How to Get from a Social Problem to a Research Question and Research Plan

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There are a few steps to crafting a research question, useful for almost all modes of inquiry.

1. Identify an important social problem that you wish to understand and solve.
2. Phrase this social problem as a research question and explain why it is interesting to you.
3. Offer three plausible answers to the question you pose.
4. Select one case, a few cases, or many similar cases that you wish to study. The cases may be artifacts, individuals, organizations, or institutions.
5. Finally, identify the instances, variables or indicators you would use to assess in each case to support each of the three plausible answers.

In some traditions of inquiry this is a natural stopping point because you now have a research question and structured way to find the best answer. If you want to form and reject specific hypotheses, you must take a few more steps, especially if you wish to play with comparative, quantitative, experimental, network, and computational methods.

1. Choose three of the variables and select two pairs from among these variables. For each of these pairs, formulate one possible causal relationship between the two variables. The relationships you specify should be theoretically motivated.
2. Provide abstract and operational definitions for all three variables. What theoretical concepts do these variables represent? How might you measure them?
3. Specify two of the possible relationships between two pairs of variables in causal terms. State these in the form of testable hypotheses, with the phrasing "If X, then Y."
4. Reverse the causal direction of one of your hypotheses. Which of the three causal relationships might still support this new hypothesis, and why?
5. Identify which theoretical paradigms this causal explanation might be consistent with.

For more, see Stinchcombe, A. (1968). *Constructing Social Theories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non-Commercial - Share Alike 4.0 International License. Please cite this work as: Howard, Philip N. (2023). *How to Get from a Social Problem to a Research Question and Research Plan*. Retrieved DOWNLOAD DATE from www.philhoward.org. Oxford University, Oxford, United Kingdom. pp. 1.