# Dissertation Proposals and Dissertations in Sociology

## Some Notes of Advice

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*This guide tries to answer some questions students must commonly face when trying to prepare a dissertation proposal and complete the dissertation. It represents my ideas about these issues, although I expect many of my colleagues would agree about the gist of the advice offered here. Please let me know any questions, suggestions, or criticisms you might have.*

*These ideas aim to help students, not restrict them. The critical goals for students are conducting good scholarly work and getting good jobs. If you find ways to achieve these goals different from those described here, pursue them.*

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## PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

*TO WHAT JOB DO YOU ASPIRE?*

A dissertation is a means to an end. The principal end is not the Ph.D. degree. It is the job that follows and the subsequent scholarly career.

*Research Universities.* The quality and content of the dissertation are most important for someone seeking a prestigious academic position. A research-oriented department will normally expect your dissertation to provide a measure of your scholarly potential, to define your chief scholarly interests, and to reflect your methodological and theoretical predilections.

Note that anyone aspiring to a job in a department with a prestigious graduate program *must* have *both* publications and a good dissertation. You should view the dissertation as one element in the credentials you will offer. With whom you have worked will count some. What you have published, either in collaboration with professors (the usual case) or on your own (occasionally), will count the most. These publications will generally count at least as much and often more than your dissertation, particularly during the early parts of most departments' job applicant review process.

The dissertation will often carry the greatest weight once a department has asked that you come for interviews, because it will be the basis for your oral presentation. The selection committee will read your publications, but the rest of the faculty will often only hear your presentation. Professors interviewing you may grill you mercilessly about the dissertation.

While some jobs have no field restrictions, many openings seek people who can cover certain substantive fields, methodologies, or theoretical approaches. Although they will not hire a detective to investigate your claims to have expertise in these fields, departments will look at your work and question you closely to assess your experience and knowledge in the relevant areas. Most departments will assume that the intellectual range defined by your publications and your dissertation

identifies the boundaries of your scholarly identity. Thus, your dissertation need not absolutely constrain how you define yourself as a scholar and teacher, but it must play a central role. Departments will hesitate to credit claims of scholarly expertise and expectations in fields, methods, and theories unless you can offer evidence of scholarly production.

Note what this implies about collaborative work with professors. If you want to seek positions aiming at some orientation, skill, or field, you should make sure that you adequately cover it either in your dissertation or in some publication (teaching in an area also helps). If you want to ensure a broad scope, you should seek publication opportunities with professors that complement your central orientation rather than just those who share it. For example, if you anticipate doing highly quantitative dissertation research, consider collaborating on qualitative or theoretical work.

*Applied Research and Teaching Colleges.* For other kinds of jobs – such as research positions or teaching in an undergraduate liberal arts college – the dissertation is less decisive but still important for finding beginning jobs. Research jobs will obviously be most concerned about your research skills, most often quantitative skills but sometimes qualitative ones. For them, the dissertation is most important as an indicator of those research skills, not as a scholarly contribution. Teaching jobs, as in small liberal arts schools, pay much more attention to your teaching experience. For them, the dissertation is most important as an indicator of your areas of teaching interest and the approach you are likely to show in your teaching. For these alternative career paths, probably neither the quality nor the content of the dissertation will be as telling as it is at research universities, but it is still a primary consideration.

### *Support Groups*

Create and join dissertation groups with other students. Even the most responsible professors cannot supply the help you will get from your peers. For most people, the dissertation is far greater than any project they have previously tried. It is the culmination of many years training and the focus of deep aspirations and fears.

To succeed at research, the analysis, and the writing you will need feedback and discipline–a lot of both. You will also face many problems

that go beyond purely intellectual issues. A group of peers can go a long way to getting you through this.

*WITH WHOM WILL YOU WORK?*

Who are the professors with whom you expect to work? While Santa Claus may not be coming to town, you should make up a list and check it twice.

