

Finding That Elusive Thesis Topic in the Social Sciences

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Over the course of fifteen years as Research Advisor in the Social Sciences for the ALM Program, I have noticed two tendencies among ALM candidates when it comes time to choose a topic for their thesis—either they *overestimate* what is required for a master’s thesis or they *underestimate* what is required. Those who overestimate think they will not have enough to write about to fill 60 to 80 pages. They are the ones who want to reinterpret all of Western civilization in terms of its intellectual/cultural, political, social, and economic aspects with concomitant ramifications for the Third World as well as every man, woman, and child that has ever existed or will ever exist in the universe. Those who underestimate what is involved, in contrast, tend to approach it as they would a paper for a course. “Oh, I write fast,” they will explain when I point out that a month is not enough time to do a thesis. Their thesis proposals are usually on the order of “I plan to go to the library and look up some books on the topic, once I get a thesis director.” I gently inform those candidates that one cannot do the work of the proposal *and* the work of the thesis in the time allotted, and that it often takes as much as a year and a half, or longer, from the time one begins looking for a topic to completion of the thesis.

In the case of both tendencies, the common denominator is a certain vagueness concerning what constitutes a research question as well as what constitutes originality. A topic needs to focus on something specific yet significant. Testing the hypothesis that, for example, more men than women carry black umbrellas, while it might involve such aspects of research as data gathering and statistical analysis, would not be particularly significant (unless one could show the opposite were

the case, but that's another story). A topic can be "broad" in a time sense, covering a century or more, or in a geographic sense, covering a relatively wide area of the globe, *if* one knows specifically what one is looking for and knows how to find it. One ALM thesis, for instance, examined the effects of power and alliance membership on the frequency of occurrence of wars from 1816 to 1965. The author was able to accomplish his task satisfactorily by adopting a statistical approach and modeling the data according to a generalized event count distribution. Another thesis examined the treatment and view of old men by young men in Athenian sources over the course of several centuries from the Archaic period to the fourth century B.C.E.

Two theses come to mind in regard to studying a wide geographical distribution. One looked at military authoritarianism in Latin America and Africa by comparing bureaucratic authoritarianism in Brazil with personalistic monarchy in Uganda as case studies. The other examined the impact the Persian Gulf War had on Japan's relations with the United Nations. These topics worked because the thesis writer was isolating and focusing on specific aspects of time and place.

Thesis directors will have ideas about context, so I advise candidates to be as specific as they can concerning the core of their research. Sometimes the evidence gathering is the most original part of the thesis; other times it can be a new way of analyzing the evidence. But if the focus of the topic is sharp and specific, then not only do I have an easier time in finding a thesis director but also the thesis director will have an easier time coming up with additional ideas about context and ramifications. To approach it the other way, looking at possible implications before one has a focused research project ("Just think of the implications if I could show that more women than men carry black umbrellas") puts the cart before the horse (and in this case there may be no horse). One recent case where the thesis director had such an impact involved a proposal in which the candidate

defined her thesis topic in terms of the significance of Quebec's having a referendum specifically in the fall of 1995 on separation from Canada. The thesis director noted that Quebec has had several such referenda in the last few decades, and he and the candidate together turned the thesis topic into why Quebec calls referenda on this issue in general.

A topic should also be something the researcher is vitally interested in, because that interest carries him or her over the rough spots and gets him or her out to the library on cold, winter evenings. The topic can have a personal interest for the researcher. But it should be one that the researcher is genuinely interested in finding the answer to a question. Research is a lonely business and there is much to be said for the value of the quest for knowledge for its own sake—that is, one wonders why something is the way it is. One recent thesis looked at the methods employed by the Romans to heat their public baths. The author of the thesis, an engineer himself, wondered what role the hollow vaults and glazed windows had in Roman baths. He concluded that (1) the hollow vaults had no role in thermal insulation but did prevent condensate from forming and dripping on the bathers and (2) the glazed windows not only prevented heat loss but had the beneficial side effect of promoting solar heat gain.

Also the researcher may have access to unpublished or previously unresearched materials. One ALM thesis used the minutes of the meetings of the Massachusetts Milk Cooperative. The minutes were unpublished, but the author of the thesis had access to a complete collection of them because his father had been recording secretary for the Cooperative. The main evidence another thesis drew on was the reactions and emotions people in the streets of Cairo, Egypt, said they had when they heard the *adhan*, the Islamic call to prayer. This was an area that had never been researched before, so far as we know, and the researcher collected the evidence personally. A third

thesis drew on the Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson papers in the Houghton Library, which, although known to scholars, had never been utilized in anyone's research on the Civil War.

