INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF JAPAN
Public Management and Policy Analysis Program
Graduate School of International Relations

Narrowing Down to a Specific Research Question

Hun Myoung Park

Many students have difficulty narrowing down their vague research question into a specific one. This document illustrates how to narrow down their research questions by asking several key questions. Writing a thesis is not to collect data and information as much as possible, but to find out irrelevant and/or unnecessary information and through them away. Have *high enthusiasm but low greediness*.

1. Locus

You need to ask, "Where is the site or place where your subject happened?" Do not simply say, "I want to study poverty." Which poverty do you want to study? Poverty in the world? In your home country? In Japan rather than U.S.A.? Poverty in Niigata rather than Tokyo? Be specific! You may say, "Poverty of elder citizens in Minami Uonuma" or "Poverty of slum areas in Niigata City" However, "Poverty of my family" is specific enough but is not worth studying. This is a personal issue, not a public one. Another example is computer software; "Office Suites under GUI in Japan" or "consequence of software copyright infringement in Indonesian local governments" will be better than just "Software."

2. Time-span

Another common mistake is not to specify time-span and spend meaningless time discussing unnecessary issues. Suppose you decide to study poverty of the elder citizens who live in Minami Uonuma. Do not describe a poverty level 1,000 years ago. Choose particular time-span that is meaningful for your research question. If you want to study the impact of Abe's welfare polity on the elder, the relevant time-span is several years before and after Abe's inauguration (e.g., 2005-2014). You don't need to discuss how the elder in Minami Uonuma suffered from poverty during the Edo period (1603-1867) to study the poverty today.

Table 1. Checklists To Narrowing Down Your Research Question

	Question	Possible Answer
Locus or loci	Where is the place where your subject happened?	City of Minami Uonuma
Time span	What is the time-span of your research?	2000-2010 (Winter season)
Target subject	What is your target (subject) to be explained?	Snow removal
Aspect (focus)	What is your specific aspect on the subject?	Cost reduction by sprinkler
Problem?	What is the problem? Success or failure?	Too costly snow removal
Public?	Is the problem public?	Yes (snow on public areas)
Significant?	Is the problem significant?	Yes (save budget)
Plausible?	Can you get sufficient data to answer on time?	Yes (e.g., sprinkler)
Controllable?	Can your answer be implemented?	Yes (City can decide)
Unit of analysis	What is the basic unit of your analysis	City (case study)
DV (impact study)	What is your dependent variable?	Cost
IV (impact study)	What is your key independent variable?	Sprinkler, snow blower, sand…
Covariates	What are your covariates to control in a model?	Gas, water, budget, regulation…
Research question	Write down your research question in a sentence	Can sprinkler save budget?
Conclusion	Write down in a sentence	Sprinkler can save budget much

3. Target Subject

Some students do not know clearly what they are studying and what is the target subject. In a worst case, a student wants to study everything because they are related each other. For instance, "I want to study income, inflation rate, GDP, investment, … to draw a correct picture of my country." I understand his/her aspiration and enthusiasm toward the research but hate such approach.

You must choose only one that you think is most important; no more than one is allowed. Suppose you have 10 girl friends one of whom you want to marry. If you don't know who is the best for you (because each girl has good and bad things) and keep thinking this scenario and that one (If I choose girl A, I will regret … because girl B has beautiful hips. If I give a ring to girl B, I will regret … because girl C is more knowledgeable than …), you will die without any wife and child eventually; People will call you just a fool! You just have too much caution or desire.

4. Aspect

You need to have an aspect to view the subject. Do not simply say, "I want to study elder citizens in Minami Uonuma after 2010." Which aspect of the elder do you have in mind? When evaluating your girl friends, you may have your own criteria such as the A-Z model (Age, Beauty, Cuteness, Dignity, Empathy, …). It is unrealistic and stupid to apply all criteria because there is no one who satisfies all A-Z fully. When writing a thesis, you must choose only one criterion. Think about what public management aspect you have in your mind in order to attack the subject. Some examples are efficiency, motivation, recruitment, corruption, responsiveness, and performance evaluation.

5. What Is Your Problem?

A good research question tends to involve a big failure or success in public affairs. A failure or success is a big difference between an expectation (desired state) and what actually happened (current state). Then your research is to find the source of failure or success, and then to draw lessons from the failure or success.

6. Check the Problem

You need to check if the problem is acceptable by asking several questions. "Is your problem public?" If no, you need to stop here and look for other topic. "Is your problem significant?" If no (trivial problem), you have a boring research topic. "Is your problem plausible?" If your problem needs confidential data that you cannot access or long time and much money to get data, then you would better look for other topic. "Is your problem controllable?" If your findings cannot be implemented (used in your department), then your research is just for fun.

7. Unit of Analysis

A unit of analysis is an entity that you want to analyze or study. If your research is "Poverty of the elder citizens in Minami Uonuma," the right unit of analysis is an individual resident who is old enough (you need to have such a criterion as "older than 70"). If you are interested in poverty in Niigata prefecture and want to analyze city or municipal data, locus is Niigata

and the unit of analysis (measurement) is local government in Niigata. If you analyze individual data about poverty, the unit of analysis is an individual residence, of course. If you want to study public service motivation in Niigata and conduct a questionnaire survey, then the unit of analysis is individual civil servants.

8. Classification of Variables in an Impact Study

An impact study examines if a policy (action) makes difference and, if any, how much. A common title of this sort of research is "The impact of A on B." The A is called an independent variable (or explanatory variable) that is assumed to influence the dependent variable (response variable) B. There may be more than one independent variable, but you just need to have one or two that you are most interested in. Covariates are, technically speaking, independent variables, but they are not that important and are to be controlled (holding constant). Then you have the following functional form.

$$y = f(x_1, x_2, c_1, c_2, c_3, \ldots)$$

where *y* and *x* denote DV and IVs, respectively, and *c* denotes covariates. DV tends to be a target subject in most research, but some research focuses on key independent variable. If you study if gender makes difference in e-government use, your target is e-government use rather than gender. If your research title is "The impact of fixed weekend toll rate policy on individuals' spending," then your emphasis may be given to the fixed toll rate policy rather than to individuals' spending.

Some students are caught by a fancy econometric method or forma model and try to consider multiple DVs and IVs simultaneously. Most of them want to advertise that they know such sexy method without thinking about the relevance of his/her research question. Like babies, they just play with a toy without knowing what the toy means to human life. Don't be so babyish or childish!

9. Research Question

Considering all aspects discussed so far, try to write down your research question in one or two sentences. Your research question might, "Did the incentive program of my department improve motivation of my colleagues for the past 10 years?" "If not, why did the program fail to make difference?"

10. Conclusion

Then try to write down your tentative conclusion. The conclusion should answer your research question relevantly. You may conclude, "The incentive program worsened the public service motivation (about 30 percent decrease compared to 10 years ago) largely due to poor performance evaluation." Do not commit the Type III fallacy. What if your conclusion is "Therefore, e-government can improve efficiency in the public sector" as an answer to your research question of the impact of the incentive program. Huh…. A doctor asks you, "Can you see me?" then you answer, "No, I can't hear you." What are you doing now???

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