Generating research questions through problematization

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- What research questions produce significant theories?
- Gap-spotting: The prevalent way of generating research questions
- The point of problematization
- Types of assumptions
- The process of problematization
- An empirical illustration of problematization
- Concluding remarks

What research questions produce interesting and significant theories?

Novelty appears to be more important than true knowledge claims. This is because the most interesting theories are not the ‘true’ one, but those that “constitute an attack on the taken-for-granted premises of established theoretical traditions …Mediocre scientists, then, are those who are unable to see beyond established paradigms because of their failure to grasp and articulate their colleagues’ ground assumptions. Successful scientists, on the one hand, are intuitively perverse, always ready to question accepted world views and create opportunities for the critical rejection of what is taken as given by others.” (Astley, ASQ 1985: 503-504)

The social researcher who wants to be certain that he (sic) will produce an interesting theory abut his subject must first familiarize himself with what his audience already assumes to be true about his subject, before he can even begin to generate a proposition which, in denying their assumption, will attract their attention.’ (Davis, 1971: 337, italics in original).
*Problematization* in the sense of challenging assumptions and disrupting current ways of thinking and doing research about a particular subject matter appears, therefore, as a central ingredient in generating research questions that are likely to lead to more influential theories than typically is the case.

Under-problematization

Over-problematization

Problematization as a *means* to generating research questions

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**Gap-spotting: The prevalent way of generating research questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic ways of generating research questions</th>
<th>Specific versions of gap-spotting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confusion spotting</td>
<td>Competing explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Puzzle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect spotting</td>
<td>Overlooked area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under-researched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of empirical support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New empirical phenomenon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application spotting</td>
<td>Extending and complementing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>existing literature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why gap-spotting routes when they are likely to not generate particular interesting theories?

1. Gap-spotting is easy
2. Gap-spotting is uncontroversial
3. A powerful tradition indicates knowledge accumulation
4. Contemporary journal format encourages gap-spotting
5. Academia is a crediting economy
6. Research institutions encourage gap-spotting
7. It often makes sense to adopt gap-spotting
8. The alternative to gap-spotting - problematization - is difficult

Problematization: What is it?

Problematization involves first and foremost a systematic questioning of received wisdom in the sense of dominant research perspectives and theories (but also of the subject matter itself), preferably at a basic, paradigmatic level, while at the same time offering a ’positive’ or constructive formulation of interesting research questions.
In problematization, *the subject matter itself becomes the problem rather than the research questions about a given subject matter.*

Instead of trying to formulate and refine a specific research question by reviewing the literature about a given subject matter we need to ask ourselves questions such as:

- How has a certain subject matter become an object of scientific investigation?
- What historical and practical conditions have given birth to the subject matter and how have those conditions given birth to it?
- What determines our current understanding of the subject matter from which we are able to formulate our research questions?
- How has the path to our current understanding of the subject matter been determined?
- How has exclusion operated in delineating the subject matter in question?

A key objective in problematization as a way of generating research questions is to illuminate and question prevalent assumptions that determine our current understanding of the subject matter

**Different types of assumptions**

- In-house assumptions
- Metaphor assumption
- Paradigm assumptions
- Ideology assumptions
- Field assumptions
The process of problematization: Identifying and challenging assumptions

1. Targeting a domain
   - a body of literature and/or an example

2. Identifying and articulating assumptions underlying existing theory
   - Identification (perceptive, analytic)/ Construction (imaginative, active)
   - In-depth hermeneutics

3. Evaluating the articulated assumptions
   - From problematization-candidate to problematization-target

4. Developing ‘new’ assumptions about the subject matter in order to challenge existing ones
   - Alternative assumptions that minimally questions but also suggests new routes
   - Avoiding ready-made problematizations

5. Consider assumptions in relationship to audience
   - Assumptions not only intellectual problems, but also political, symbolic and ‘economic’ (investments)
   - Dialogue-confrontational nature of problematization

6. Assessing the alternative assumption ground
   - That’s obvious
   - That’s interesting
   - That’s absurd

Problematization is not a linear procedure

The problematizer typically
a) have all the elements and aspects in mind most of the time and
b) probably goes back and forth in terms of focusing on a specific theme.

Challenging established assumptions in a productive way is itself a challenge. It is a struggle to unpack and come up with new alternatives.
An illustration of our problematization methodology

Dutton et al (1994) understand identification by investigating how ‘a member’s cognitive connection with his or her work organization derived from images that each member has of the organization. The first image, what the members believes is distinctive, central, and enduring about the organization, is defined as perceived organizational identity. The second image, what a member believes outsiders think about the organization, is called the construed external image’ (p 239)

3. Developing Alternative assumptions

subjects
i) do not necessarily have fixed beliefs but take temporary positions on a particular issue regarding their organizational affiliation, where feelings of membership, being a part of an employment contract and being subordinated to an organizational structure are all key ingredients shifting in salience and meaning, ii) express sentiments of ambivalence, uncertainty and doubt, iii) relate in terms of situations, events and processes rather than in terms of static images about attributes, and iv) the possible beliefs/images about attributes are indistinct, of uncertain location in terms of periphery/centrality and temporarily.

Another illustration: Gender

Gender: socialization effect (fixed subjectivity) or a structure (gender system, patriarchy)

West & Zimmerman: Doing gender (interaction)

Assumption challenging(2): Un-doing gender

Defense: W & Z: Re-doing gender

Assumption challenging (3): Non-doing gender
Concluding remarks

When and why problematization?

The aim of problematization can be seen as a process of opening up and holding open, a space of un-thinking, wherein, we along with others, can strive to think, do and be differently from our received wisdom.

Problematization is not about preprogrammed fault finding and assumption replacement associated with the exploitation of established critical lines of inquiry. Instead, a central issue is to try to problematize elements of ‘others’ positions as well as one’s own favorite assumptions.

Problematization cannot be reduced to some kind of mechanical procedure. It is more about cultivating a reflexive and questioning way of thinking and approaching research tasks.

Towards more interesting research?