

Politics, Philosophy and Public Affairs
Thesis Seminars for PPPA students

How to plan a social sciences research design

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Who am I? :)

- **PhD candidate in Political Studies** (NASP - UniMi)
- **Research interests:** Political parties, intra-party politics, leadership, crises and political scandals
- **Methodology:** Quantitative and computational methods (but I also really like qualitative stuff!)
- **Background:** Sociology, Administrations and Public Policy

Goal for today

Provide a roadmap and practical advice to help you create a social science research design, in order to help you write a more "sociological/political" thesis or essay

FEBRUARY 15, 8.30-10.30AM, ROOM 12 VIA CONSERVATORIO

HOW TO PLAN A SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH DESIGN

Identifying a research question, selecting a case, selecting methods

FEBRUARY 22, 8.30-10.30AM, ROOM 12 VIA CONSERVATORIO

HOW TO PLAN A PHILOSOPHY RESEARCH DESIGN

Identifying a research question, structuring a coherent argument

FEBRUARY 23, 4.30-6.30PM, ROOM 13 VIA CONSERVATORIO

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH, CITING AND WRITING

Bibliographical research, correct citation, academic writing

FEBRUARY 23, 12.30-2.30PM, ROOM A VIA PACE

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGIES FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Main methodologies for qualitative research and some interpretive tools for quantitative research

Index

- Formulating a good research question
- How to "deviate" from a full philosophical thesis
- Qualitative and quantitative methods
- Strategies for case selection
- Q&A section



From a research topic to a research question

What makes a good research topic?

- Phenomena, events, processes, outcomes
- Avoid assembling random facts on a very broad topic!
- Must be focused (not too broad, not too narrow)
- Point out a specific aspect of the topic
- Start from a personal interest!



Figure: The Myth of Populism

Good questions to ask yourself about a general topic

- **History:** How did it develop over time?
- **Structure and Composition:** How does your topic fit into a context or larger structure?
- **Categorization:** Can your topic be grouped into types? How does it compare with others?
- **Negative Questions:** Why did this topic not develop the same way in other places?

"I want to study populist parties because I want to find out how they shape individual attitudes towards immigrants"

Research question in the social sciences

- **One sentence** followed by a question mark
- It **specifies** the aspects of your topic that you're trying to answer
- It provides **guidance** throughout the research process
- Explanatory (how? why?) or descriptive (when? what? where? who?) questions



Good vs bad research questions

Bad examples

- Should abortion be legal?
- Does age affect people's attending religious ceremonies?
- What challenges do American citizens face in the current political landscape?

Good examples

- How do varying legal frameworks for abortion access impact public health outcomes and reproductive rights in different states?
- How do changing demographics and cultural pluralism influence the transformation of religious identities in France?
- How do structural barriers, such as voter ID laws, registration requirements, impact voter turnout and political participation among marginalized communities in the United States?

Philosophical vs Social Science Research Questions

Philosophical RQ:

How do different philosophical traditions conceptualize the nature of justice, and what are the underlying principles that guide moral reasoning about justice?

Social Science RQ:

How do environmental factors, such as socioeconomic status and neighborhood characteristics, influence access to justice and legal representation in Italy?

Main differences

Less normative, less theoretical, more specific, relies on empirical evidence but there's no a full dichotomy!

Features of a good research question

- Clear, simple, brief
- Researchable
- Avoid questions that are too moral/normative, vague, yes/no
- Do not ask for opinions
"What is best between X and Y?" "What should we do about X?"
- It should be interesting to you! (...but also to others)



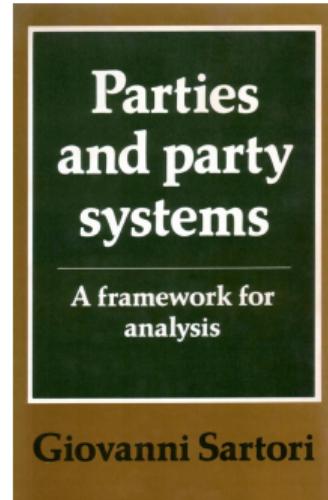
Theorizing in the social sciences

It's important to have a grasp of the theories around your project!