The researcher can look at a number of different aspects within a specific context. For example, one thesis discussed whether we can consider William Thompson (Lord Kelvin) to have been a scientist, an entrepreneur, or a technologist. The author of the thesis focused his analysis on inventions connected with Thompson's contributions to undersea telegraphy (laying the cables, sending the electrical impulses, receiving and recording them, etc.) from the 1850's through the 1880's. By focusing his research on a particular, yet significant, aspect of Thompson's work, the author was able to answer the question satisfactorily in favor of Thompson's being primarily a technologist. Another thesis analyzed the theory and practice of Museum of Science displays in terms of whether they are or should be celebratory, descriptive, or critical. By focusing specifically on the design and arrangement of displays, the author was able to discuss the wider aspects of the role not only that museums of science have in present-day society but also the role that science has.

While I do encourage ALM candidates to interview people for a topic in the Social Sciences, interviewing usually should not be the basis of the thesis. It is often difficult to set up interviews and time consuming copying the notes or transcribing the tape of the interview. Also I warn against topics with lengthy questionnaires. Some candidates think that doing a questionnaire is a quick and easy way of doing research. But then they find that people, in general, do not like to fill out questionnaires, especially when it involves providing personal information, such as how much money they make, where they live, etc. And the longer a questionnaire is the less likely one is going to get much of a response, not to mention the cost of photocopying and mailing for the researcher. Sometimes, however, the nature of the topic calls for a series of questions asked of a large enough

group to be statistically significant. One of our candidates wanted to find out what organizations with political lobbies would do if federal campaign finance reform prohibited them from contributing directly to candidates for political office. In particular, he wanted to try to determine whether the effects of such reform would be more in keeping with the ideas of the Founding Fathers as expressed in the Federalist Papers or less so. He devised a four-question questionnaire and, instead of mailing it to lobbying organizations, he called them on the phone. Almost all lobbying organizations have spokespersons whose job it is to talk with the public, so in a way he had a captive audience for his questionnaire. It was their job to respond to his questions, and his response rate was close to 100%. As a result of their responses, he was able to reach the conclusion that prohibiting direct contribution of money to political candidates would result in lobbies' using their money to try to influence voters, which coincided more closely with the ideas concerning ways expressed in the Federalist Papers to influence the electoral process.

The particular danger of personal interest in a topic, of course, is the preconceived notion, that is, wanting to prove a point or engaging in a diatribe against some view that one does not like. We all have our biases, but when we try to prove our biases are correct rather than testing them to see if they are wrong we are prone to skewing the evidence and forcing it to conform to our wishes. Such tendencies do not lead to appropriate thesis topics. One is free to write letters to the editor of one's local newspaper or even articles for magazines or even run for public office to advance one's own ideological position. But the best research is done when one has no vested interest in whether the outcome is one way or another. "Let the chips fall where they may" should be the researcher's attitude. Follow the evidence wherever it leads. This is what is meant by disinterested research, even though the topic itself may be fraught with emotion for the researcher and for the people

involved. For example, not too long ago, a mayor of a New England city wrote his ALM thesis on public and private housing programs for the poor. Ideologically and based on his past experience with public housing in his city, he approached the topic with the idea that public housing was a bad idea, and his proposal stated as much. Yet, in the course of doing his research on the thesis itself, he found evidence of cases and situations where public housing worked better. The conclusion of his thesis presented a more nuanced and refined understanding of the entire issue than he had before, but only because he allowed the evidence to speak to him.

Another thesis also analyzed an issue of some ideological heat. At the same time some politicians a number of years ago were speculating that welfare was the reason why there were so many Cambodian Americans in Lowell, one of our graduates had just completed her thesis on this topic and concluded that the first Cambodian Americans to come to this area were drawn by the technology companies on Route 128. These new hires found Lowell a good place to live because of the low rents and real estate prices. Once there, they, being family oriented, invited their families and relatives to come, which created a growing community of Cambodian Americans. This community, in turn, required services, which Cambodian-American entrepreneurs began to provide. The success of these Cambodian-American entrepreneurs led to resentment among Americans born in the U.S. and earlier European immigrants, whose businesses had not adjusted to the new customer base. Thus, we would hear the fiction that Cambodians came to Lowell for the welfare when statistically there was a lower percentage of Cambodian Americans on welfare than other ethnic groups in the area. The point is, not that the author of the thesis had shown a preconceived notion to be wrong, but that she had no vested interest in forcing the outcome to be one particular way or another. She came to her topic when she was driving through a neighborhood in Boston where there

is a large population of Americans from southeast Asia and wondered why that is. She studied Lowell and the Cambodian Americans there because it was more convenient for her to gather evidence.

Avoiding the Scylla of overestimating and Charybdis of underestimating one's thesis topic is part of the process of developing a topic. The topic should be both specific and significant, which is a key point. And it should be something the researcher has a genuine interest in finding out what the answer is but no pre-determined notion what that answer must be. These are the essential components of finding and developing an excellent thesis topic.