You need three professors for your committee. You only have to have *two* committee members to have your dissertation proposal officially accepted. Most students will want to have all three committee members chosen before they complete the proposal, but that is a strategic choice.

If necessary, you can have one professor from outside the Department on your committee. This person must supply knowledge that is both necessary for your dissertation and not available in the Department and must be a scholar of appropriate stature. An outside member cannot be the chair of the committee.

While you are toying with ideas and developing alternative proposals, you should still talk to all the professors with whom you might work. You do not need to narrow down to a specific committee before you have a research project. Of course, if you are certain with whom you want to work, that is fine. Focus on them and their research interests.

## DESIGNING THE RESEARCH

*CRITERIA FOR A GOOD DISSERTATION PROJECT*

Let us start by considering the goal. What should a dissertation be? No simple answer will suffice. Nonetheless, let me offer a few criteria for you to think about. If you are planning for an academic career, a good dissertation project will:

- match the research interests of professors (professors who are responsible, who will help you get jobs, and with whom you are comfortable working),
- fit the scholarly identity you want to present to people when you look for jobs,
- have a research design assured to produce a significant scholarly contribution,

- have two or three articles planned as an integral part of the research design (a book is a good long-term goal for some projects, but a dissertation should have more immediate publication goals),
- build on the knowledge you already have (it is rarely a good time to jump into a new area),
- and be straightforward to complete in a maximum of two years.

*WHAT SHOULD THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL LOOK LIKE?*

Ideally, a dissertation proposal: identifies a research question, shows why the question is worthwhile yet unanswered, specifies a clear research plan, describes the data and how you will analyze it, shows that the research has a high likelihood of resolving the question, identifies the main problems (technical, conceptual, theoretical, and practical) that you must surmount, supplies a preliminary schedule, describes how you expect to organize the dissertation, and suggests what publications may follow. If you meet these goals, the style of presentation is not very important (although the quality of presentation always matters).

Many guides provide advice on writing dissertation and grant proposals. Use them. Like writings on any topics, their quality and styles vary widely. You need to look them over to find which ones seem both well done and appropriate to research you contemplate. Overall, these works reflect considerable effort and reflection by their authors. Neither I nor anyone else in this department can hope to give you better advice. You can find works on proposal writing at Bobst Library by doing a keyword search for *proposal* and *writing*. You will also find other titles in bookstores.

These guides will be useful for finding checklists of all the things you should include in a proposal and all issues you should consider. They can also give you some effective guidance on reasonable styles for presenting the material.

Usually, I would recommend adopting one recommended style or an amalgam of several. Adapt it to the needs of your research project as required, but mainly just try to follow it. You are not likely to invent a better style for a proposal than you can find in these sources. Even if you could, you would largely waste your creative energy, because it would be an achievement with no value.

*DISTINGUISHING PRIMARY, SECONDARY, AND TERTIARY GOALS*

When designing a major research project like a dissertation in sociology, most people soon find they have too many questions. Unless you assert some discipline over these multiplying goals, you can start flailing.

One reasonable method is to organize your goals into a simple hierarchy. Consider three levels:

- Primary Goals. This would be one or two research goals that will be the focus of your research design. You should feel confident that you can achieve these goals, they should have a clear relation to the existing literature, and they should be sufficiently important to merit publication. Meeting these goals will be the first consideration for all your research decisions.
- Secondary Goals. You may have up to five secondary research goals. These goals fit well with your primary research design and substantive aims, but are not the focus of the study. You anticipate that you may have something valuable to say about some of these issues, but you are not certain about any of them. You will consider these goals in your research design, but only as far as they are consistent with your primary goals.
- Tertiary Goals. These are all other interesting issues related to your research design about which you might accumulate information. Your research design will not consider these issues. They appear more as ideas of which you are aware and on which you will keep your eye. You do not expect you can write a paper focused on any of these issues (although serendipity occurs much more often in good research designs), but you anticipate that you could probably make some worthwhile comments about some of them as part of papers focused on the higher goals.