- Theories are **reductionist**: they all have contextual limits, assumptions, and limitations
- There is no single "*true*" social science theory but the best theory suited to explain a phenomenon
- A good theory will tell you the connections between the elements of your research

How to find relevant theory?

- Reading carefully literature related to your phenomenon of interest
- **Back-and-forth approach:** don't necessarily work only on the theory before the definition of your RQ. You can always read some new books or papers
- Use your philosophical knowledge and experience to build a strong theoretical framework

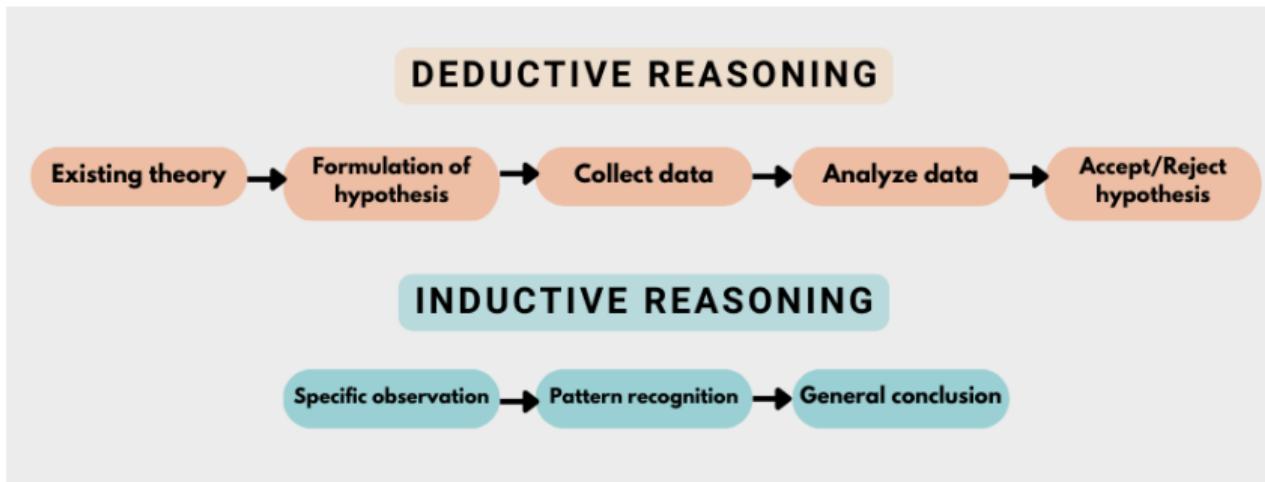


How to "deviate" from a full philosophical thesis

What should you say to your supervisor if you want to do a more "politological/sociological" thesis?

- "The **topic** of my research is.." (maybe you've already read some theories about your topic!)
- "My **research question** is.."
- "I feel like this research question is suited to be investigated in a more politological/sociological way, how could we do it?"
- You can also just take a more socially conscious approach to social issues within a normative and philosophical framework

What if you want to develop more empirical research?



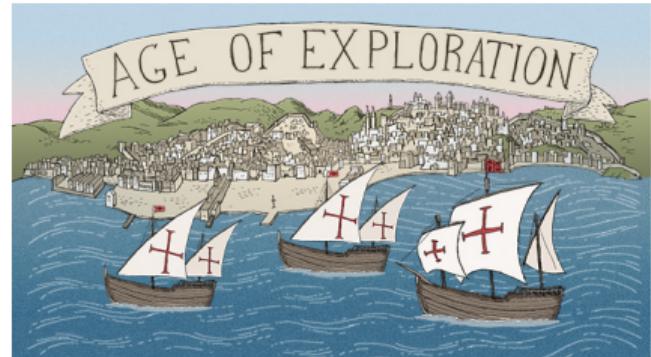
- Purely descriptive questions are not really suited for deductive social science projects
- In a master thesis, it's unlikely that you will have the tools to do a complete empirical research

You can do an "explorative-descriptive" research

You can still use some empirical tools to describe your phenomenon and try to answer your research question!

