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Defining a Research Trajectory

Research (/?category=Research), PhD Studies (/?category=PhD+Studies)

As a PhD student, I often feel pulled in all sorts of directions by opportunities. They present great potential for discovery (and publications), but they are also time consuming. It's hard to choose and harder to say no. Yet, by not doing so, my work can easily spread to the point of rupture, becoming everything to everyone. This becomes a real problem when the



projects are so varied that it becomes almost impossible to communicate clearly what my research work is about.



Spiral staircase in Melk, Austria

A clear research identity matters. It helps not only to find a job, but also to attract other researchers with similar research objectives. The result is that future collaborations are more likely to relate to past ones. A clear research identity makes keeping a clear research identity easier.

The purpose of this post is to share with other graduate students a tool to clarify your research identity: the research trajectory. I use it mostly to work out what my research is about and decide which projects to pursue. In a nutshell, your research trajectory clarifies what you're doing, where you're going, but also the way you're doing it.

When I started working on mine, I started with the parts clearer to me, then moved across the categories. It is an iterative process. As I filled the gaps, I realized some parts were clunky or out of place. One change often led to many other changes, as I readjusted the pieces that did not fit. The exercise certainly was more important than the final result, which remains a work in progress.

Research trajectory (or research agenda) discussions often take place at graduate student workshops during research associations' annual meetings. That's where I came in contact with them. What I am presenting here is an adaptation of what I have seen others work on in those workshops. I have tried to be inclusive rather than exclusive. As a result, the tool includes numerous rubrics. Adapt the tool to your needs.

The Foundational Parts of the Research Trajectory

You: Why you? Why are you on this research trajectory? What brought you here? How does who you are, your identity, relates to your research?

Topics: Your list of broad areas of enquiry. In my case: Higher education; Leadership, management, and administration; Organizational politics; and Organizational policy.

Philosophical Framework: How you see the social world. What constitutes knowledge, evidence. This is an important piece, because it will likely reflect the type of research you'll be interested in. In my case, critical realism offers me a firm footing.

Theoretical Framework: This describes the main theory or theories tested by your research. Usually, theories describe mechanisms and make predictions. Your research will likely support or challenge those predictions. So, for example, if you choose institutionalism instead of agency theory to look at, say, performance appraisals, you're likely to ask completely different research questions. In my case, it's still a work in progress, but it starts to look like institutionalism. The way I understand theoretical frameworks, in relation with conceptual frameworks is that theoretical framework tend to stick with you over a wide range of topics, whereas conceptual frameworks tend to be associated more precisely to the research project you're working on.

The Functional Parts of the Research Trajectory

Big Questions: These are the questions that you will likely never answer conclusively. They are broad and shared by many researchers in different fields. They are broad enough that you can fit many areas and methods of research into them. They position your work as a small contribution towards answering great questions. In my case, the big questions are: How is leadership shaped by context? How organizations work?

Little Questions (or Research Agenda): These are more precise questions about which you are likely to find answers within your lifetime. I would say that this is what people mean when they talk about their research agenda. In my case: How is academic leadership shaped by organizational policies? What unintended consequences result from the implementation of controlling policies on administrators in academic institutions? And what explains these outcomes?

Current Research Questions: This is what you are working on now! In my case: How do Canadian university deans experience and make sense of the reappointments and performance appraisals?

Conceptual Framework: The tools you will be using to “classify” your thinking and your data. It is another type of lens, narrower in focus than a theoretical framework and generally dependent on the specific project you are conducting. I currently work with concepts drawn from the fields of leadership, socialization, performance appraisals, and organizational politics. (At this point, it should be clear that the line between theoretical and conceptual is quite fuzzy.)

Argument: What is your research saying? What are your findings saying? I find the first question depends more on your theoretical framework, while the other draws from your little questions and your research findings. In my case, the general is: Organizations use dangerous tools they don't understand; and the particular one is: Academic deans operate in contexts that often strip them of the means by which they can fulfill their role.

Research Methods: This list describes what you tend to favour. It should stem naturally from your philosophical and theoretical frameworks. For me, a critical realist perspective sees quantitative and qualitative approaches as complementary. I tend to favour qualitative approaches though, as I am usually more interested in identifying underlying mechanisms.

Posture (level of criticism): What is the purpose of your research work? Knowledge? Advocacy? Improvement? Efficiency? Critique? Usually, there is a relation between your posture and your identity. Clarifying your posture helps a

lot in controlling the tone of your writing. In my case, I'm aiming to identify what works as well as what does not.

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Intended Outcomes of Research: This also goes back to the first item, the You part. What do you want your research to achieve? Having clear intended outcomes helps identify what type of research you should be doing, but also how it should be disseminated.

The Connecting Parts of the Research Trajectory

Dissemination Strategy: Where should you publish your work, in order to reach your previously described intended outcomes? What conference should you attend? Who should you go and meet?

Community building: What networks of researchers, practitioners, other populations, do you wish to move closer to? How will you get in touch with those communities? How are you creating, maintaining, and reinforcing those ties?

Career Objectives: You, you, you. What kind of job are you aiming for?

Teaching: How does your scholarship inform or shape the way you make sense of the teaching part of an academic career? What types of teaching outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment tools make more sense to you?

Readings (journals): The list of journals you need to keep an eye on.

Readings (authors): The list of authors you need to keep an eye on.

How to Use the Tool

You can start anywhere along the list. As you make your way through the items, you'll find the ones where you are solid and the ones where you're not. It's not that you need to have an answer to everything, but it helps to identify what is still not clear. Working on my research trajectory has made louder the dissonances in my approaches. I found them annoying, nagging. It kept thinking about them, until I found a way to make them work together or a way to change them without throwing everything out the window.

From Pieces to Pitches

I suggest the following simple fill-in-the-gaps structure as a starting point: “My research aims at understanding (Little Questions). Currently, I am investigating (Current Research Questions).” Ideally, you don't have a long laundry list of little and current questions. You can add to the short pitch, simply by adding the framework, or the methods. The important thing is that it feels like you know what you're doing and where you're going.

Why Developing a Research Trajectory Matters

I've found myself describing my research more and more, and I've noticed that I struggle less and less when trying to summarize it. The pieces work together. They fit with one another and tell a simple story. This is in great part because of the time I have spent trying to make things coherent. It's still clunky to me, but every day, it's a little better, and so are my descriptions of my research.

Does this work for you? Do you have another favourite tool you could share with us? Is something big missing, or is it redundant? Please share your thoughts and comments with us.

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