These distinctions may seem too naive to be useful. They do not aim to be sophisticated or dramatic. Just practical. Although organizing your research goals into a simple, *explicit* hierarchy might seem obvious, people commonly fail to do it.

A research design must have a clear focus if it is to be successful. This means that you must control your imagination and your interests. One

benefit of this simple priority hierarchy is that it allows you to preserve all your related questions and interests, without losing your focus.

The better sociologist you are, the more questions you will generate. The more questions you have, the more you need to adopt an explicit strategy for controlling them.

### *How Much Is Enough*

How big must your dissertation be? This is a tough question. The problem is not how many pages you write. Good dissertations can be short or long. No, the question is about substance. What should be your scope? How ambitious should you be?

I do not think than anyone can give a precise answer to these questions. That is partially because no consensus exists. It is also partially because we have no good technique for quantifying scholarly contributions.

With these provisos, let me suggest that a reasonable dissertation design might aim toward the publication of two articles in good professional journals. When you develop the research proposal, try to think as concretely as you can about the papers you might publish. Write a brief prospectus (no more than a page – a paragraph may suffice) of each.

If you cannot come up with two good ones that seem sure bets from the research design, it might need rethinking. If you can think up more than four distinctive articles that seem assured by your research design, it might be too ambitious.

Do not be overly literal or simplistically slavish about guidelines like this. I am not proposing you think of this as anything other than a heuristic device that can help you think about the scope of your proposed research. However, thinking as concretely as possible will help you assess the implications of your plans in the early stages rather than discovering their implications when it is too late to change.

### *Start With Several Preliminary Project Designs*

You will have a higher likelihood of success if you initially propose several preliminary research projects for a dissertation. One sure sign of strong scholarly future is the ability to think up many more research

projects than you can hope to do. If you can only think of one plausible research project, you do not have much of a scholarly future.

I strongly recommend that you develop at least three possible preliminary project descriptions to the point that you can circulate them among the professors with whom you might work. This will allow them to evaluate the options and give you valuable advice about which way to proceed. Professors are generally more successful using their experience and knowledge to help you choose a good research project from alternatives than they are at helping you transform a poorly chosen research project into a good outcome.

### *How Do You Find a Good Research Project?*

For most people, this is the most important question. Unfortunately, this is where others can only give general advice. Your ability to find a good research project on your own is a measure of how good a sociologist you have become.

I do not know how even to begin a comprehensive answer to this question so I will not try. Instead, I will just offer comments on some paths.

The current literature in an area is one obvious good starting point, often the best one. Oddly enough, however, students often seem to overlook it until after they choose a topic or perhaps they prefer to avoid it. How can you use the literature? Well, one simple approach is simply to try to review it (relying when possible on published reviews). A good review of an area will identify the major questions it addresses, identify the current debates and disagreements, unearth the unanswered problems, and survey the data available. Recall that some articles will directly aid this pursuit when they suggest, as part of their conclusion, what future research would address issues raised by their work. A thoughtful review of an area can specify a range of possible research projects that directly respond to the current issues in the field.

Several responses you might have to other people's work are particularly good clues that you should dig farther. First, and simplest, consider the various direct questions raised but left unanswered. Do any seem interesting and practical? Authors often point out specific further issues they have not addressed. For example, some analysis of national political

responses to economic fluctuations over time might mention that its results could be tested by an analogous study comparing variations among states within the same periods. You could be the one to do it.

Second, try to catalog the inconsistent research results in a field and then ask if you could resolve one of them. For example, when reviewing studies of democracy, you might find that some studies conclude democratic politics are strongly related to levels of economic development while others find just the opposite. *If* no one has shown why researchers are getting inconsistent results *and* you can conceive a research design that would let you resolve this debate, you have the starting point for a good project. Note, when contending with competing theories, you will often find much more room to do good work if you aim to specify the conditions under which each theory is valuable rather than seeking to show which theory is more accurate or more likely correct.

