RESEARCH DESIGNS

Research designs are road maps. They tell the reader where you are going, why the trip is expected to be worth the effort, and exactly how you intend to arrive at your destination. As a set of directions, the reader should be able to duplicate your steps and arrive at similar conclusions. Research designs are ***not*** research papers; **you are *not* expected to complete the research** that you propose.

At one point or another, every academic article or book you have read came from a research design. This means that before actually doing the research, the scholar had a plan for how to do it.

Research designs tend to follow a common form, which include the four elements listed below.

1) **Statement of the Problem/Research Question.** All significant research begins with a question, whether theoretically or empirically driven. Examples:

- Why do countries wage wars?
- What explains patterns of coalition formation in parliamentary systems?
- Why did democracy collapse in Weimar Germany?
- Why are some countries poor and others rich?
- Why does the US have two effective political parties?

Unfortunately, this is often the most overlooked step in beginning a research design. Sometimes scholars get caught in disciplinary debates and/or their preferred methodology, forgetting that ***important*** and ***relevant research is always directed toward asking and answering interesting questions.***

The statement of the problem always takes the form of a question. The answer to your question is what you might think of as the "thesis statement" in a research paper. This question ought to appear at the end of this section.

Good questions are driven by empirical or theoretical ***puzzles or problems***. You will hear this from me again and again: *what **puzzle** motivates your question*? Readers will be drawn in if you can offer an example that is counter-intuitive for the "conventional wisdom" or if you can draw out unexpected implications of an existing argument, or demonstrate that existing strands in literatures that don't usually speak to each other are in tension. ***Something puzzling must motivate your research question***.

***(E.g.** Given all the similarities between the US and Brazil, why is there such a difference in terms of racial attitudes and institutions?*
*(**E.g.** Given the high voter turnout overall in Minnesota, why do communities of color vote at such low rates?)*

I recommend this section is divided into two paragraphs: the first, you develop and build to the research question. In the second, tell me explicitly why that question is

relevant/interesting/important. This is where you make your "pitch."

2) **Literature Review.** Knowledge of the literature is absolutely essential before proceeding with either the design or the actual research. The literature review serves to place your project in perspective of the research traditions in your field. You should be thinking about how your work addresses existing research:

- Are you replicating an existing study?
- Are you testing an existing hypothesis with a new set of cases or with a different method?
- Are you extending an existing theory to a new dependent variable (i.e. outcome, output)?
- Are you deducing new explanations for an already-studied phenomenon?
- Are you formalizing an "informal" hypothesis and deriving new implications?
- Something else?

In the literature review you should endeavor at all costs to avoid summarizing everything that you have ever read on your subject. If one part of your research design needs "cutting," do it here. Discuss specific works in single sentences to make your point. **Do not take** the reader through a step-by-step exegesis of even the most important works. **Do not include paragraph-long footnotes** on points you find particularly interesting or arguments you find particularly ridiculous. **Do not "machine-gun**" existing research by discussing flaws unrelated to your research question simply because your hackles were raised.

Include in this section where your research is different from the existing body of research.

Chances are you are not the first to ask the question you are asking. This is fine. After all, Science is rooted in community. This means that you must find what the community already thinks about your topic.

3) **Hypothesis/Proposed Explanation.** This is where you develop your causal statement that will, if supported by empirical evidence, answer the question you posed at the beginning. This section is relatively short, composed of two paragraphs. The first is actually just the hypothesis. It should be simple and clear (like a well-written thesis statement). The second paragraph walks me through the moving parts of the hypothesis. In particular, why do you think the elements contained in the hypothesis will lead to the outcome you are researching.

***(E.g.** When a society experiences high levels of intra-elite, ruling class conflict, then racialized identities become salient.*

My reasoning assumes that elites have political power and want to maintain it. In order to retain this cohesion and keep rebellion at bay, I think that they organize people against some kind of "other," which very well could be racialized. They maintain in group cohesion by unifying against something – or someone – else. I would expect that we should see variation on both the input and output sides of this hypothesis, ie that greater cohesion would lead us to find less racially divided societies and vica versa.)

4) **Methodology.** In this section you describe how you *plan* to test your hypothesis. There are

three elements to this process.

First, you must operationalize your variables, or inputs and outputs. Operationalization involves identification of empirical referents that measure the typically abstract concepts specified in your hypotheses. Discuss how your operational indicators of the abstract concepts are *valid* (measure the true variable as closely as possible) and *reliable* (yield consistent values across a series of observations). A research design should identify the types of empirical evidence you will need to collect to measure your operational variables. You should explain how and where you can obtain the information you just described. Will you have to compile the data yourself, or does it exist in some format already and is publicly available? The list of potential sources is long: interviews, newspapers, monographs, government documents, surveys, electoral returns, fiscal data, etc. etc. The test of good evidence is in its appropriateness – but you also must conduct a "reality test" when it comes to evaluating the availability and cost of obtaining the evidence. In this section you should also address potential problems of reliability and bias of sources. This part of the research design is typically fairly short.

Second, you must select your cases. Your research question should dictate your case selection, not vice versa. Of course, if you derived your research question from an empirical puzzle, your selection of cases may be constrained.

In general, you need to explain why your cases are appropriate, and address issues of selection bias: why selection of your cases does not automatically lead to confirmation of your hypothesis, and why the inclusion of excluded cases would not alter your results substantively.

Third, you must explain why the particular method you have chosen is appropriate for your question and purposes. While scholars are always motivated by personal interests ("I am interested in the evolution of human-rights norms") and skills ("I am particularly adept at statistical modeling"), you must demonstrate how the choice of principles is appropriate.