

# **POSC 358: Comparative Social Movements**

## **Preparing for the Research Paper**

### **1. Formulating a research question**

The hardest part of conducting research is picking a good research question – one that is not too broad, not too narrow, of theoretical and/or empirical significance, that can be answered with the resources/time available, and that will hold your interest for the duration of the research process.

How does one find such a topic? While there is no perfect process, consider the following questions to help you think about topics and questions:

- What are the important debates – theoretical, methodological, and empirical – in this field of study?
- What are the major unresolved questions or areas/topics/movements in need of further study?
- What existing theories or explanations seem faulty, flawed, or inadequate from a theoretical, methodological, or empirical point of view?
- What are the current “real-world” debates about this topic or movement?
- Have certain theories been adequately tested with a variety of movement examples?
- What concrete movement dynamics are inadequately explored or entirely unexamined by existing theory?
- What assumptions might existing theories be making that deserve closer scrutiny?

You may want to do an initial scan of the scholarly literature to assess whether a particular topic or issue area has been the focus of scholarship. Even if you find that there are a number of studies on a particular topic, you might discover that all of these studies have a methodological or empirical or theoretical slant that would benefit from a different focus (e.g., applying a well-studied theory to a new movement sector; or thinking about how a theory that has been extensively tested using one dominant methodology might fare when using other analytic tools).

The final formulation of your question may very well be revised and refined several times, but in general, it should be:

- Analytic
- Requiring analysis of multiple sources
- Highly focused to avoid superficial discussion of an issue

You should avoid at all costs questions that are:

- Answerable with a yes or a no
- Questions that are primarily about establishing facts
- Answerable using one or two sources

### **2. Preparing for the Research Design**

Before turning in your research design on April 26, you will want to do some preliminary reading on your proposed topic. Initially, you will want to start reading broadly on your proposed issue and then continue to narrow down your topic as you refine and focus your research.

You will find several databases to of particular help in this process of background reading, particularly JSTOR and Web of Science. In addition, the most cutting-edge research is available at paper depositories of the major professional associations – American Political Science Association ([www.apsanet.org](http://www.apsanet.org)) and the American Sociological Association ([www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org)).

**Please note: it is not only permissible, but routine, for you to shift the focus or reformulate your research question as you learn more about the topic and the existing scholarship in this area. Your initial consultation with me does NOT pin you down to a permanent research question. In fact, you should feel free to rework and refine your topic (within reason) as you continue to do research on it. You are not irrevocably bound to a topic at any time – I will evaluate your final paper based on the question that you articulate in that paper.**

**However: this freedom is not an invitation for you to radically change your topic from week to week!**

3. The research design itself is a proposal that is your articulation of how you are going to do your research while placing the topic in context (meaning within the context of existing knowledge/theory/research in this area.)

The conventional elements of a research proposal of this kind include:

- Proposed title of your paper
- Introduction to the issue: should capture the reader's interest and contain a statement or indication of how/why this topic matters
- Problem statement: should articulate your proposed topic
- Literature review: for this assignment, a BRIEF and PARTIAL discussion of what literatures/theories might apply or which ones you will draw on in your research
- Hypotheses: if you have some initial hypotheses or expected relationships that you will be testing, include them here, along with any variables that you think will be relevant in your final study.  
NOTE: if you are conducting a more process-based study, then articulating your project in variable-focused terms may not be appropriate for you.
- Methodology: a discussion of how you will go about answering your question, including a statement of the data you will need and where you will find this information
- Concluding thoughts: if you have any concerns about your topic (e.g., finding the necessary data), then put them here. Also include a bibliography for all works cited.

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