Third, look for the places where you feel that others are wrong about what they argue. For example, while reviewing the literature on economic mobility, you might conclude "they keep suggesting that social mobility is so high that kids born into the lower class have only a marginally lower chance at economic success than kids born into affluent families, and I am sure that this is not true." *If* no one else has already investigated the validity of your criticism *and* you can think of some way to settle the issue through research, you probably have a potential project.

Fourth, look for the questions that come into your mind for which no one seems to have found a compelling answer. For example, when reviewing the literature on women and work, you might wonder "how does the movement of women into the labor force affect the long term division of income between capital and labor?" *If* no one knows the answer *and* you can think of a way to discover it, you probably have a potential project.

Another approach to finding a good research topic is to ask a professor. Usually, this makes sense only if you already have a good working relationship with a professor and are prepared to collaborate further. In some disciplines, professors often “give” topics to graduate students for their dissertations, but this approach is not common in sociology. So, if you want to try it, be prepared for a couple things. First, even a professor

who has the research ideas, collaborative skills, and a possible interest in fulfilling such a request is likely to be puzzled and unsure how to proceed at first. Second, this strategy normally implies a *quid pro quo*: you and the professor will each do something to benefit the other. Commonly, this means that you and the professor will engage in a joint project directed by the professor that produces both joint publications and your dissertation.

### *Modeling the Work of Others*

Following any of the above routes, you usually want to model your research project after other good ones. The ideal choice if you are seeking efficiency, quality, and support is to closely follow a design used by one of your professors. If that is implausible, try to pick as your model a widely respected research project that differs as little as possible from what you need. Obviously, your research design must fit your particular central research issues and these will presumably distinguish it. Nonetheless, the only originality needed in your research design will the absolute minimum needed to answer your questions. Otherwise your design should ideally follow the model you choose. Remember, while doing your dissertation you are still trying to learn how do design and conduct research the way skilled professionals do; you are not trying to devise new ways of doing things.

### *Fit the Dissertation to the Committee*

Choosing a dissertation topic, then selecting professors who know something related to the topic to form a committee is a common strategy among graduate students in sociology. Unless carefully constrained, it is not a good strategy. All too often, the result is a committee of well-meaning professors who have neither appropriate authoritative knowledge nor any inherent interest in the research. Effectively, this means you, the student, are on your own. Well, you have the rest of your career to do research on your own. Starting with your dissertation is not a good idea.

You want to work with professors who are responsible toward you, who do the kinds of work you admire and wish to emulate, and who you

believe will help you forward with your career. All that probably seems self-evident.

What may be less obvious, is the goal of choosing a dissertation that fits the professors. That is right. Do not choose the professors to fit the dissertation, but the dissertation to fit the professors. Possible dissertation topics are endless. The professors available are a small, finite group.

Ideally, your dissertation should pursue a research project that at least one of you committee members (usually the chair) could have straightforwardly done. I do not mean simply that they could do this research, but that it fits within the scope of their interests and research orientation. It is a project they might have done, but never did. This means that these professors have authoritative knowledge about the topic and methodology. It also means that they have a high interest in the research.

Thus, a reasonable approach might work like this. First, a student decides that four professors are the main pool of potential committee members. She will select at least two committee members, including the chair, from among these four. Second, she prepares a preliminary research agenda for three possible dissertation projects. Her initial restriction on these potential projects is that each must weave together issues, methodologies, and theories in a way that she could plausibly conceive one of her prospective committee members doing. Obviously, each design must appear worth pursuing, practical, and interesting. She must also design each possible project so that at least one other of the four professors would have reasonable interest in it and valuable authoritative knowledge to contribute. Third, she discusses all the potential projects with the four professors and other graduate students. Fourth, after gathering advice and considering all the relevant criteria, she selects her topic and committee. Students following these steps can be confident that they will get a sensible project with a sensible committee.

### *Getting a Professor Involved Through Collaboration*

If you want a professor to be particularly committed to your project and to work closely with you, you could consider practical strategies likely to gain this end. One of the best is to have part of your dissertation

be a joint project with a professor that you will publish as a collaborative effort.

