload this form to the Moodle site for your dissertation, which you can find at moodle.bbk.ac.uk.

Name:

E-mail address:

MSc or MRes programme:

Full-time or part-time?

Title of proposed dissertation

Description of subject area

What scholarly literature will you be examining?

What primary research material might you use?

Have you identified or spoken with a potential supervisor? If so, who?

Proposal form: Basic personal information

- ▶ Name
- ▶ Email address
- ▶ MSc/MRes programme
- ▶ Full-time or part-time

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The information you provide needs to be consistent with what we see on MyBirkbeck

Proposal form: Title and subject area

- ▶ Title of proposed dissertation: Short v long? Creative v informative?

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- ▶ Title of proposed dissertation: Short v long? Creative v informative?
- ▶ Description of subject area: A brief statement to introduce your research (like a paper's abstract)
 - What are the **research questions**?
 - What is the **focus of previous research literature**?
 - What is the **context and/or background**? What is the **scope condition**?
 - What is **distinctive to your own theory position or intellectual approach**?
 - What are **your methods and data sources**?
 - **[Not yet]** What are your bottom-line findings? What "new facts" have you found? Or what key conclusions do you draw? The value-added or originality of your work within this field?

Proposal form: Title and subject area

Developmental puzzles First, you might, for example, pose a developmental puzzle – **how and why did x or y develop?** The x or y might be anything, ontologically speaking, for example, racist attitudes, cultural imperialism, the American system of government, a mental illness, and so on.

Mechanical puzzles Alternatively, your puzzle might be about how something works or is constituted. **How does x or y work? Why does it work in this way?** Again, x or y might be anything – intimate personal relationships, a legal system, a penal institution, the human psyche, and so on.

Comparative puzzles **Your puzzle might be about what we can learn from comparing x and y , and how we can explain differences and similarities between them.** This could involve comparing legal or social institutions internationally, different cultural objects or artefacts, or groups of people with different sets of experiences, for example.

Causal/predictive puzzles You might be interested in causality, and pose a puzzle about **what influence x has on y , or what causes x or y ?** You might extend that into a predictive puzzle - what is the likely outcome of x or y , where x or y might be a social intervention or programme for example.

Proposal form: Title and subject area

- ▶ Mason's categories provide a useful starting point, but they not mutually exclusive. Certainly it is not the only typology available out there.

Proposal form: Title and subject area

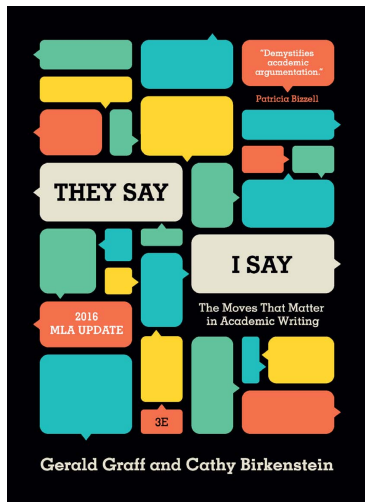
- ▶ Mason's categories provide a useful starting point, but they not mutually exclusive. Certainly it is not the only typology available out there.
- ▶ A research project can address one or more of the following questions – for instance,
 - How and why does X happen? Under what conditions will we see X?
 - Do these conditions really “cause” X?
 - How and why do these different conditions lead to X?
 - Why does X happen in some places but not others? Why does X happen in some years but not others?

Proposal form: "Scholarly literature"

- ▶ List the relevant "scholarly" literature(s); arrange the literature(s) by topic/keyword

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- ▶ List the relevant "scholarly" literature(s); arrange the literature(s) by topic/keyword
- ▶ Identify the gap, such as
 - Theoretical/empirical tensions or contradictions between the papers
 - Different or alternative theoretical perspectives
 - Different methodological approach (e.g., build on more inductive work to propose some hypothesis-testing deductive approach)
 - Extension to new context (e.g., different region, time period)
 - Some conventional wisdom left untested or understudied (e.g., critical element not engaged with, need to consider other conditions)
- ▶ Use literature to think through your supervisor preferences/choices



BRIEF CONTENTS

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5 "AND YET": *Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say* 68

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Proposal form: “Primary research material”

- ▶ A suggestive research design where you
 - describe the type(s) of evidence which will be collected and analyzed to address the research question
 - show that the proposed evidence can feasibly be collected given the time constraint
 - outline feasible method(s) that will be used to analyze the evidence
- ▶ Note it is okay to be tentative (we know things might change)
- ▶ The key is to build a coherent alignment between question, theory, and empirics; you can use your observations to *evaluate* or *challenge* a theory

ON THE ART OF WRITING PROPOSALS

Some Candid Suggestions
for Applicants to
Social Science Research Council
Competitions

Adam Przeworski
Department of Political Science
University of Chicago
and
Frank Salomon
Department of Anthropology
University of Wisconsin



Social Science Research Council
One Pierrepont Plaza, 15th Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11201
212.377.2700 | www.ssrc.org

<https://www.ssrc.org/publications/the-art-of-writing-proposals/>

Proposal form: Potential supervisor

Supervisor allocation is a **collaborative** process between the program director and the students; you can/need to

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- ▶ Nominate an (permanent) academic staff to supervise your dissertation
 - SSHP departments: Politics (for MRes Politics students), geography, HCA, philosophy, and psychosocial studies
 - Participating departments in Arts and Law: Applied linguistics, criminology, and law
 - Other departments (e.g., FMCS, management and psychological science)
- ▶ Show some knowledge of the work by your potential supervisor and provide some explanations in the proposal form
- ▶ Provide more than one name in case your first choice is not available
- ▶ Start informal conversations with your potential supervisors

Where Research Begins

CHOOSING A
RESEARCH PROJECT
THAT MATTERS TO YOU
(AND THE WORLD)

Thomas S. Mullaney
& Christopher Rea

Where Research Begins

Choosing a Research Project That Matters to You (and the World)

Thomas S. Mullaney and Christopher Rea

Plenty of books tell you how to do research. This book helps you figure out WHAT to research in the first place, and why it matters.

The hardest part of research isn't answering a question. It's knowing what to do *before* you know what your question is. *Where Research Begins* tackles the two challenges every researcher faces with every new project: How do I find a compelling problem to investigate—one that truly matters to me, deeply and personally? How do I then design my research project so that the results will matter to anyone else?

This book will help you start your new research project the right way for you with a series of simple yet ingenious exercises. Written in a conversational style and packed with real-world examples, this easy-to-follow workbook offers an engaging guide to finding research inspiration within yourself, and in the broader world of ideas.

Course of action (until we meet again)

- ▶ Start thinking about your dissertation (if you haven't)
- ▶ Talk to your personal tutor and/or potential supervisor
- ▶ Review materials on the dissertation's Moodle shell
- ▶ Work on the proposal form and submit it by **20 January 2023**

Key contacts

- ▶ MRes Politics: Dr Barry Maydom (b.maydom@bbk.ac.uk)
- ▶ MRes/MSc Social Research: Dr Chao-yo Cheng
(c.cheng@bbk.ac.uk)

Thank you.