Exploratory-descriptive research involves:

- Collecting and analyzing data to understand a phenomenon or topic
- Describing patterns, trends, and relationships in the data
- Generating hypotheses and ideas for further research



Choosing a suitable approach to collect data

Qualitative

- Small number of cases
- Holistic
- In-depth analysis
- Less generalizable

Quantitative

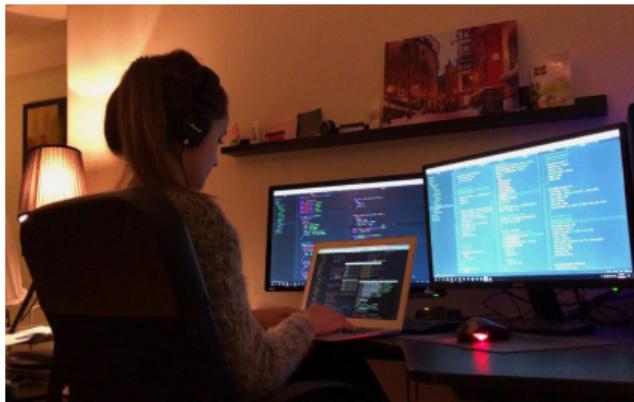
- Large number of cases
- Particularistic
- Broad analysis
- More generalizable

Qualitative Methods

- An interpretative form of research
- Involves data collection (interviews, fieldwork)
- Advantage: goes beyond statistical inference, collects novel information
- Disadvantage: harder to generalize or replicate



Quantitative Methods



- Examination of social phenomena, using statistical models and mathematical theories
- Often looks at a statistical relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable (X affects Y and by how much)
- Advantages: generalizable, replicable
- Disadvantages: inference is limited by statistics

Quant or Qual?

How to choose between qualitative and quantitative methods?

- Number of observations of phenomenon (large vs. small N)
- Your research question
- Guided by the feasibility of data collection
- Don't choose based on your skills! You can always learn something new



Case selection in the social sciences

What is a case?

- One unit of observation of your phenomenon
- A study of 5 countries = 5 cases; a study of two political parties = 2 cases
- Both qualitative and quantitative analysis selects cases
- Quantitative is large N, qualitative is small N



Figure: Social movement



Figure: Populist party

How to do the "selection"?

- Cases must be selected **purposefully** and with a good motivation
- There is no "right" case
- Not all case selection types generate the same insights
- It must suit your research question and the selection reasons must be transparent
- There will always be some sort of selection bias
- Single case vs comparative case selection

You can choose just one case

Single case selection types:

- **Extreme**: has an extremely low or high value on the central variable
- **Critical or influential**: "If it's valid for this case, it's valid for all (or many) cases", on the converse, "If it's not valid for this case, then it's not valid for any (or only few cases)"
- **Typical**: an example of the phenomenon under investigation
- **Deviant**: has a combination of characteristics different from most other units

Comparing cases: Most Similar Design

- Case-pairs need to be as similar as possible and vary only in one regard
 - Logic: isolate the effect of this one aspect
 - If these systems are so similar, why did they have different outcomes?
-
- Hypothesis: "The higher the unemployment rate of a city, the higher the crime rate"
 - Cases: 1 city with high unemployment, 1 city low unemployment but similar in other regards (size, region, etc)

Comparing cases: Most Different Design

- Case-pairs need to be as different as possible in many regards, with a similar outcome
 - Logic: the background factors that differ across the cases are unlikely to be causes of Y since that outcome is constant across the cases
 - If these cases are so different, why do they have this common aspect?
-
- Country A: majoritarian, winner-take-all representational system
 - Country B: proportional representation system
 - High degree of efficiency and consensus in the legislative process in both countries

Case Selection Considerations

- What is the case or cases that you have selected?
- What is the rationale for having selected them?
- How is this selection not random?
- What are the potential sources of bias in your choices?



Don't let the chaos guide your choice!

Thank You for Your Attention! Any questions?



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