All professors have a responsibility to guide graduate students through the long process that produces a dissertation. Most will do so conscientiously.

Do not, however, expect your professors altruistically to offer you endless ideas, guidance, and constructive reviews. They will run out of time, patience, and generosity. This probably will seem a restatement of the obvious to most graduate students.

What may not be so obvious, however, is the availability of a straightforward strategy to gain more help and commitment from a professor. Somehow you want to make it worth his or her while. Nothing is more important to a professor than his or her own work. So, if your dissertation becomes intertwined with a professor's own work, you can expect that professor to show the highest possible commitment to advancing your work. As a simple example of collaboration, one or two chapters of the dissertation could be a coauthored article. Another example might be a professor and a student jointly creating a data set that they each use for separate research projects.

In short, consider collaborating with a professor as one option in your dissertation planning. For some, this could prove a highly successful strategy.

(As a minor aside, let me also suggest that some graduate students who do not collaborate might still want to introduce more reciprocity in the relationship with the professors with whom they work. Students often ask their professors for many favors, such as guidance on research, general counseling, or recommendations. But, most professors would not think to ask students for even small favors. If you want to ensure that a professor continues to give time and effort to these requests generously, you might try to respond more in kind [e.g., give careful feedback on a paper draft, help proofread an article, or help transform a data set]. Remember, if you want professors to treat you more as a colleague and less as a student, one key is moving toward a relationship characterized by balanced reciprocity. In short, act like a colleague if you want to be treated as one.)

*WORKING WITH YOUR COMMITTEE*

Your dissertation committee normally has three members, one who is chair (your choice). You need to work successfully with each of these professors and you need to ensure that everyone works together. Usually, this is unproblematic, but a wise student will not trust her or his fate to chance.

Discuss the entire dissertation process openly and concretely with each member of your committee. You are entering a work relationship that will last a long time. Try to set it up properly from the beginning.

Ask what each professor expects from you at each stage and what you can expect from the professor. Be concrete. How often will you meet? What kinds of written materials will you submit at each stage? Through what medium will the professor supply feedback? Reach an understanding.

Avoid problematic inconsistencies between your personality and expectations and those of the professors. Pay special attention to your personality quirks. For example, if you are one of the very efficient types, find out if any of your professors is one of those who is always late with comments. Alternatively, if you are one of the scattered sorts who never follows schedules, find out if any of your professors will be driven mad by your behavior.

Ensure that your dissertation committee members all know what the others are saying. You can distribute comments and suggestions from each to all. Often, you can do even better by writing an interpretive summary of the comments you have received from each professor and adding your response (be specific about how your work will reflect this response). Distribute this to all committee members soon after you have received their comments. Take special care to detail why and how you believe you should do something different from what a professor recommends. Similarly, clarify any inconsistencies in the recommendations of the committee and state how you intend to resolve them. If you do this consistently you will generate a a clear sense of shared understandings on your committee about what you and they expect to be done. This will avoid misunderstandings (which can fester) and raise the quality of feedback you receive.

*SOME THINGS TO AVOID*

The preceding discussion has explored strategies and goals that will make the development of a dissertation project go more smoothly and achieve better results. There are also some pitfalls that you want to sidestep.

COVERT OPERATIONS. Do not work in secret. Start to discuss your ideas with others right at the beginning. Write your ideas about possible projects, issues, problems, and ideas. Write every day. Tell others your ideas. Let others read your thoughts. Do this and your work will advance much faster and it will be much better. Do not take this advice lightly. Many find them selves overcome by multiple conditions inducing them to work like a hermit and withdraw from others. Guard against this.

DATA STARVATION. Do not waste time on topics made impossible because you could not assemble adequate data. Data is the starting point of all research projects. Without a solid data foundation, any project will founder. Data takes many forms. You may use quantitative data collected by surveys, censuses or the like. You may use historical records. You may collect your own data through observations or interviews. Whatever the form or source, the data must be adequate to answer your research questions and you must be able to collect, develop, and analyze that data within a reasonable time limit. Never assume anything about data. Always collect and examine some of the data you will need *while* designing the research project (unless you have done so even earlier). That is the only way you can have confidence that about the content of the data and the time it will take you to get it ready for analysis.

MEGALOMANIA. Do not set out to use the dissertation to prove you are brilliant. You will just set yourself up to fail. If you are truly brilliant, you do not have to be self-conscious about showing it. Your work will speak for itself. If you try to win a foot race when you are just learning to walk, you will fall flat on your face.

NARCISSISTIC SOCIOLOGY. Biography and identity provide invaluable fuel for the sociological imagination, but putting them in the driver's seat is unlikely to give you a smooth ride to your destination. Avoid fixating on topics because of your biography. Intellectual narcissism has wasted the time and talents of many graduate students. Your dissertation is not, we hope, the pinnacle of your scholarly career. It is not a fundamental

expression of your identity. It may be terribly important to you that you grew up among fascist, working class, Slavic immigrants, or you may be a dedicated member of the new age movement to raise the intellectual achievements of animals. That does not mean that a study of your roots or your social movement is practical or that it will reveal anything other scholars care about. Your dissertation is a transitional piece of scholarly research. It bridges between your training period and your career of independent scholarship. Your first concern is that you choose a topic clearly related to the interests of your professors and current issues in the discipline. You have the rest of your scholarly career to pursue your identity and politics through your scholarship, if you so choose. Do not pursue it through your dissertation unless you are sure that it is practical and the outcome will be worthwhile to other scholars in the discipline.

Think and write about the scholarly, substantive, or analytical problems you are going to solve, not what group, type of people, or event you will study. Research and analysis should seek to resolve problems, not provide descriptions nor sustain our preconceptions

ONE WAY CORRESPONDENCE. Do not ignore the comments you receive. Professors and other graduate students will sometimes spend a lot of time and effort trying to give you good responses. People can quite rightfully become irritated and alienated when then give someone else such feedback and then that person simply ignores it or disappears. I recommend the following. Whenever anyone gives you comments, particularly ones that suggest much time and thought, make sure you give a response within two weeks. Write a memorandum in which you state your interpretations of the suggestions and criticisms you received and you state how you intend to use these. Also, when you offer people your next draft, include another memorandum that summarizes what you have changed; in it, refer specifically to the comments you have used and those you have not. These memos can usefully respond to the comments from several people; this gives everyone a sense of the balance of the comments (not only their own) and an overall view of your responses.

### *DISCOVERY, A NEGLECTED COMPONENT*

Okay, now one special concern of mine. Somehow, it seems to me, the goal of *discovery* has fallen into neglect in the social sciences. I

strongly recommend that you think about *discovery* as a central aim of your research.

By discovery, I do not mean anything obscure or rarefied. One dictionary defines discover as "to gain sight or knowledge of (something previously unseen or unknown)." The part that says "previously unseen or unknown" is the key.

Too much research in sociology has the dubious goal of showing that the researcher's preconceptions were accurate. Confirming a theory is a reputable and useful research activity. It is also limited. It is particularly limited when you start out confident that the research will come out the way you want. I do not mean this is a bad thing. Just that it cannot take you far.

I believe that the best and most interesting research considers issues where you truly do not know what the outcome will be and no one else does either. This makes the research inherently interesting and invests it with the potential for a valuable scholarly contribution.

Seeking to discover something unknown does not mean that your research is unguided by past research and theories. Just the opposite. Aimless exploratory research is unlikely to discover anything except by pure accident. The point of a good research plan is to use theories and past research to specify a research strategy that will discover new knowledge by design.

So, as you develop your research design, ask yourself, "what am I seeking to find out that neither I nor anyone else now knows?" If you have no answer to that question, you might reconsider the direction of your work. If you have an answer that seems substantial and practical, pounce on it. Put it at the center of your work and never loose track of it.